



A Love Unfaltering

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Category: Romance

Description: He's head over heels, and no amount of history can sway his judgment. He wants her, but she doesn't even realize the veracity of his love... at least, not yet.

Jared: Her jade eyes burn a hole into my soul. There's a certain calmness that envelops me when Amy is around. I've missed this. Since we were kids, my heart has always been set on her. A burning passion blazes inside, deeper than the crimson in her hair... and no girl has ever come close to making me feel the way Amy has. But, she can't know. At least not yet, as I am not the man she deserves. My youthful follies with women still haunts me to this day. I can see the distrust in her eyes even though she's quite fond of me. I'll find my way around her walls eventually. I just have to figure out how.

Amy: Jared has changed since the last time I saw him. He's warmer, kinder. Even more irresistible. As children, he always had a way of conjuring butterflies in my stomach out of nowhere. The problem is that he has a bad habit of breaking women's hearts. While my skin secretly yearns for his touch, I can't put myself through that. Jared will forever be just a friend. I don't care if he flashes me that gut-wrenching smile. Or if he squints those smoldering blue eyes in a way that makes my toes curl. I just can't. I... oh, no. I'm not even sure if I'm strong enough. Now that we're older, a lot of things have happened that caused me to rethink my stand on this self-imposed "No Jared" rule. There's just something different about him and it's making me feel... vulnerable.

Is this even a good idea?

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Chapter One

Amy

Thursday nights were never that eventful.

The Capital Diner had been open in my town for as long as I could remember. It was a regular occurrence for college students to head down and grab a greasy burger and fries on their free nights or after exams, which was likely the only reason that it had stayed open for so long. On Thursday nights, however, the students stayed in their dorms, and the townspeople went home to their white-collar lives, and I got to stand around and do dishes and stare at the clock for four hours.

On this particular Thursday, I was cleaning the glasses of fingerprints left behind even after the most thorough running through the dishwasher and looking up every thirty seconds hoping that an hour had passed.

It hadn't. Two hours left in my shift, and I was the only one on the floor. Nobody had come in since my shift had started, and I'd already made sure everything around the place was in tip-top shape.

As usual, my boss was locked in his office, likely watching TV and waiting for me to knock and tell him that the night was over.

It was an easy-going job, at least. And it had helped me through the entirety of my time at university, so I couldn't be too mad about the occasional boring shift. However, that boredom wouldn't last very long because, to my surprise, I heard the

jingle of the bell above the door. I picked up a menu and walked around the corner of the booth, looking up at the man who had walked in.

I didn't realize it at the moment, but the exact second I met his eyes, my life would change forever.

I recognized this man.

Jared Helms had been my best friend ever since Kindergarten, when he practically adopted me, him being the massive extrovert and me being the shy and quiet introvert. We'd grown close during elementary and middle school and had been closer than ever during high school, but we started to drift apart when he moved away about a year ago.

We hadn't even spoken in the past few weeks, which was new for us, but I figured that was just our relationship's new nature.

Meeting his eyes now, though, and seeing him smile upon recognizing me, brought a happy smile to my face as well.

I'd missed him.

"Well, look who finally decided to show up," I said, tapping the menu against his chest and shaking my head with a disappointed tone to my voice. "And I thought I'd finally gotten rid of you for good. Shame that I have to put up with you again."

He laughed good-naturedly and took the menu, following after me as I led him toward an empty table up near the front.

"Well, I figured that you'd be bored on a Thursday night, so I might as well drop by and see if annoying you was on the table."

He remembered me complaining about Thursdays, at least. Even after being apart for so long, it was still easy to fall into joking with him.

“Well, you were right about that. It’s been dead all night,” I replied, pointing him toward one of the tables. “You’re the first and will probably be the only customer for the entire night.”

“Well, I guess that means I get to bug you without feeling bad about taking time away from other customers,” he said, to which I laughed and walked over to the bar.

“A beer, I assume?” I called out, pulling out a glass and walking over to the few beers we had on tap.

“Oh, actually, just water is fine, thank you!” he called out, which was the first sign to me that something about him had changed.

Jared Helms was... Well, he’d never lost his extroverted nature as he’d grown older. He’d always been one of the popular kids, heading to parties and getting drunk and never shying away from alcohol. It was one of the many things that I disagreed with him about, so hearing him reject a chance at a beer...

It was strange.

“Alright, who are you, and what’ve you done with Jared?” I asked, pulling out a clean glass and filling it with water from the dispenser. I carried it over to him to find him fidgeting with the menu, a nervous smile on his face.

“Well... I gave up drinking a couple of months ago. I gave up quite a few things, while... You know,” he said, a bit of a sad tone to his voice. I nodded sympathetically and patted his shoulder, knowing very well what he meant.

Jared had moved away not by choice but because he wanted to be with his father. It had been a tough decision for him, and I think it was eventually me that convinced him to move out there to help.

It seemed to have changed him by the looks of things.

“I hope everything is well,” I said softly, to which he nodded and looked up at me with a bit of a sad smile.

“Everything’s well. I just wanted to come back for a bit and check up on people, starting with you. We haven’t been talking much, and I feel bad about that. How’ve you been, Amy? What’ve you been up to?”

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Even his voice sounded different now that I thought about it. He didn't sound arrogant or proud like I was used to; instead, he spoke softly and politely, which was a dramatic shift from the sarcastic and rude conversations I was used to having with him.

"I... Well, everything's been alright. University is done in just a few weeks, and then I'm finally finished with this degree. Maybe I'll find a bit of work with it if I'm lucky," I said, chuckling a bit and eventually sitting down in the booth across from him.

