

## Loving Amber - Chapter One

Amber tapped out another e-mail, then sat back and picked up her coffee mug. She tipped back the last cold remnants before going over her schedule for the day. It was six in the morning, and she had most of the office to herself. She liked it that way. The quiet let her think clearly. Still, the early mornings and late nights were beginning to wear on her. In fact, she couldn't think of the last time she'd had a vacation. It'd been at least two years. Her cell phone rang, and she peered down at the screen. Rachel, the only other person she knew up and about at this ungodly hour. She'd met Rachel in grade school. She'd been the shy girl in study hall reading Shakespeare, and not because it was a school assignment either. Amber had been intrigued and struck up a conversation. They'd been friends ever since.

Amber picked up the phone and hit the talk button. "Let me guess, you're at the Brew already, waiting for that hot cop to show so you can ogle him from afar."

Rachel tsked. "Mister Dreamy Eyes isn't the reason I come here."

"Ooh, he has a nickname now." Amber knew her friend too well. Rachel was totally into the sexy blue-eyed officer, but she was too shy to do anything about it, so she would sit and stare and wish she had the courage to approach him.

"Okay, well, he's not the only reason."

Amber rolled her eyes. "Ask him out already." When only silence greeted her, she added, "What's the worst he can do? Turn you down?"

"Yes," Rachel hissed. "And that would be mortifying."

"Maybe he's into you. Ever consider that?"

She scoffed. "Why would he be?"

"Because you're a catch," Rachel answered, wishing the woman would realize her own worth. "Think about it. He goes there every day, same as you. Maybe it's not just for the coffee."

"I don't know," Rachel said, clearly hesitant. "He's sort of a flirt. And I'm through with the flirtatious charmers of the world. I need a nice, stable guy. Someone who doesn't lose his cool just because I forget to call—one time."

"Okay, Jake was way too possessive. You can't shut yourself away just because you had one bad apple."

"That's the thing, it's been a string of bad apples. I have terrible taste in men. So, basically, if I like this guy, the cop, then that means he's a loser," she said, as if coming to some great realization. "What I really need to do is date the first guy I'm not into. That'll be my Mister Right."

Amber laughed. "That's the most absurd bit of logic I've ever heard."

"Whatever. Enough about me. What are you doing at work? Don't you ever sleep?"

"Sure, you're one to talk. And how do you know I'm at work? Maybe I'm at home, in bed."

"First of all, of course you're at work. You're always at work. And the only reason I'm awake right now is so I can ogle, remember?"

Amber sighed. "Yeah. It's been a long time since I stopped and ogled."

"Maybe it's time for a vacation," she suggested. "You do tend to burn the candle at both ends."

She flipped through at her planner sitting open on her desk in front of her. Meetings, meetings, meetings. God, when had her life gotten so predictable? "You're right. It's time I soaked up some sun and put some color back into my cheeks."

"Great idea. I hear Miami is gorgeous this time of year."

"Miami," Amber repeated, remembering the last time she'd been to sunny Florida. Her senior year of college, she'd spent a week partying with some friends. Geez, Amber had done things then she wouldn't even tell Rachel about. "I love it. I'm going to book a flight today. I've got a ton of vacation time coming."

"And you deserve to use some of it."

After they talked a bit more, Amber hung up and got back to work. At around noon, she took a break and called her mom. When a cheerful voice answered the phone, Amber said, "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetheart. How are you?"

"Good, I've got a full day ahead, but I was thinking of stopping by on my way home. Feel like some company?"

"Always," she answered. "I'll be sure to have the coffee ready."

It was after six in the evening before Amber reached her mother's small white ranch-style house. "Mom?" she called out as she stepped through the front door.

"In the kitchen," her mother yelled back.

When Amber entered the brightly lit room, her mom pointed to the chair at the kitchen counter and handed her a cup of freshly brewed coffee. "Thanks," she said as she breathed in the rich aroma. "Smells like heaven."

