

the rekindle flame

A SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE

BOOK 1 OF 5

TRISHA FUENTES

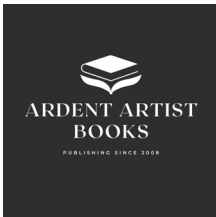
ARDENT ARTIST BOOKS

The Rekindled Flame
Book 1 of 5
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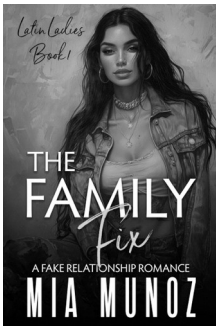
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part one





one

Sarah's reflection stared back at her from the glossy surface of her laptop, determination etched in every line of her face. The clock ticked relentlessly, each second a reminder of the impending pitch. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she scrolled through her meticulously crafted presentation one last time.

"Market trends... *check*. Campaign strategy... *check*. Visual mockups... *perfect*," she murmured, her fingers dancing across the keyboard as she made minute adjustments.

The familiar weight of anxiety settled in her stomach, a constant companion since her college days. She pushed the feeling aside, focusing instead on the task at hand. This pitch could make or break her career at Pinnacle Marketing, and she was determined to nail it.

As she stepped into the boardroom, Sarah felt a surge of confidence. The clients, a mix of suits and creative types, looked up expectantly. She smiled, her professional mask slipping into place as easily as breathing.



“Good morning, everyone,” Sarah began, her voice steady and clear. “I’m thrilled to present our campaign strategy for RevolutionTech’s new line of sustainable smart home devices.”

She clicked through her slides, each one a carefully crafted piece of the larger puzzle. The clients leaned in, their interest palpable.

“Our research shows a growing trend towards eco-friendly technology,” Sarah explained, gesturing to a graph. “RevolutionTech is perfectly positioned to capitalize on this market shift.”

As she spoke, Sarah’s mind raced ahead, anticipating questions and planning responses. It was a dance she knew well, one that allowed her to stay one step ahead of her audience.

“But how do we stand out in a saturated market?” she posed the question rhetorically, her eyes scanning the room. “The answer lies in our unique approach to storytelling.”

Sarah clicked to the next slide, revealing a series of emotive images. “By focusing on the human impact of sustainable technology, we create an emotional connection with consumers.”

She could feel the energy in the room shift, the clients’ skepticism melting away into genuine interest. It was moments like these that made all the late nights and sacrificed weekends worth it.

As Sarah wrapped up her presentation, a small voice in the back of her mind whispered, “Jordan would be impressed.” She pushed the thought away, annoyed at herself for letting her old boyfriend creep into her thoughts even now.

“Thank you for your time,” Sarah concluded, her smile genuine despite the twinge of old pain. “I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.”

The silence that followed was pregnant with possibility, and Sarah allowed herself a moment of pride. She had given it her all, and now, standing in the sleek boardroom of Pinnacle Marketing, she felt ready to take on the world.

The clients exchanged glances, their eyes alight with excitement. The woman in the charcoal suit leaned forward, her manicured nails tapping against the polished table.

“Sarah, this is... remarkable,” she said, her voice tinged with awe. “Your approach to sustainable technology marketing is unlike anything we've seen before.”

Sarah's heart soared, but she kept her expression professionally composed. “I'm glad you think so. We believe in creating campaigns that not only inform but inspire.”

As the clients peppered her with enthusiastic questions, Sarah felt a familiar rush of adrenaline. This was her element, where her passion and expertise collided in a dazzling display of marketing prowess.

After the meeting concluded, Sarah gathered her materials, her mind already racing with the next steps. She barely noticed the tap on her shoulder until she turned to find Hannah's beaming face.

“You absolute rockstar!” Hannah exclaimed, pulling Sarah into a tight hug. “I swear, I could feel the excitement from down the hall.”

Sarah laughed, the tension in her shoulders finally easing. “Thanks, Han. I think it went well, but you never know...”

“Oh, please,” Hannah rolled her eyes playfully. “I saw their faces when they left. They looked like kids who'd just met Santa Claus.”

As they walked towards their offices, Sarah couldn't help but smile. Hannah's unwavering support had been her anchor through countless pitches and late-night brainstorming sessions.

“So,” Hannah nudged her, a mischievous glint in her eye. “How are we celebrating this victory?”

Sarah hesitated, her mind briefly flashing to past celebrations with Ethan. She shook off the memory. “I don't know, Han. Maybe just a quiet drink?”

“Nuh-uh,” Hannah wagged her finger. “This calls for something special. You've earned it, Sarah. Let yourself enjoy this moment.”

Sarah nodded, realizing Hannah was right. She deserved to celebrate her achievements, past ghosts be damned.