It was good to catch up with him.

"Other than that, not much has changed since you left. I've been working, doing school, and generally just trying not to be swamped with studying."

An English degree wasn't all that much work compared to other things, but it was still difficult to manage both work and school.

"I'll get a whiskey burger with fries, please," he eventually said, closing the menu and handing it back to me. I nodded and wrote it down in my notebook, put the menu back in the holder at the front, and then put the ticket in the window for the cook.

Byron, the 33-year-old line cook who didn't talk much, seemed just as baffled as I was to be getting business. I shrugged, and then he nodded and got to work preparing the food.

"I bet you're excited to get out of this place, at least," Jared said, and I turned back to

face him and leaned against the bar.

“Put in my notice a few weeks back. I’m leaving the day before graduation,” I said, grinning and nodding. I was fine with working at the Capital Diner, but it wasn’t my dream job. I was excited to get out and start doing things I enjoyed.

“Have you still been writing?” he asked, gesturing to the booth in front of him. I sat down again and was interested to hear him talk about my writing like it was a positive thing.

Jared wasn’t a reader. He didn’t understand my love of English, which extended to making jokes about my work.

“I... Yeah. Just on the side, I don’t have much time these days,” I said, meeting his eyes and searching them for any sort of budding joke or criticism.

There... Wasn’t any.

He seemed like a completely different man. Had his time away from home changed himthismuch?

“That’s good. I... Well, I’ve been reading a bit more recently, and I read some of your stuff. I’m sorry for being an ass about it in the past. I should’ve put in more effort to encourage you. I know you work hard on it.”

Alright, now I was utterly floored.

“I... Yeah, it’s fine, man. Are you sure you’re alright? You’re acting... Well, not to be rude, but you’re actingpolite,” I said, laughing a bit and watching his face.

He laughed as well, but it was good-natured. “Yeah, I’ve been working on myself a

bit. I know I haven't exactly been the best friend to you, and I want to be a bit better in that regard. If anything's weird, I'll stop," he said, which left me a bit stunned.

"I... No, you're all good. That's good of you to work on yourself." I said, not having much else to say. It was like he'd really taken all of my complaints to heart and was actively working on himself. It was what I'd been asking him to do for years.

Him not doing that was probably one of the key reasons we'd drifted apart, but now...

He had all the memories of our past but was the kind of person I would hang out with.

"It really is nice to see you again. I've missed our stupid conversations," he said, laughing as the cook's bell rung out. I got up to fetch his food for him and brought it back to the table, where he took it happily.

"I've missed you, too," I replied while he took his first bite of the burger. I watched him for a couple of seconds, perplexed that the only man I'd ever felt anything for was now actively working on fixing all of the reasons I'd never considered a relationship with him.

Even now, I remembered all the small crushes through middle and high school that had faded because of how I saw him treating other people.

This might be a bit dangerous if he turned out to be a reformed man. The thought of it made me chuckle a bit, and he looked up to meet my eyes with delight in his own.

I felt butterflies in my stomach, but I quelled them with annoyance. I couldn't already be falling back in love with him. That would just be ridiculous.

“I’m glad you’ve been doing well,” I said after a moment. “I know that things must be tough with what’s going on. It’s good of you to be there for your father.”

Jared nodded, polishing off his burger before picking up a few fries with a sigh.

“It’s hard seeing him like that. But at least I know he’s happy that I’m there, and that’s all I can do for him now. Stage four cancer isn’t something that can be helped all that much, so we’re just doing as much as we can to keep him comfortable now.”

It was a horrible situation. Jared had been close with his father for as long as I could remember, and I still remembered the haunting call I got from him one night in February when he cried to me about how his father was dying.

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That was the first and only time I'd ever heard Jared cry.

"Do you still live in that old apartment building nearby?" he suddenly asked, thankfully changing the topic of conversation. I nodded, a bit stunned that he remembered that.

"Could I walk you home, then? I know very well that you wouldn't drive such a short way, so I'd like to see you home safely if you'd let me."

I stared at him in dumbfounded silence. He was right; I never drove to work because I thought of it as a waste of gas.

"I... Sure, but my shift doesn't end for another hour and a half," I replied, watching his expression.

"That's fine. I'll just get a chocolate milkshake and wait it out," he said with a smile that looked almost... Relieved.

"Alright, you crazy idiot," I said, shaking my head with a chuckle and getting up to put in his order. "Either this is some elaborate plot to kidnap me when we head out of here, or... You're doing well."

I couldn't help but feel those butterflies dancing in my stomach again when he smiled at me.

Chapter Two

Jared

Everything had gone well so far. I was happy about that much, at least. I'd expected to walk into the door of the restaurant, realize I was too nervous, and duck out before she could see me.

But now, here I was, leaving with her.

"You ready to go?" she asked, looking toward me with those beautiful eyes that I really couldn't get enough of. I nodded mutely, and she pushed open the door, flooding the restaurant with the cool Ohio night air. The shock of the cold brought me back to reality, and I reached my hand over her to fully push open the door.

We both stepped out into the night and began walking back toward her building, the route still clear in my mind even though it had been over a year since I'd been in this town. My mind was racing, pondering over whether or not I should tell her the real reason I'd come back or if I should just take it slow and tell her eventually.

Hopefully, she'd forgive me for keeping it from her for that long.

"It feels much nicer here than down in Florida," I said, to which she laughed.

"I'll bet. It must be what, a hundred degrees at night down there? Plus the humidity? No wonder you decided to come back."

