

# SAVAGE LOVE - SAMPLE

---

A LOVE LIKE THIS NOVEL

CASSIA LEO

GLOSS PUBLISHING LLC

## PROLOGUE

**T**he snowfall picks up as we cross the floating bridge over Lake Washington toward Washington Park. I don't turn on the music in the truck, in case Colette wants to talk during the drive, but so far, she hasn't spoken a word. At least the silence gives me time to think about what I'm going to say when we get there.

I haven't been to my childhood home since the day I hired a property manager to take care of the house while it sits empty and unused. Earlier today, when I debated

whether I wanted to bring Colette to the place where my life changed in an instant, I was certain I wouldn't take her inside. Now that we're on our way, I know I have no choice.

If she's going to understand who I am and why I did what I did, she needs to know everything. She *deserves* to know the whole story from the beginning.

She knows my dad died before I had my first girlfriend. But she needs to know that he never got the chance to sit me down and teach me how a woman should be treated. How I learned the basics of love from the poor father figures my mother latched onto in the throes of her grief.

She needs to know that the one thing I learned on my own is there's a fine line between love and hate. Even love can sometimes feel like an act of violence. It's not just the intent that matters. Though my intentions with Colette have always been

pure, my actions—and inaction—have often spoken louder.

Looking back, I'm certain I've loved her since the day we met. Despite my distractions that day, Colette made me feel like we were the only two people who existed. She made falling in love feel like it could really be that easy.

But everything changed after that night. Suddenly, we *were* the only two people who existed in our mutual universe of pain. I knew she was the only one who could ease my suffering. I never thought I'd become the only person who could soothe hers.

I wish telling Colette the truth didn't come with the risk of losing her. I want someone to promise me everything will stay the same after I come clean. That when I wake up tomorrow, I'll be holding Colette in my arms.

But there are no guarantees in love; especially not the kind of love we share.

I hate myself for the pain I've caused her. But if I don't tell her everything, she may never know how agreeing to stay with her that night destroyed me. And she deserves to know.

As I pull my truck in front of the two-story brick house where I grew up, the silence in the truck is crushingly heavy. It won't stay that way for long. Because tonight, I'm telling Colette the true story of how our love began. I just hope to fucking God this isn't how it ends.

PART 1

*savage  
beginnings*

“Remember tonight... for it is the  
beginning of always.”

— DANTE

## A LESSON

*Colette*

I shouldn't have downed that second dirty martini in one gulp. I drew too much attention to myself. The bartender hesitated when I ordered martini number three. He's glanced at me with those mesmerizing moss-green eyes at least four times while making my cocktail.

Here he comes.

"Where's my drink?"

He leaves the martini he just prepared on the back bar and approaches me. A smile

spreads across his handsome face, and not a single wrinkle appears at the corners of his eyes. Though he carries himself with the confidence of an older man, he's young for a bartender; can't be more than twenty-five. Or maybe that's just wishful thinking, considering tomorrow's my twenty-second birthday.

"You're throwing 'em back pretty swiftly. We have a three-drinks-per-hour limit."

I stare at him for a moment as my face starts to go numb. "Are you kidding me? I've only had two drinks. You can't cut me off at two drinks!"

He tilts his head, unamused by my outburst. "I'm not cutting you off. Just giving you a minute to catch your breath. Can I ask you a question?"

"No, but you can tell me where the nearest bar is. Preferably one within

walking distance that doesn't employ sanctimonious bartenders."

He laughs heartily, and—*God help me*—it's such a gorgeous sight. It's an open-mouthed, throw-your-head-back kind of laugh, the generous kind that fills a room and simultaneously fills your heart with joy. If you have space in your heart for that sort of stuff.

The deep resonance sends a chill coursing through me, raising the hairs on my arms, but in a different way than the antiseptic smell of a hospital corridor or a two a.m. knock on my bedroom door.

"Okay, I'll give you the drink—on the house, even—if you answer one question." He's still smiling, completely oblivious to the dark place my mind has wandered off to. "Why do you drink something you hate? Is it a form of self-punishment?"

I stare at him in confusion. "That's two

questions. Two pretty rude questions, at that. What makes you think I hate dirty martinis?”

“Could be bartender wisdom. Or the look of intense disgust on your face every time you take a sip. Or the way you gulp it down instead of sipping it.”

I glare at him. “So, you’re sanctimonious *and* a smart-ass?”