As they rounded the corner, Sarah spotted Mallory and Angela approaching, their faces alight with enthusiasm. Mallory, the youngest of the group, practically bounced on her toes, her trendy blouse a splash of color against the office's muted tones.

“Sarah!” Mallory exclaimed, her voice carrying down the hallway. “That was absolutely incredible! The way you handled those client questions was just... wow!”

Angela, ever the composed one, offered a warm smile. “Impressive work, Sarah. Your confidence really shone through.”

Sarah felt a flush of pride warm her cheeks. “Thanks, you two. I'm just glad it's over, to be honest.”

“Over?” Angela raised an eyebrow. “This is just the beginning. You've set the bar high for all of us now.”

Mallory nodded eagerly. “Seriously, teach me your ways. I want to be you when I grow up!”

Sarah laughed, a genuine sound that surprised even her. “You’re already grown up, Mal. But I’d be happy to share some tips.”

As they huddled near the water cooler, Sarah couldn’t help but feel a sense of belonging. These women, her colleagues, and friends understood the thrill of a successful pitch, the late nights, and caffeine-fueled brainstorming sessions.

“So, what did the clients say?” Mallory leaned in, eager for details.

Sarah grinned. “They loved the social media strategy. Said it was ‘fresh’ and ‘innovative’.”

Angela nodded approvingly. “No surprise there. Your ideas always push boundaries.”

As they discussed the finer points of the campaign, Sarah felt a familiar spark of excitement. This was why she loved her job, why she pushed herself so hard. The creative energy, the potential for impact – it was intoxicating.

“This campaign could really put Pinnacle on the map,” Sarah mused, her mind already racing with possibilities.

“On the map?” Mallory laughed. “Sarah, you’re going to launch us into the stratosphere!”

The enthusiasm was contagious, and for a moment, Sarah allowed herself to bask in it. She caught Angela’s eye, seeing a mix of pride and something else – understanding, perhaps. They’d both fought hard to get where they were.

“We make a pretty good team, don’t we?” Sarah said softly, including them all in her gaze.

The answering smiles warmed her heart, chasing away the lingering shadows of her past. This, right here, was her present – and her future looked brighter than ever.

Sarah excused herself, needing a moment alone. She strode towards the floor-to-ceiling windows of the conference room, her reflection a blur against the New York City skyline. The city stretched out before her, a tapestry of ambition and dreams.

Her heart raced, adrenaline still pumping from the pitch. She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. Pride swelled in her chest, a warmth that spread to her fingertips. This was what she'd worked for, what she'd sacrificed for.

"I did it," she whispered to herself, a mantra of triumph. Memories of late nights, of doubts and setbacks, flashed through her mind. But she'd persevered, pushed through. And now...

Sarah opened her eyes, her gaze sharp and determined. This was just the beginning. She'd prove herself, climb higher, achieve more. The thought both thrilled and terrified her.

A gentle knock interrupted her reverie. Sarah turned to see Mallory hovering in the doorway, her youthful enthusiasm infectious.

"Hey, superstar," Mallory grinned. "We were thinking... how about we celebrate your big win? Maybe grab dinner or drinks after work?"

Sarah hesitated for a moment, old instincts urging her to decline, to retreat into solitude. But the genuine warmth in Mallory's eyes melted her resistance.

"You know what? That sounds great," Sarah replied, surprising herself with her eagerness. "I could use a night out with the team."

Mallory's face lit up. "Awesome! I know this perfect little bistro downtown. We could all unwind, maybe even let loose a little?"

Sarah laughed, feeling lighter than she had in years. “Let's not get too crazy. We still have work tomorrow.”

“Spoilsport,” Mallory teased. “But seriously, you deserve this, Sarah. We're all so proud of you.”

The sincerity in Mallory's voice touched something deep within Sarah. She felt a sudden, overwhelming gratitude for her colleagues, for this moment.

“Thanks, Mallory,” she said softly. “I'm looking forward to it.”

As Mallory bounded away, Sarah felt a familiar presence at her side. Hannah leaned against her desk, her green eyes twinkling with mischief.

“So, I hear we're celebrating,” Hannah grinned, her curly auburn hair bouncing as she cocked her head. “Any requests for the venue, Ms. Rising Star?”

Sarah chuckled, shaking her head. “God, not you too. I swear, if I hear one more person call me that...”

“You'll what? Dazzle them with your marketing prowess?” Hannah teased, nudging Sarah's shoulder playfully.

Sarah rolled her eyes, but couldn't suppress her smile. “You're incorrigible, you know that?”

“It's part of my charm,” Hannah winked. “But seriously, any ideas for tonight? We could hit that new rooftop bar on 5th. I hear their cocktails are to die for.”

Sarah's mind drifted to the last time she'd been to a rooftop bar. The memory of Jordan's arms around her, the city lights twinkling below, sent a sharp pang through her chest. She pushed the thought away, focusing on Hannah's expectant face.