I laughed in response, realizing again just how easy it was to fall into conversation with her. Even though it had been months since we'd had a real conversation, it still felt just like the old times.

Except I was better now.

“Hey, Amy,” I said after a moment, building up the confidence to make an apology that was 20 years in the making. She turned over to look at me with those innocent eyes, which nearly stopped me in my tracks. But I knew that this, at least, had to be said tonight. If it wasn’t, I’d go back to my hotel and feel disgusted with myself.

I was sick of feeling horrible about who I had been as a person.

“So, I know that I haven’t always been the best friend,” I said, watching her as we kept walking down the sidewalk. “And I know that over the years, you’ve told me a lot about myself that you wanted to see change, and I know that I’ve ignored that advice for as long as we’ve been friends.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and kept going.

“But, I’ve been taking that advice recently. I know I’m not perfect yet, and I know that I won’t be for quite a long time, but I’m doing my best, and I’m trying my hardest to make myself into the person you’ve always wanted me to be. It is not just for you and not just for anyone else but also because I’ve felt horrible about myself over the past few months. I’ve found that I don’t enjoy the things that I used to think we’re all the rage, and I see that a lot of the stuff that I used to do was annoying, rude, and hurtful.”

She had her eyes on the ground now, but I could tell she was still listening. I’d walked and talked with her enough throughout our lives to understand that this was just because it was a serious topic.

“And I don’t expect you to forgive and forget for the things that I’ve done over the years because I haven’t even forgiven myself yet. But I want you to know that I’m trying, and I have been trying, for the past couple of months. I know I’m different, and I know that it’ll be strange for a little while, but... If you’d give me a chance to be your friend again, as a new man, it would mean the world to me.”

She cut me off then, not with her words but with her actions.

She wrapped her arms around me and buried her face in my shoulder, and just like that, I was thrown into the past. I was thrown back to all the times she'd hugged me before, and even though those times had been few and far between... I remembered them clearly.

"I would be so,sohappy to try everything again," she said softly as I wrapped my arms around her in response. "I know that I haven't always been the best either, and I know I'm pushy, and I asked you to change, but I promise I only ever wanted the best for you. You're doing so well, Jared."

Hearing her say that made it all worth it. It made the months of confusion and fear worth it, just to be here, in her arms, if only for a couple of moments.

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“I- then that settles it,” I replied, grinning and pulled away from her even though it was the last thing in the world that I wanted to do. I couldn’t hug her for too long, or she might have felt like something weird was going on.

I couldn’t let her know how much I wanted to be with her, at least not yet.

I’d always had a crush on Amy, but making the change to myself and trying to better who I was just made it that much stronger.

We started walking again, and after a couple more minutes, we arrived at her old run-down apartment building.

I wanted more than anything to invite her to come to stay at the hotel with me, but... I couldn’t. Not yet.

“I- would you like to get dinner together tomorrow night?” I eventually asked out of the blue and was shocked with myself for doing so. I waited a few agonizing seconds for her to answer, but when she did, there was a smile on her face.

“Sure. I would love to,” she replied, allowing my heart to recede down to my chest from my throat. “I’ll text you to ask about plans later, alright?”

I nodded mutely, and after a moment, she wrapped her arms around me once again.

“Have a good night, Jared,” she said.

Then she was gone, walking through the parking lot to her first-floor apartment.

Left alone, I remained baffled by the fact that everything seemed to be working out.

Chapter Three

Amy

It had been a long, long time since I'd dressed up to go to dinner.

I left my bathroom and walked out into my bedroom, looking into the full-length mirror against the wall. I had picked out my best dress for the occasion because honestly, I knew very well what would happen at this dinner.

I was going to fall in love with my best friend for probably the hundredth time. And this time, I was going to look forward to it.

The emerald floor-length dress matched my eyes perfectly, and I combed my fingers through my maroon locks before deciding to straighten them for the evening. I pulled out my straightener, plugged it in, and sat down in front of the mirror with a sigh.

This was insane.

I had never expected anything like this from Jared. He'd been a loud partygoer that had drank too much and had to be dragged home on the nights where he made too many insensitive comments.

Now? He was polite and apologetic, yet he was still the man I had known and loved for all these years.

It was a bit exciting to be heading into this without knowing where it would end up.

I watched the curls in my hair fall away into straight locks, pondering over what I

expected to happen during the night. We'd decided to meet up at Luca's, a fancy Italian place that we'd frequented a few times while in high school and living without bills.

Tonight was a night of celebration, though, or something like that. It felt as if we were celebrating, even though there wasn't anything to be holding a celebration over.

Either way, I was excited.

It only took me another 20 minutes or so to get ready, and I locked my door as I walked out to my car. It was only a 10 minute drive, but I was still leaving 25 minutes before we were supposed to meet.

I was excited and nervous.

The drive wasn't eventful, but I hadn't expected it to be. I kept the windows up because I didn't want the wind to mess with my hair, and I got to the restaurant before it even began to feel toasty in the car.

Even though I'd left 15 minutes early, I still saw Jared's old blue Pontiac sitting in the parking lot when I arrived. As I pulled into the spot next to it, he climbed out and leaned against the side of the car, an easy grin on his face.

He looked...incredible.

He was wearing a well-fitted suit, and his beautiful blonde hair was combed up in a swirl that I liked, and as I put the car into park, he walked around the side to open the door for me.

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“Welcome, madam. I’ve been expecting you,” he said, with a dumb fake British accent that made me laugh.

I missed the stupid bits like that, the joking around and laughing and just existing within each other’s presence.