“I aim to please,” he says, flashing me dangerously sexy grin. “Let me make you a drink you’ll actually like. On the house, of course.”

For the first time in weeks, I have to suppress a smile, but the feeling quickly recedes as guilt sets in again.

“I won’t say no to free liquor.”

Not today.

He smiles at my response as he sets off to create my perfect cocktail.

As I watch him, my phone buzzes in the

pocket of my jean shorts. Pulling it out, my chest aches when I glimpse the identity of the caller. I don't want to answer, but today is not a good day to start ignoring my mom's calls.

"Yeah."

"Where are you? We thought you were going back to the house, but no one's answering the landline."

My mom's voice is hoarse from the howling cries she expelled less than an hour ago at my sister's bedside. It's a memory that will be burned in my mind for the rest of my life. One of the many memories I hope to erase with a little help from my new bartender friend.

"I'm just getting something to eat," I lie, hoping she can't hear the guy who just sat down a few barstools away from me as he barks his beer order.

"Are you okay?" she asks, her voice

wavering as she probably remembers how *not-okay* her other daughter is.

I sit up a bit straighter, as if this will disguise how tipsy I sound on the phone.

“I’m not going to do anything stupid. I just need to be alone right now.”

She’s silent for a while as she contemplates whether I’m telling the truth. Or maybe she’s wondering if she can even set aside her own pain to be what I need her to be right now.

“She’s okay,” she mutters to my father as she seems to decide I’ll be fine without her. “Will you be coming home tonight?”

I consider whether I should go back to our house in Duvall—a forty-minute drive from the hospital—or if I should stay at my parents’ second home. Their Laurelhurst apartment is a fifteen-minute walk from here. Obviously, I can’t drive if I’ve been drinking. But the idea of spending an entire night with my two grieving parents sounds

as appealing as tearing out my own fingernails.

My other option would be to accept my best friend Dahlia's offer to crash at her apartment in Capitol Hill. She knows how much I hate staying at my parents' apartment. It's harder to escape their grief in that cramped apartment than our two-story house in Duvall. I have an open invitation to stay with Dahlia, for anytime I need to get away from my parents for a while.

But Dahlia is working her retail job until late tonight. And she's only lived in this apartment for a few months. It would feel weird showing up alone at her new home and letting myself in without her.

I wish my other best friend, Anissa, wasn't visiting her family in Ohio. She'd pick me up in a heartbeat. And we could stay at her house, and her mom would offer to make my favorite foods.

Not that I can eat right now. I haven't

had much of an appetite for almost two years.

“I’m staying at Dahlia’s for a day or two,” I say to my mom. “I’m turning my phone off... just for tonight. But you can text me tomorrow if you need me for... um... anything.”

I leave the implication of funeral arrangements hanging in the air.

She sniffs loudly, and her voice is thick with emotion now. “Okay, sweetie. I love you so much. You know that, right?”

I clench my jaw against a surge of emotion. “Yeah, Mom, I’ll talk to you later. Love you. Bye.”

I end the call before she can say anything else that might make the tears stinging my sinuses leak out into reality. When I look up from my phone, I realize the bartender is standing there with a drink in his hand.

“You okay?” he asks, his dark eyebrows furrowed with concern.

*You okay?* Two words are all it takes for my tears to spill.

“Fuck,” I whisper as I frantically wipe at my face with the sleeves of my coral hoodie.

“Yo, can I get a Natty, or what?” the other patron asks the bartender again.

“In a minute,” the gorgeous man holding my cocktail says as he sets it down next to my empty martini glass. “Here.” He grabs a few napkins from behind the bar and holds them out to me. “The drink will help. I promise.”

“You promise?” I say, my voice strangled by the painful mass in my throat.

He smiles warmly. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

Something about the way he delivers these words feels heavier than light banter between strangers. It feels more like a

promise sealed in blood. Or in this case, tears.

I stuff the spent napkins in the pocket of my hoodie as I stare at the deep-magenta drink in front of me. It sort of resembles blood, with some fizzy bubbles of carbonation lining the inside of the glass. I bring the tumbler to my lips and take a sip. The liquid is cold, sparkling, and tart with a hint of berry sweetness, though I don't recognize the fruit I'm tasting.

"What is it?" I ask as I get a whiff of an unrecognizable floral note.

"It doesn't have a name yet," he says as he pours a pint of Natural Light from the tap and slides it to the guy a few barstools down.

"What's in it?"