Her mom stood across from her and frowned. "Did you eat today? You have dark circles under your eyes."

She chuckled. "Gee, thanks."

"I worry about you." She reached over and patted her hand. "You work too hard."

Amber admired her mom. At fifty-five, Betty Price stayed in relatively good shape with weekly yoga classes, and she kept the gray in her hair at bay with store-bought brown hair dye. And even though she had some laugh lines, the woman could still turn a few heads.

"Actually, I was considering taking a vacation."

Her eyes widened. "Wow, when was the last time you did that?"

"It's been at least a year." She propped her head on her fist. "I'm thinking Miami."

"Oh, that sounds lovely," her mom said, a smile curving her lips. "Going alone or with someone special?"

She rolled her eyes at the not so subtle probe into her love life. "Nice try, but there isn't currently a someone special." Unfortunately, she added silently.

"What about that new neighbor of yours?" Mom perked up at that. "The one who moved in a few weeks ago? Didn't you mention that he's tall, dark, and handsome?"

Amber laughed. "Yes, I did. But I haven't even said hi to him, and you want me to invite him on vacation with me?"

"Well, no, but you could introduce yourself and then maybe take a vacation at home." She paused. "Don't they call that a stay-cation?"

"Yes, they do," she replied, and much to her surprise, the thought had merit. "I suppose it would be a nice gesture to welcome him to the neighborhood with one of my famous strawberry pies." She had been super curious about the guy. He seemed so mysterious.

"Hmm, good idea," Mom said with the hint of a smile. "So, tell me more about this guy."

"He has black hair that hangs down to his shoulders. He's tall, over six feet if I had to guess. And sort of...rugged." Too late, Amber realized she'd made it acutely obvious that she'd totally checked him out from afar.

"Rugged, huh?" She winked. "Rugged sounds nice."

"Okay, so maybe I'll take a stay-cation." Amber felt like a teenager in high school, blushing at the mere mention of a cute guy.

"You know, Alison from church noticed your new neighbor too. She said he's downright yummy."

Amber frowned. “Seriously?” She rolled her eyes. “She’s too young to be checking out men like him. I mean, she’s barely twenty years old.” And why did it bug her that other women had noticed her neighbor? It wasn’t like she had any claims on the guy.

Mom laughed. “Better get your butt in gear or you’ll have to take a number to get a date with him.”

The thought didn’t sit well at all. “I know, Mom,” she said. “And what would I do without you arranging my love life for me?” She got up and gave her mom a hug. “Die an old maid, I suppose.”

Her mother started to speak, but Amber’s cell phone rang. She checked the number on the screen but didn’t recognize it. She said, “Hello?”

There was a beat of silence and then, “Hi, baby.” The deep voice on the other end sent a chill down her spine.

Amber paled at the sound of her ex-husband. “Ted,” she bit out. The world tilted on its axis, and for a split second, she was thrown back in time to when that deep baritone first melted her heart, and then would later freeze her in fear. Never in a million years had she expected to hear from Ted again. At the conclusion of their disastrous marriage, they’d said good-bye and never once talked again. Until now.

There were some details of her marriage Amber hadn’t revealed to anyone. Ted had a mean streak a mile wide when he picked up “the drink.” She’d witnessed it on a few occasions when she’d inadvertently made Ted mad. He quite simply frightened the hell out of her, and she wanted him to keep out of her life.

On one such occasion, Amber had come home from work late to find Ted drunk and sitting quietly in the dark. He’d asked where she’d been. She told him she’d been working, but he was disinclined to believe her. He got angry, and to teach her a lesson for lying to him, he landed a blow to her cheek. It had put her out cold on the floor. When she came to, Ted pleaded with her to please not leave him. He was so sorry, and it would never happen again. She naively believed he was sincere. Of course, it happened again. The second time it wasn’t just a blow to the face but also a kick to her stomach. She’d doubled over in agony, pleading with him to please stop. That was right before she’d caught him in their marriage bed with another woman. Amber decided enough was enough and filed for divorce.