I climbed out of the car and nodded to him in thanks before we both walked off toward the restaurant.

“You look lovely tonight,” he said, which made those butterflies dance in my stomach once again. I wasn’t used to him saying stuff like that; I had only been used to him making fun of my appearance, even jokingly, and I had done the same.

Him being earnest like this was, well, it was a welcome change, but it still felt so different from what I was used to.

“You look wonderful, too,” I said, looking up at him with a smile. He smiled back, and I remembered all the years of walking with him like this. I remembered going to restaurants, going to prom with him, and all the time I’d spent with him.

I had more love for this man than anyone else on the planet, and yet I’d never really been able to love him.

Until, perhaps, now.

We walked into the restaurant and were greeted by a hostess. Jared’s request for a table for two led us across the restaurant toward a lovely table at the back against a

window. A waitress came by not long after we were seated.

“Hey! My name’s Jamie, and I’ll be your waitress for tonight. What can I start you off with for drinks?” she asked, to which Jared and I perused the menu.

“I’ll have a Shirley Temple,” I said, looking up to the woman with a smile. She nodded and then looked toward Jared, who ordered a Coke.

It was interesting seeing him avoid alcohol.

“Do you miss it?” I eventually asked once the waitress had walked away from the table.

Jared looked over at me with a confused expression and asked, “Miss what?”

“Alcohol. I know that you drank pretty heavily for a little while,” I said cautiously, knowing very well that it might be a sensitive subject.

Apparently, it wasn’t. He didn’t yell or seem aggravated like I knew he would have before. Instead, he simply shook his head, and a slight smile touched his lips.

“Not really. It wasn’t that tough for me to stop drinking, which I know sounds strange. But I was so committed to changing myself for the better that the alcohol was the easiest part of it all. The hardest part was learning how to get rid of my arrogance and attitude, things like that.”

I nodded along slowly, listening and taking in what he was explaining. It made sense; his personality for the longest time had been based around witty arrogance and spite, and this reformed version of him seemed to be a complete turnaround.

“You don’t seem to have changed a bit since I last saw you,” he said, bringing me out

of my reverie. “Still as kind as you always were, and still just as annoying.”

He stuck his tongue out at me, to which I returned the favor, and we both laughed.

A steady silence fell over our table until our drinks arrived, and I took a sip of mine, my eyes locking onto him.

He seemed nervous. I knew I was as well, but I hoped it wasn't that obvious.

“So, why now?” I finally asked softly, keeping my eyes on his face, and eventually met his eyes as he looked toward me.

There was a vulnerability in his that I wasn't used to seeing in anybody.

“I, well, I don't know,” he said after a belated moment of pause, but it felt like he was hiding something. His eyes flicked away from mine, just like they have always done when he'd tell me a lie.

It was how I'd caught him in many over the years.

I didn't question him on this one, though. This was a massive thing for him to go through, and if he wasn't ready to tell me why, I could at least understand that.

“I wish I had done it sooner, though.” He said, and his voice sounded... Constricted.

After his next sentence, I really understood why.

“Maybe then I would've had a chance with you sooner.”

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It took me a moment to even process what he meant by that sentence and another moment to actually comprehend that he'd voiced it aloud.

We had never commented on having feelings for each other. Ever.

"I..." I tried to speak, but I couldn't really get any words out. I didn't know what to say. Could I tell him that over the years, I'd had a crush on him a million different times? Could I tell him that the only reason I'd never asked him was because of exactly the reasons he was working on now?

"You don't have to say anything. Just know that I've liked you for a long, long time. And I understand what I've been and what I've done is irreparable, but I figured that it's time for you to know."

I sat in stunned silence, a million thoughts racing through my head. Did I want to commit to this? Did I want to tell him that I had felt the same? Or did I want him to believe that I've only ever wanted to be friends?

"You're an idiot." Those were the words that eventually left my mouth, and a slight smile touched my lips as they did. His eyes locked onto mine with a bit of confusion evident in them, and as they did, the smile on my face grew wider.

"You are oblivious, aren't you? I've had so many crushes on you over the years. You were too stupid to realize back then, and you still can't even tell when I fancy you. I mean, haven't you seen the way I've looked at you since you've been back?"

It didn't even feel like I was the one speaking; this confidence, this ability to tell him

these things, was completely new to me.

His eyes widened as I spoke, and by the time I finished, I had left him in silence as equally stunned as my own.

I didn't think either of us expected the dinner to end up with big reveals like this, especially before we'd even gotten any food in our systems.

"I... well alright then," he said before letting out a laugh. I laughed too, and then we were both laughing, the nerves leaving our bodies in heavy chuckles as we struggled to breathe, just like the old times.

This was surreal.

We were eventually able to calm down as the waitress came by to take our orders, and we both ordered some variant of Alfredo. We were giddy on the revelation of mutual love, just like I'd first expected when getting ready.

I was falling in love with him all over again, and it felt so easy, so effortless, that I didn't even care how fast it was happening.

"Well, that's a couple of months of nerves gone and out the window," he finally said, sighing shakily and taking a sip of his drink. I chuckled and took a drink of my own as well, trying to keep my hands from shaking and spilling it all over the place.

"I could've sworn that I was going to come here tonight and tell you that, and you were going to call me an idiot and duck out of here before our food even arrived," he said, to which I looked at him before rolling my eyes.

"You really think I'm that stupid? I'd at least mooch the free food first," I said, to which he rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I’ve probably spent more money on food for you than on anything else in the world,” he grinned, and then we both looked over to see a waitress bringing our food to us.

“That was quick,” he said delightedly as she set the two bowls down in front of us.