I don't really care what's in the drink. I'm just hoping to draw out the conversation, because I suddenly don't want to be alone anymore.

He glances at a couple businessmen who've just sat down at the other end of the bar. "Hold that thought."

I try not to watch him too intensely as he takes the new customers' orders and prepares their drinks. I've barely spoken a few sentences to this guy, and I already find myself drawn to him, needing his company.

I shouldn't be talking to beautiful, charismatic men when I'm in such a vulnerable state. But there's nothing wrong with needing someone, especially after the day I've had. Well, more like the two years I've had.

The bartender returns with a warm smile, and I'm relieved to not be alone. But I also feel the stirrings of something else, something I haven't felt around a guy in a while: nervous. I reach up to wipe the corners of my lips, wondering if I've been sloppy with my red cocktail.

"How are you doing?"

“Honestly, not very good.”

He stares at me for a few seconds. “I was talking about the drink.”

My face flushes with heat. “Oh, I should have known that.”

“It’s fine.” He watches me as I nervously tuck my long, caramel-brown hair behind my ear. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

I look directly into his eyes. “Are you one of those therapist bartenders?”

“Nope, but I can make an exception.”

I want to ask if he’s making an exception for me or if he’s just feeling generous today.

“Tomorrow’s my twenty-second birthday and... my sister died today.” I force the words past the painful lump in my throat. “She was nineteen.”

He stands up straighter, looking somewhat uncomfortable now. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

I shrug and take another sip of the drink he made for me.

“What’s in this?” I ask, reminding him of the unanswered question from earlier, while also seizing on the opportunity to change the subject.

He looks relieved to talk about something else. “Mulled strawberries, elderflower honey, Prosecco, and a few drops of elderberry syrup, mostly for color.”

My stomach twists at the mention of elderflower honey.

He seems to notice my discomfort. “Not your thing?”

“No, it’s just the honey. My sister... she wanted to save the bees.” I chuckle as tears well up in my eyes again. “This is so ridiculous.”

“Your emotions aren’t ridiculous.”

His expression is fierce with the need for me to believe him.

“I know my emotions are valid, but what kind of person cries to a bartender about their problems? It is a little

ridiculous. This whole fucking day feels so... surreal.”

Without a second thought, I gulp down the rest of the cocktail. The concern I saw in his face when I guzzled my second dirty martini a few minutes ago is back. That’s three drinks in less than an hour.

Three strikes, I’m out.

“Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back,” he says, then he disappears through a swinging door marked for employees only.

I hastily retrieve the used napkins from my hoodie and wipe my face and nose. He’s back before I’ve finished tucking them into my pocket. But he doesn’t come straight to me.

He fulfills a few more drink orders and closes out a few bar tabs as an attractive woman in her late twenties or early thirties arrives behind the bar. Without so much as a glance in my direction, she takes the empty

glasses in front of me and places them in a sink.

I don't know if it's the alcohol I've consumed that's making it difficult to understand what's going on or if I'm just out of practice in social situations. I've spent most of the last two years in hospital rooms or locked in my bedroom. Dahlia has likened my social acuity to a house-cat, fluctuating between indifferent and demanding.

I shake my head to clear the numbness that creeps over my senses, but this only makes me dizzy. It's nearly three p.m., and I've consumed nothing but three strong cocktails.

I blink at the bartender as he approaches me. Did he put something in my drink? Or am I really this much of a lightweight? *Damn.* I can't even remember the last time I drank a beer, much less hard liquor.

The bartender rounds the bar, and his

eyes widen as I clumsily attempt to twist around on the stool to see where he's going. I realize too late this isn't the kind of seat that spins. The barstool begins to tip, and I reach out desperately toward the mahogany bar-top. But my fingers miss, closing around air as my momentum carries me toward the hardwood floor.

I squeeze my eyes tightly as I brace myself for the impact. But the violent crash I expect never comes. Instead, my body moves in reverse until I'm upright again.

When I open my eyes, I realize the bartender has his strong arms wrapped around me, and I'm not on the barstool anymore. I'm standing upright, but just barely. My legs are wobbly, which is probably why he's holding me.

I look up at his handsome face, but I can't seem to focus. "You have four beautiful eyes."

"Glad you're still conscious." His voice

doesn't sound the least bit strained by the effort it must take to hold me up. "Do you have a car where you can sleep this off? I can sit with you."