“Actually,” Sarah said, her voice steadier than she felt, “I was thinking something a bit more low-key. Maybe that little Italian place near the park?”

Hannah's eyes softened, understanding flickering in their depths. “Sounds perfect. I'll let the others know.”

Just then, Sarah's computer chimed. Her heart skipped a beat as she saw the sender's name: Jackson & Pryce, the new clients she'd pitched to earlier.

“Oh god,” Sarah breathed, her fingers hovering over the mouse. “It's from the clients.”

Hannah squeezed her shoulder. “Open it. Whatever it says, I'm here.”

With a deep breath, Sarah clicked the email open. As her eyes scanned the words, a slow smile spread across her face.

“They loved it,” she whispered, almost in disbelief. “They want to move forward with the campaign. Hannah, they actually loved it!”

Sarah's heart raced as she reread the email, her mind whirling with possibilities. She looked up at Hannah, her brown eyes shining with a mix of pride and lingering disbelief.

“We need to tell the others,” Sarah said, her voice gaining strength. She stood up, smoothing her navy blue suit with trembling hands.

Hannah grinned, her auburn curls bouncing as she nodded enthusiastically. “Absolutely! I'll grab Mallory and Angela.”

As Hannah darted off, Sarah took a moment to collect herself. The weight of her past, the ghost of her ex, seemed to lift ever so slightly from her shoulders. She straightened her spine, letting the confidence from her recent success bolster her resolve.

Moments later, Hannah returned with Mallory and Angela in tow. Sarah couldn't help but notice the contrast between Mallory's youthful eagerness and Angela's composed professionalism.

“What's the big news, Sarah?” Mallory asked, her eyes wide with anticipation.

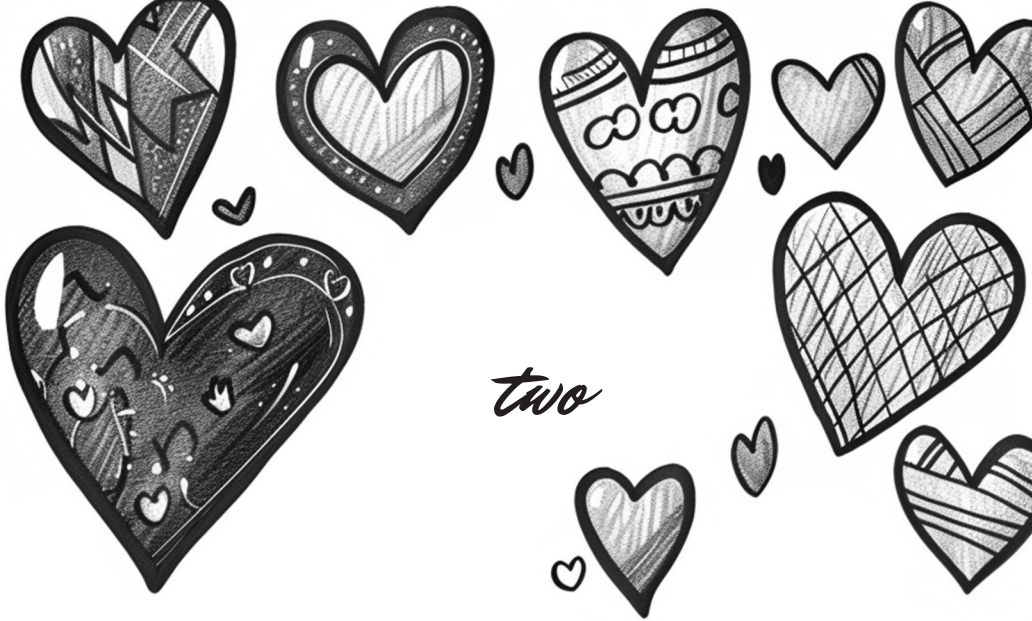
Sarah took a deep breath, savoring the moment. “Jackson & Pryce loved our pitch. They want to move forward with the campaign.”

A chorus of excited exclamations filled the air. Angela's usually reserved demeanor cracked into a genuine smile, while Mallory practically bounced with joy.

“That's fantastic, Sarah!” Angela said, her voice warm with admiration. “Your hard work really paid off.”

Mallory nodded vigorously. “Yeah, you totally crushed it! I can't wait to see how this campaign unfolds.”

Sarah felt a warmth spreading through her chest, a feeling of belonging she hadn't experienced in years. “Thanks, everyone. But this isn't just my success – it's ours. I couldn't have done it without this amazing team.”



two

Sarah's heels clicked against the polished floor as she entered the glass-walled boardroom, her reflection fragmenting across the sleek surfaces like shards of a broken mirror. The usual buzz of pre-meeting chatter died down as heads turned towards the door at the head of the table.