“Enjoy!” the waitress said before receding into the kitchen.

There wasn’t much else to say about the meal; we ate in relative silence, meeting each other’s gaze every once in a while and smiling. It was just a quiet and peaceful dinner between the two of us.

Before I realized it, Jared paid, and we were out the door, walking toward our cars. I realized, quite quickly, that I didn’t want the night to end.

Before he could say anything, I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face in his shoulder, sighing contentedly.

“I’m happy you’re home,” I said quietly, to which he wrapped his arms around me as well and nodded his head.

“I’m happy to be here,” he said in a low voice before pressing a quick kiss to the top of my head.

The butterflies were back, dancing in my stomach again. I couldn’t believe that after so many years, he and I were finally... Something.

I didn’t know what we were, though, or what we would become, not just yet.

“Can I see you again tomorrow?” he asked, to which I simply nodded into his shoulder. “I’ll text you tonight to talk about it. We can work something out.”

He patted me on the back, and with all the reluctance in the world from both of us, we parted.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” he said with a smile. I watched him get into that blue Pontiac I had taken so many rides in and take off into the distance, leaving me confused on where the hell my life was heading.

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Everything had been so neatly organized, and I was ready to move on into the world, but now? Now, everything felt like it had been turned upside down.

I got into my own car a moment later and took off down the road, heading back to my small apartment that likely wouldn't feel the same after a night like this one.

Ten minutes later, I pulled into my parking spot, and it felt almost dreamlike as I walked over toward my door, unlocked it, and stepped inside.

I had been right. My apartment felt entirely different.

Everything was in the same spot, and, of course, nothing had changed physically, but I was a changed person.

I showered, changed clothes, and just tried to regain a sense of normally. But, that was shattered with one single sound.

The sound of my phone ringing.

I hadn't expected Jared to be calling so early, but when checking, the number was one I didn't recognize.

"Amy Reeves?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

"Um, yes?" I said inquisitively.

"There's been an accident involving Jared Helms. We need you to get to the Fairview

Hospital immediately.”

That’s when my heart stopped.

Chapter Four

Jared

I didn’t wake up right away. My eyelids were too heavy to drag open, and I still didn’t really know if I was dead or alive. I could still hear the loud honk of the semi-truck as it barreled toward my car, completely ignoring the red light and-

I opened my eyes.

Anything to get away from having to experience that crash for a second time.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the bright white, fluorescent lights above, but after they did, I eventually took stock of myself. Each of my four limbs were in a sling, though after a couple of terrifying tests, I realized that I could move each of my fingers and toes.

That was amiracle.

Getting out of a crash with a semi-truck without even a broken limb seemed practically impossible.

I was reminded of my mortality when I went to take a deep breath, and a shattering pain resounded throughout my entire chest, letting me know that I had likely cracked a couple of ribs in my escapade.

I couldn’t help but be thankful that I hadn’t asked Amy to go back with me like I had

wanted to.

That semi had hit the passenger side of my car. If she had been there with me...

I shivered. I didn't want to think about it.

After finishing up taking stock of my body, I looked around the room instead and found exactly the person I'd been thinking about slumped over asleep in a chair. Amy's red hair hung down in front of her face in a curtain, but I could tell she was sleeping just from the way she was positioned.

I smiled and had to stop a tear from rolling down my face.

She had stayed with me through however long I'd been out, for how long I didn't even know, and that made me worry.

I looked around until I found a red button that said it would summon a nurse, located conveniently right next to my hand. It only took a movement of my finger to press it, and a loud buzzer rang out in the hallway.

A nurse appeared in the doorway, and upon seeing that I was awake, she smiled with a surprised look on her face.

"Well, hello," she greeted, which seemed to wake Amy. She looked up at the nurse and then looked over at me, and I could see the tears starting to form in her eyes.

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“Well, you must have missed me or something to wait in a hospital for me,” I said, grinning. “You hate these places.”

She brought the chair she was sitting in over next to the bed and sat down beside me, the tears already beginning to roll down her face.

“You’re a miracle man. That much is obvious. You’ve got somebody upstairs watching out for you,” the nurse said, pausing and looking at a couple of the screens on the monitors around me and writing a couple of things down on her clipboard. “You got out with only a couple of cracked ribs, and it could’ve been much nastier than that.”

I nodded, even though none of it felt real. I could feel the pain throughout my body with the cracked ribs, and I could see Amy next to me crying as she held onto the edge of the bed, but my brain didn’t realize that I had almost died.

“You’ll be allowed to leave within a couple of days if you keep being this lucky,” the nurse said, flashing me a smile before heading back out into the hallway to record me being awake.

And so, Amy and I were left alone in the hospital room, a million unspoken things between us.

“They called me and said you’d been in an accident. I was so scared,” she eventually said, and my heart melted.

I could only imagine. If someone had called me and told me that she had been in an

accident... I don't know what I would've done.

"It was a semi-truck that didn't stop at a red light," I said after a moment, not knowing if understanding what had happened would make her feel better or worse.

"I know. I talked to the nurses, the doctors, and everyone in between," she replied, and eventually, she laid a hand very carefully on my arm.

Even if I had just been in an accident, I felt like I was on cloud nine. Just being touched by her was enough to make me feel on top of the world.

"Sounds like you were really worried about me then," I said, with a bit of a joking tone to my voice. She shook her head with a bit of a choked laugh and met my eyes, and I felt a world of worry in her own.

I knew, then, that I needed to tell her everything.