“What do you want, Ted?” Amber tried to force a measure of calm in her tone, but found she was sorely lacking.

“Now is that any way to talk to your ex-husband, baby?” Ted said laughingly.

“Do not ever call me baby again,” she yelled. “You lost that right.” Now her temperature began to climb along with her temper. How dare he simply phone her after all this time and attempt to sweet-talk her. He was in for a rude awakening if he thought that tactic was going to work. She was no longer an innocent young girl.

“Come on, Amber. It’s been ages, and I’ve changed a lot,” Ted said earnestly. “I know I made lots of mistakes by you, but just hear what I have to say, and then I’ll leave you alone, Okay?” he implored.

Amber sighed and decided to let him say his piece and then hang up on the jerk. She turned and saw her mom watching, worry creasing her brow. In her anxiety over hearing Ted again, Amber had forgotten she wasn’t alone. She walked over to her mother and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Very well, Ted, get on with it, then,” Amber said, getting more perturbed every second she spent on the phone.

“I just wanted you to know I’m back in town, and I thought it’d be real nice if we got together and talked about old times. What do you say, Amber? We could go to the Tasty Freeze and have burgers and fries like we use to when we were married.”

She rolled her eyes at his sheer stupidity. “Ted, I’m going to say this once, and then I’m hanging up. I will not go anywhere with you ever again. Our marriage is over, and I’ve moved on with my life. I suggest you do the same. Do not attempt to call me again.” She spoke with calm authority and hit the end-call button. After taking a deep breath, she once again turned toward her mom.

“What did he want?” her mother asked fretfully.

“He says he’s back in town and wants to get together for old time’s sake. Can you believe the nerve of him to call and expect to just pick right up where we left off?” She clenched her fists, just thinking of the whole thing. “Of course I told him not a chance, and don’t call me again.” She sat across from her mother and took a long drink from her iced tea in an effort to cool her temper.

Mom began chewing her lower lip. “Is there anything you want to tell me, Amber? About Ted and your marriage, I mean?”

Did she suspect there was more to the story? Amber squashed her growing panic. “You already know everything of importance, and besides, I don’t want to rehash all that depressing stuff. I’d rather just forget about it and move forward.” She went on with forced cheer. “I won’t allow him to ruin our visit together. He isn’t worth my time.”

“Okay, dear, if that’s what you want. Just know that I’m here if you ever feel like talking, okay?” Mom said with love in her eyes.

“Thank you, that means so much to me.” She covered her mother’s hand with her own and squeezed. Amber only hoped she’d be able to keep the past buried where it belonged, but knowing Ted was back in town made all the old fears resurface and gave her a sense of foreboding. Ted wasn’t used to being told no. There was no telling what he might do. However,

she was determined to live her life and deal with her own problems. She refused to cower and run to her mom or her brother every time something bad happened.

After they shared a dinner of pork chops and steamed asparagus, her mom saw her out the door with a hug. Before she left, Amber promised to call when she got home.

With them both alone in the evenings, they often had dinner together. Mom could never get used to cooking for just herself. She'd always cooked for herself and Dad before he passed away. Amber suspected her mom was lonely, but Betty refused to even consider dating. In her heart, she was still married.

Amber had done a good job of reassuring her mother that all was well and she shouldn't worry about Ted, but deep down, Amber wished she could convince herself of the same thing. She shivered, but quickly shook it off. She was taking a vacation, and she wouldn't let anything spoil it.

When Amber reached her own house, she closed and locked the front door, and finally kicked off her shoes. She sighed, emotionally exhausted. She was just glad the day was at last at an end. In two weeks, she would start her vacation. Or, stay-cation, as it turned out. And maybe, just maybe, she'd work up the nerve to introduce herself to her sexy new neighbor. She smiled. If there was a God, maybe she'd even go out on a date.

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