As my heavy head tips backward, I remember I didn't sleep last night. "I want to sleep, but I don't remember where I parked."

He adjusts his arms around my limp body. "You didn't park in the lot?"

The tighter his solid arms embrace me, the weaker my limbs become. The closer his gorgeous face gets to mine, the more I want to lick him. I just want to collapse in his arms and let him have his way with me.

I rest my head on his broad shoulder. "I parked at the hospital across the street last night."

My sense of smell is dulled, but I still get a tiny whiff of a clean, spicy scent coming off him. I inhale deeply, and it makes me even sleepier.

“Do you think you can stand on your own?”

He doesn't want to hold me anymore. I pout like a petulant child as I grab onto the barstool for support.

He slowly releases his hold on me and takes a step back, assessing my condition. “Can you walk?”

I hold on to the barstool for a moment until I feel steady enough to move. Then I nod as I step sideways to get around him.

“Thanks for catching me.”

He chuckles as he grabs my hand to stop me. “I'll walk you to your car and sit with you until you can drive. Unless you'd rather call someone to come get you.”

“No,” I say, perhaps a bit too hastily.

With Anissa out of town, the only people who can pick me up would be Dahlia or my parents. With Dahlia working, and knowing my mom has taken a Xanax by now, I'd *have* to call my dad.

And he's the last person I want to see right now.

He lets go of my hand and stares at the floor as he seems to consider what he should do next. "Well, if you don't mind, I can drive you home in your car, then I'll get an Uber back here."

I squint at him. "Why would you do that?"

He looks confused for a moment before his face splits into a charming grin. "Because I'm a serial killer."

I let out a soft sigh. "I knew it."

"Want to be my next victim?"

The way the light dances over his purposely messy chestnut-brown hair is spell-binding. At this distance, I can see he's almost a foot taller than I am, and I'm five-five, so he has to be at least six-foot-two. Judging by his height and how easily he caught me when I nearly fell, he could easily overpower me if he wanted to. But as I

search his gorgeous green eyes for any sign of ill-intent, all I see is kindness.

And pain. I recognize that look.

I smile despite the gnawing ache in my belly. "I'd love to be your next victim."

---

After describing my white Nissan Leaf to the bartender, the one with the passenger-side footwell full of empty water bottles, I give him my best guess at where it may be located on the hospital lot. Somehow, from this vague description, he helps me find my car. As he watches me dig my key fob out of my shorts pocket, the clouds move in front of the sun, turning an uncharacteristically blue April sky into a more familiar Seattle gray.

I finally find the remote and unlock the door, but he pulls it open for me. As I plop down into the passenger's seat, he stands

nearby to make sure I don't tip over again. Before I can close the door, he gently takes the key fob from my hand. Then he makes his way into the driver's seat.

I turn to face him and lean the side of my face against the headrest. "You really don't mind driving me home? Or you just don't trust me to wait here until I sober up?"

"Call me crazy, but I don't like the idea of leaving a drunk girl alone in a parking lot. And, no, I don't mind taking you home."

A lazy smile spreads across my mouth. "Oh, so you're trying to protect me."

He doesn't reply, but he looks uneasy with my comment. The heavy silence, and the guilt of possibly having said something offensive, makes me want to close my eyes and take a nap. Shut the world out.

"An Uber from Duvall has to be at least fifty bucks. I'm poor. I can't afford to pay you back," I say as my speech becomes more slurred.

“I’ll survive,” he says with a smile as he takes his phone out of his pocket. “What’s the address?”

I take a moment to recall the address for the home I’ve lived in almost all my twenty-one years on this hell planet. When I finally give it to him, he wastes no time punching it into his app and pulling out of the parking space.

As I adjust my position and clumsily secure my seatbelt, the sour burn at the back of my throat tells me I need some fresh air. As the window slides down, a mist of tiny, sprinkling raindrops hits my face. I close my eyes and inhale the cool, damp air of the Pacific Northwest.

When my stomach has settled a bit, I sit back again and glance at his phone. The trip estimate is forty-six minutes. I should take a nap. But as we pass Husky Stadium and approach the bridge, I burst into laughter as I realize I don’t even know this guy’s name.

His eyes flit toward me as I double over and devolve into barely controlled hysteria.

“Are you okay?”

“No, I’m definitely not okay.” I squeeze the words out between fits of snorting giggles. “I just gave you my home address and the keys to my car... and I don’t even know your name!”