Maybe it was some notion that if I didn't, something else would happen, or perhaps it was because my mind had been cleared by what had happened that it made me realize that I was stupid for not telling her the truth in the first place.

I just knew I had to tell her.

"Amy," I said gently, looking over at her and meeting her eyes. The beauty and innocence in hers were nearly enough to stop me in my tracks, to stop me from telling her about the terrible stuff that had happened.

"I... I haven't told you everything. I told you that I didn't know why I decided to change myself, but... That isn't necessarily true. The truth is that about four months ago, my father died."

Her eyes widened slightly, just for a moment, and her lips parted. “Oh, Jared... I’m so sorry, I...”

I stopped her with a slight shake of my head.

“It’s alright. I’ve already had my time to grieve, and I was with him when he passed. He knew that I loved him, and I know that he’s now in a more peaceful place. But after he died, I realized that I wanted to be somebody that he was proud of. And the only way I could think to do that was to follow your advice.”

I couldn’t read her expression; it was some mixture of sadness and sympathy that I’d never seen before.

“But I took what you’d said to heart, and I began to fall in love with you more and more every day. I tried to lessen our conversations not because I wanted us to grow apart but because I wanted to see if there was some way that I could stop it. I didn’t think you’d ever want me.”

She was about to protest, but I shook my head again.

“No. Before this, I knew you would never have considered a relationship with me. I was rude and arrogant, and I did my best to change that because I wanted you to see that I could be different. I wanted you to feel safe around me because you being worried about being around me is one of the worst things I could imagine.”

I paused for a moment, catching my breath. Speaking for so long was beginning to hurt my ribs.

“I just want you to know, now, that I’ve changed. I want to try things with you just once, and if you hate me, then we don’t have to be anything more than the friends we’ve always been. But I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember, and I just-”

She stopped me by doing something that I never expected.

She leaned forward and pressed an incredibly soft, quick, and slight kiss to my lips.

“You talk too much,” she said quietly, laughing softly at my stunned silence. “You’re right. Before this, I wouldn’t have considered dating you. I’ve had so many crushes on you over the years, but the thought of dating you always worried me because I’ve seen how you are in relationships. I’ve seen how you treat people, and I know that you probably aren’t that way anymore. But I still worry.”

I nodded sadly. She was right; I hadn’t always been the best in my relationships, and it largely came from the fact that not many of them had the spark that I was looking for.

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Shewas that spark.

“It makes sense that you worry. And I don’t have anything I can say to stop you from worrying, other than you’re the one person that I’ve always wanted to be with. So we can take things slow, wait things out, and you can leave whenever you want to. But I want to try if you’ll have me,” I said softly, hoping that she’d say yes.

“I want to try too,” she said. Those words set my heart on fire because they were everything I’d ever wanted to hear. Being with her was a goal that I’d given up on long ago, and now I was finally coming to terms with the fact that she might want to be with me too.

“We can go slow, and give it a shot,” she said quietly before leaning forward and pressing a kiss to my cheek. “And you can stop doing stupid stuff like getting into car accidents.”

I laughed a bit, which hurt my ribs just a bit more than I would’ve liked.

“That sounds like a deal.”

Chapter Five

Amy

I visited Jared in the hospital every day after school and work, making sure that he was as happy as one could be while confined in a hospital bed.

Luckily enough, after a week, they finally said that he could come home, with the promise that he'd be careful so he wouldn't rip the stitches in his chest and cheek.

It was a cloudy Thursday afternoon when I drove to the hospital for what was hopefully the last time so that I could pick Jared up and take him back to wherever he was staying. I had asked my boss to take the day off because I needed to help a friend, and because it was Thursday and Thursday's were dead.

Checking in at the front desk, I showed them my ID and made my way to Jared's room.

Even after a week, it still felt surreal that he and I were actually... A thing. After so many years of just being friends and with me liking him intermittently, we'd both finally acted on it.

It felt insane.

Walking into the room, I found Jared standing with a nurse, crutches underneath both of his arms. I chuckled a bit and leaned against the door frame, alerting both of them to look up at me.

"There's my ride," he said, smiling at the nurse. "Thanks for making sure I didn't die over the past week."

"That's what I'm here for," she said, nodding at both him and me with a smile. "Just don't do any strenuous physical activity and don't operate heavy machinery for the next few weeks."

"I'll make sure he doesn't," I said, to which Jared rolled his eyes.

"Alright, big guy. Let's get you out of here," I said, waving at the nurse, and walking

back down the hallway with Jared following behind me.

“Crutches are so stupid,” he muttered, trying his best to keep up with me as he walked. “I didn’t break my legs. I shouldn’t need these.”

“Your ribs are cracked. If you try to walk normally, you’ll just make that worse,” I replied, shaking my head with a bit of a laugh.

“Yeah, whatever,” he said, though there was a sarcastic smile on his face.

I led him out through the hospital and into the parking lot to my small red Nissan.

“Damn, I guess my car won’t be around any time soon,” he said, sighing and ducking into the passenger seat.

“No, it was trashed pretty thoroughly. It made me pretty sad, too. A lot of memories in that thing,” I replied, thinking back over the years of being driven everywhere in that small blue Pontiac.

I’d miss that car just as much as he would.

“Damn. I guess I’ll have to get another eventually,” he muttered as I started the car and backed out of the parking lot.

“Not until you’re healed up from this, at least. You heard what she said; no heavy machinery,” I replied, pulling out onto the road before looking over at him.

“I, err, where are you staying? I guess I should have asked that before this.”

He chuckled and shook his head before pulling out his phone. “The Lakewater Inn. It’s a couple of miles from here. I’ll pull it up,” he said, opening his GPS app and

punching in the address.

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A helpful voice told me where to turn after a few seconds, and he set the phone down on the center console.

“I just hope that I don’t pop a stitch or anything. It’ll be annoying to have to go back to the hospital for a single stitch,” he muttered.

“Yeah, you’ve done it before. A million times,” I added, looking over at him. “The number of stitches you’ve had in your life is probably twenty times the number I’ve had, considering you were too much of an idiot back in the day.”

He looked at me, scandalized, but I was right, so he couldn’t say anything.

“Well, okay, whatever,” he replied, crossing his arms while I laughed. “That just means I had more fun than you.”

“No, it means you were more stupid than me,” I said, turning when the voice told me to. “Anyway, I’m guessing you’ll pop at least one over the next few weeks because you’re too impatient to take it easy.”

“You don’t need to call me out like this. You could’ve just left it at how much more pristine your childhood was,” he grumbled, to which I smiled.

I’d missed him. Truly, genuinely, I had missed him; there were so many things from our childhoods that only the other knew.

“It’s here,” he said, nodding toward a small, shoddy-looking inn on the side of the road. I looked at it a bit apprehensively as I pulled into the parking lot, turned off the

car, and looked at him.

“Really?” I asked with raised brows. “I mean, I’ve been in some hard times myself, but this place looks like a serial killer’s rodeo.”

“Yeah, yeah. Trying to save money for a little while,” he said, chuckling as he got out of the car and took his crutches from the backseat.

I nodded grimly but looked back at the building with a bit of apprehension.

I really didn’t like the idea of him staying there.

“I’m on the first floor, at least,” he said, breaking me out of my thoughts as he began making his way toward one of the doors. “So I don’t have to climb up the stairs every day.”

I paused for a brief moment, pondering whether I really wanted to ask him to leave the place, but I eventually decided it was worth it.

“Okay, listen. You’re a stupid ass, and I also don’t like the look of this place. Pack your stuff and come stay in my apartment, alright?”

He looked over at me with a bit of surprise in his eyes, obviously not having expected anything like that. “I… Are you sure, Amy? I don’t want to impose or anything.”

“Shut up; we’ve spent the night together a hundred times over the years. Pack your stuff and get back in the car,” I said, doing my best to sound assertive so that I could avoid sounding embarrassed.

Apparently, it worked. He held his hands up in the air with a bit of a grin, nodded, and said, “Yes, ma’am.”

That was good, at least. I didn't want to have to argue the point.

I waited outside while he packed up his stuff, and I was a bit surprised when he came back out, closing the door behind himself with only a single duffel bag.

"That's all you brought?" I asked, looking at him with curiosity.

"Yep. Not much else I needed," he said, patting the bag with a bit of a smile. "Anyway, I'll just toss it in the trunk, and you can kidnap me as you wish."

I rolled my eyes and popped the trunk for him, and he walked around to throw it in. I went to help him, considering he was struggling with the crutches, but as I expected, he just shooed me away and did it himself.

He then jumped back into the front seat, and I got into the driver's seat. We sat there, just staring at each other for a while.

"Well? Go on, then. You're the one kidnapping me," he said, grinning and nodding toward the road.

So I turned on the car and took off, wondering what I had just gotten myself into.

Chapter Six

Jared

Walking into Amy's apartment was like stepping back in time, back to her first year of college, where I was figuring out who the hell I was.

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I had no way of knowing that it would take several years to even answer that question.

“This looks the same as it always had. It reminds me of all the hours spent lazing around in this place,” I said, looking over to find her smiling.

“Yeah, I haven’t changed much over the years,” she said, walking toward the hall closet and pulling out a pillow and a blanket.

“And you’ve spent plenty of nights drunk and asleep on that couch, so I’m sure you remember it quite well,” she said, nodding toward the well-worn black couch sitting against the far wall.

“Yes, I remember it fondly,” I replied sarcastically as she chucked the pillow and blanket onto it. After smoothing it out, she walked over to me and wrapped her arms around my waist, which still shocked the absolute hell out of me.

The casual affection was something that I loved, but it was also something I would have to get used to.

“Do you want to watch TV or something for a little while?” she asked, to which I nodded mutely. She nodded as well and made her way over to the coffee table to grab the remote and then sat down on the loveseat. I set my crutches down on the ground next to it and sat down. After a moment of consideration, I wrapped an arm around her.

She curled up to my side, and I knew I’d made the right choice.

She began to flick through the channels, but I couldn't focus on anything on the TV. I was captivated by her and the fact that I was sitting and cuddling with her after so many years of believing that it would never happen.

It took her a few moments, but Amy seemed to realize that I wasn't watching the TV and instead was watching her. She looked up and met my eyes, something passing between us then, a mutual understanding that even if we'd said we would take things slowly...

We knew each other too well for that.

"What is it?" she asked softly and reached a hand up and ran it through my hair.

I nearly melted when she did that; she knew very well it was one of my favorite things.

"I- I don't know how to tell you without sounding like I want to move things way too quickly for the both of us," I said, meeting her eyes and begging for her to understand.

There was a spark that made me think she did.

And then she spoke, and I knew she did.

"Then show me."

Normally, it would've taken me a few seconds to process that. However, the thought of her had been on my mind for hours already. So it only took me a second to press my lips to hers, and we immediately sank into a deep, passionate kiss.

It was everything I ever imagined it to be. I immediately understood why none of my

relationships in the past had worked out; none of them had this spark, this love that made it feel like we completely and effortlessly fit together.