He laughs along with me as he glances at the Flex Pass transponder on my windshield. But as we come to a stop before the Montlake Bridge and wait for it to lower, his laughter dies down, and he doesn’t attempt to fill in the missing information about his identity. Instead, he sits in silence as he waits for me to catch my breath. By the time that happens, I wonder if letting him drive my car was a wise thing to do.

“It’s Max,” he finally says as he pulls onto the bridge and changes lanes.

I exhale a dramatic sigh of relief. “Phew.

Now I know what name to write in blood when you leave me for dead.”

The word “dead” conjures up an image of Elle, her face gray and sunken as she whispered her last words to me this morning.

I’m grateful I was the one she entrusted with her words. And I know she was on heavy pain meds, so she may not have meant it. But part of me hates her for telling me something I know will haunt me for the rest of my life.

“Hey, please don’t cry,” Max says. “I promise I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just trying to get you home safe.”

I wipe the tears from my cheeks as a tension headache grips my skull. “It’s not that. I’m not afraid of you.”

He glances at me a couple of times as he changes lanes to transition to highway 520. “You still haven’t told me your name.”

The giddiness I initially felt at not

knowing his name doesn't return with this revelation.

"Colette."

"Colette? Is that French?"

"I think so. My mom is a bit of a Francophile. My sister's name is —*was*—" I shake my head at my slip-up. "Her name was Gabrielle, but everyone called her Elle."

"You want to tell me more about her?"

My headache spreads to my neck. "She had leukemia."

He continues driving in silence, though I don't know if it's because he doesn't know what to say or because he's trying to encourage me to keep talking. Either way, it doesn't matter. I'm drunk, and I need to tell someone. I'll likely never see this guy again. This is the perfect time to over-share.

"They discovered it when she was six, but she was in remission for ten years. Then, about a year and a half ago, it came back and never went away." I give up on my futile

attempts to dry my face. “This morning, she called me close and whispered in my ear, ‘I’m so scared. I don’t want to die. Please tell them I don’t want to die.’ And now I don’t know what to do with that information. I mean, how am I ever supposed to be happy again knowing how scared she was?”

He lets out a soft sigh. “I’m so fucking sorry. I wish I knew what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Listening is enough.”

As I say this, it occurs to me I should apply this logic to my feelings about Elle’s final moments.

Words are inadequate when trying to comfort someone who’s grieving. Actions speak louder. Maybe Elle’s words should not be taken so seriously. Perhaps they were just thoughts she had no control over as her brain was shutting down. Or maybe the words weren’t connected to the meaning behind them.

But that type of logic would require objectivity; something I'm incapable of feeling right now. All I can think of is how my beautiful sister no longer exists, and how fucking unfair that is.

She didn't deserve to spend so many months anticipating her death. She didn't deserve to spend so many years of her young life in misery. She didn't deserve to feel so fucking scared and helpless in her final moments.

She deserved to grow old and fall in love. She deserved her chance to save the bees, or whatever it is she would have done with her life. She deserved better, and the world deserved her.

"It should have been me in that hospital bed."

He flashes me a look of deep concern. "That's not something you should think about today."

I wonder if he has experience talking

someone down from the brink of hopelessness. His tone is gentle, but his words are firm. Even with three drinks in my system, I understand what he means. It's dangerous to think about my death when I'm freshly grieving my sister's.

I extract my feet from the sea of empty water bottles in the footwell and place them on the seat to hug my knees against my chest.

His gaze flits toward me. "I know it's still raw, but maybe it will help to make plans. Like, what if you learn about beekeeping, or something, in your sister's honor?"

I rest my chin on my knee and stare at the gray sky as I imagine myself in a beekeeper's suit. "I'm afraid of bees."

"Why do I find that hard to believe?"

"Because you don't know me." My response is cold, but I can't bring myself to care. "Besides, I don't want to work with bees. I like working with animals."

“Bees are animals.”

I rest my cheek on my knee, so I’m facing him. “You’re not giving up on this bee thing, are you?”

He turns the volume down on his phone as the Google Maps lady announces our next exit.

“My dad died when I was nine,” he says with a shrug. “I guess I wish someone had convinced me to do something in his honor.”

“You’re not too old to take your own advice.”

“I’ve already taken it.” There’s no joy in his declaration. The muscles in his neck tense up, and he sucks in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “If you don’t want to be a beekeeper, what *do* you want to be?”