But with her, I didn't even have to try. The chemistry, the love, the connection, it was all just there.

I pressed deeper into the kiss, running my hand up and down her back before I eventually pulled her over so that she was sitting on my lap, straddling me. I felt her lips part slightly in a bit of a gasp, but she didn't let it stop her from kissing me, and it was so attractive that it made me angry that I hadn't changed sooner.

I ran my hands up through her hair and pulled it slightly, which she seemed to love, given the fact that she slowly began to grind her hips against mine.

It was only then that I realized that we might be going all the way that night.

I slid my hands down to the hem of her shirt, then and tugged upwards slightly, more of asking a question than anything else.

I wanted her, and I wanted her to want me.

She broke away from the kiss only for long enough to give me a slight nod, her cheeks already red and a smile on her face.

The next few moments passed in a blur. I pulled her shirt from her body and unclasped her bra, and eventually, she pulled my shirt off me as well, and we lost ourselves in the kiss once again.

I hardly realized it as we lost more clothing as the night went on. Eventually, I was completely bare, and I tugged her panties down from her waist, and she was completely naked in front of me as well.

She was gorgeous. I was absolutely infatuated with her.

She slowly got back on top of me, straddling me, and began to grind lightly against my bare length. Her lips parted and formed an 'o', which only made me want her all the more.

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She felt so good, rubbing against me, and eventually, I lifted her up lightly and rubbed the tip against her, again asking more of a question than anything.

She answered it very quickly when she pushed back down on me, and it slipped into her by her own design.

Her moans were the most delicious sounds I had ever heard.

She rode me hard and well, which surprised me because I'd never expected Amy to be into anything much more than vanilla. But eventually, I got up and bent her over the couch, and she had to bite down on the pillows to keep from screaming.

I thrust into her hard, deep, and quickly, laying my hands on her hips and bringing myself toward her with every stroke. She yelled out into the pillows, and I could feel all the ecstasy in the world at that moment.

There weren't many positions I could do, with my body broken the way it currently was. But we switched between all the ones I could manage, and she looked all the more delicious as we did so until we were eventually back to what she said was her favorite, her being bent over the couch with me fucking the daylights out of her.

"Jared, I-" she began to say and then bit down on the pillow to silence another scream. "I'm close; I'm close; please give it to me."

Hearing her say my name like that was bliss. It was everything I'd wanted. I kept thrusting into her until she was screaming for real and begging for me to cum inside of her. And without even a thought or a care in the world...

I did.

I released inside of her, and she moaned so hard and deliciously as I did so that it made it feel better than anything I'd ever experienced. I kept thrusting, filling her up until I eventually had nothing more to give.

I pulled out of her slowly, causing us both to shiver in pleasure, and I helped her back into a sitting position on the loveseat, collapsing next to her with a pant.

We were both shellshocked. We were supposed to go slow.

This was anything but that.

"I," she began, but I just shook my head with a laugh.

"I guess that answers all of those questions," I said, to which she nodded with a laugh of her own. She then curled up next to me, leaving the TV off, and relaxing against my side.

I curled up with her, basking in her presence, and knew what I needed to ask her then.

"I want you to come away with me," I said lightly, turning her face up toward me and meeting her eyes. "Let's get out of here. Let's leave in your car and head out somewhere, start a new life. Let's leave this town behind and do something."

She looked shocked, but... Not in a bad way.

"After you finish school. That way, you can keep looking for a job while we go," I added, knowing very well that it sounded like I was begging. "I know it's fast, but neither of us has ever been slow with anything. Let's take all our stuff and get out of here. I have the money, and you've already put in your notice at work. Let's go."

She didn't respond for an agonizing minute, and I could see all of the wheels turning in her head. I shouldn't have asked; Amy had always been a very practical person. She would want stability and a routine in her life, and living on the road would be her least favorite way to-

"Okay."

That singular word from her mouth sent shivers down my spine and rocked me out of my thoughts. I thought I had imagined it for a second, but she was looking at me with a wide smile on her face. "Alright. After graduation, let's go. I'll get everything packed."

I knew nothing would ever be the same after that.

Chapter Seven

Amy

"Amy Reeves!"

I heard my name called by the Dean on the stage, and I pranced forward happily to receive the degree that I had worked so long and hard for.

Today was the big day. The day I would be leaving everything behind.

I shook the hands of the people on the stage, but none of it felt real. Of course, it didn't; nothing had felt real since that first night with Jared, where I'd decided to up-end my life and hit the road.

It had become all that I could think about over the last couple of weeks. Every waking moment was spent packing, pondering, or deciding what I would be bringing

and what would be staying behind.

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I probably never would have considered it if I hadn't chosen an English degree. I could get a job that focused on sitting at home and typing away on my laptop, and that was something I could easily do in a car.

I was excited.

I was thrilled. Thrilled to be getting away from my hometown and leaving with my best friend and the love of my life.

I looked out over the crowd, and I saw him in the front row, in a beautifully pressed suit that he'd gotten made specifically for my graduation because his other had been ruined in the crash.

He didn't need the crutches anymore. He was standing and clapping and smiling, just like the rest of them, but he was all that I could focus on.

As I walked down the stage, he walked up to me and wrapped me in an embrace. He took my hand, and I squeezed his once, gently, and we began walking away, down toward the parking lot where my car was parked with all our things.

There was a reception and a gathering after the ceremony, but I didn't care.

I wanted to leave. I wanted to be free with him, with no responsibilities, and I wanted my small-town life to end.

I wanted my new life, a better life, with him.

All I had to do was step on the gas.

To be continue