“I’m a dog groomer. I used to want to be a veterinarian, but I dropped out of U-Dub... Ever since I could remember, I’ve wanted a big hobby farm with dogs and horses and goats and cats and... I guess if I

could work with animals for the rest of my life, I'd be pretty happy. How about you? What are your hopes and dreams?"

"Don't have any."

I squint at him. "Come on. Everyone has dreams."

"Guess I'm not like everyone."

The note of finality in his tone feels like a challenge.

"Ooh, so broody and mysterious."

This makes him laugh, but there's still an uneasiness in his eyes. "I used to think I wanted to be like my dad."

"What did your dad do?"

"He was a helicopter pilot. He worked with search and rescue organizations." He doesn't blink as he seems lost in thought for a moment. "He died in a helicopter crash."

As he stares out at the road ahead of us, I wonder if this is the pain I saw in his eyes earlier. I want to say something to acknowledge it, but I don't think either of us

wants platitudes right now. Better to just shut up and listen.

“I actually got my degree in data science,” he continues. “I fell into bartending after graduation because of the flexible hours.”

He glances at me with an apprehensive look in his eyes.

A lazy grin spreads across my mouth. “Don’t worry. I don’t judge guys based on what they do for a living. I mean, I think there are better things you can do with a data science degree than spending your time driving drunk girls home. But you do you, you know?”

He laughs out loud. “Damn, girl. That’s some savage criticism of my life choices.”

“Sorry. That’s the alcohol talking. I didn’t mean it that way. I actually envy you.”

“Envy me?” he says, still chuckling as he looks much more relaxed now.

“Yeah, you’re lucky you at least have a

degree. If I hadn't dropped out, I'd be graduating with my bachelor's next month and applying for the master's program in comparative medicine." I inhale a deep breath as my chest tightens. "It would be hella difficult to get U-Dub to take me back now."

I'm grateful he doesn't try to offer advice on getting accepted back into UW. I've already had that conversation with my parents a million times. I know what I need to do; I just don't think I have the mental fortitude to do it.

As he drives in silence, the muscle in his jaw twitches occasionally, as if he's stressed about something. I consider asking him what he's thinking about, but this question may open up the conversation to subjects I'm not prepared to deal with right now. Still, it doesn't stop my mind from wandering to the many possibilities.

Maybe he's worried he'll lose his job for

ducking out on such short notice. Perhaps he has a girlfriend, and he's worried what she'll think when he tells her he drove a drunk girl home today.

I think back to my previous comment about him being broody and mysterious. This is an accurate description of him. His brooding discomfort at the mention of certain topics, and his inability to hide it, makes me wonder if I'll be like that in ten or fifteen years. Or however long it's been since his dad died.

Will I never get over Elle's death? Will the mere mention of it always make me physically uncomfortable?

And he's definitely mysterious. Few men would drive a woman home and ask for nothing in return. Unless he plans to demand payment when we get to my house. For some unknown reason, I don't think that's the case.

Maybe it's the liquid courage coursing

through my veins, but he doesn't frighten me. I'm actually hoping for something—*anything*—to take my mind off Elle. This gorgeous man would make the perfect distraction.

“Do you really think I'm broody and mysterious?” he asks, and he seems genuinely curious to know my answer.

I chuckle softly at his question, considering I made the comment about him being broody and mysterious a few minutes ago. Has he been thinking about it this whole time?

“Does that offend you?”

His mouth curves into a flirty smile. “That depends. Do you like broody and mysterious guys?”

“It's probably not ideal, coming from a strange man who knows my home address.”

“Now I'm broody, mysterious, *and* strange? Maybe I should pull over and get an Uber.”

“No!” I blurt out, and this brings a sparkle to his eye. “I’m not ready to be alone yet.”

His smile widens for a brief second before it recedes. “Good, ’cause I’m not ready to leave you alone yet. And, just to be clear, I wouldn’t have left you. It was a joke.”

My stomach swoops and I’m suddenly hyper-aware of gravity pushing me down into the seat. Something has shifted between us. He finds me attractive, too.

I decide not to say anything else unless he talks to me. I can’t mess this up. I need something to distract me from the aching hole in my chest. I don’t care if this is just a one-night stand. I want to feel something other than pain today.

When he pulls my car into the driveway of our two-story family home in the suburbs, he turns off the engine and engages the

parking brake; something I never remember to do.

He taps his phone screen to end the navigation, then he hands me my keys. “Is it okay if I help you inside?”