A man stood there, his presence commanding instant attention. Sarah's steps faltered for a microsecond before she recovered, sliding into an empty chair.

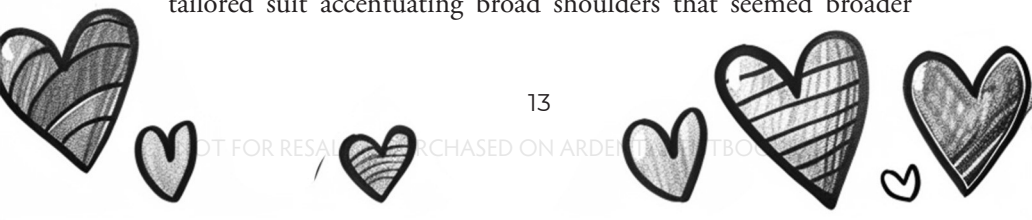
"Good morning, everyone," the man said, his deep voice resonating through the room. "I'm Ethan Woodridge, your new Creative Director."

Sarah's fingers tightened around her pen.

Ethan?

Here. Now. The universe had a twisted sense of humor.

He moved to the head of the table with easy confidence, his tailored suit accentuating broad shoulders that seemed broader



than Sarah remembered. His eyes, still that mesmerizing deep blue, swept across the room.

“I’m looking forward to working with all of you,” Ethan continued, flashing a smile that probably melted hearts on a regular basis. “Pinnacle has an impressive reputation, and I’m excited to see what we can achieve together.”

Sarah forced herself to breathe normally, hyper-aware of every movement Ethan made. She could practically feel the energy radiating off him, filling the room with an electric charge that made her skin prickle.

“So,” Ethan said, leaning forward slightly, “let’s dive right in. I’ve been reviewing our current campaigns, and I think there’s room for some fresh perspectives.”

As he spoke, outlining his vision with passionate gestures, Sarah found herself torn between admiration for his ideas and a gnawing ache in her chest. This was the Ethan she remembered - brilliant, charismatic, utterly captivating. And completely out of reach.

Sarah’s gaze remained fixed on Ethan, her heart hammering against her ribs. She tried to focus on his words, but her mind kept drifting back to stolen kisses in empty lecture halls, late-night debates over marketing strategies, and the intoxicating way he used to look at her.

“Sarah?” Ethan’s voice cut through her reverie. “You’ve been heading up our social media efforts, right? What are your thoughts on integrating more user-generated content?”

She blinked, struggling to gather her thoughts. “I, uh... yes, that’s been a focus area for us.” Sarah cleared her throat, willing her voice to sound steady. “We’ve seen good engagement with user content, especially in the lifestyle sector.”

As she spoke, fragments of memory flashed through her mind: Ethan's laughter echoing across a moonlit campus, the warmth of his hand in hers, stolen kisses at midnight in her dorm room, the searing pain of their final argument. Each recollection was a dagger, reopening old wounds she thought had long since healed.

Sarah forced herself to meet Ethan's gaze, fighting against the urge to lose herself in those familiar blue depths. "We could definitely explore expanding that strategy," she managed, her voice only slightly strained.

Ethan nodded, a ghost of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Excellent. I'd like to see some proposals on that by the end of the week."

As the meeting continued, Sarah found herself caught in a whirlpool of conflicting emotions. Pride in her work warred with the raw ache of old heartbreak, while a traitorous part of her wondered if Ethan ever thought about what might have been. *He was still handsome-as-fuck*, she thought to herself. *Messy black hair, stubbly face, blue eyes, white smile, shit, hadn't ten years changed him at all?*

The air in the boardroom felt thick, heavy with unspoken words, and charged with an electric tension that seemed to crackle between Sarah and Ethan. Every breath Sarah took felt labored, as if she were inhaling syrup instead of oxygen. The muted sounds of the city below faded away, replaced by the thunderous pounding of her own pulse in her ears.

Ethan's voice cut through the fog in Sarah's mind. "Alright, team, let's dive into our new social media campaign." He stood, commanding the room's attention with an effortless charisma that hadn't dimmed in the decade since she'd last seen him. "We're calling it *'Everyday Extraordinary.'*"

Sarah's pen hovered over her notepad, her hand trembling slightly as she forced herself to focus on his words rather than the memories his presence evoked.

“The goal,” Ethan continued, pacing slowly around the table, “is to highlight how our clients' products make the ordinary moments in life special. We want user-generated content showing real people using these products in their daily lives.”

Tom, the junior copywriter, raised his hand. “How do we ensure we get high-quality content from users?”

Ethan's lips curved into a confident smile. “Great question. We'll be implementing a tiered reward system for participants. The best submissions will not only be featured in the campaign but will also receive exclusive product packages.”

As he outlined the strategy, Sarah couldn't help but admire his expertise. Despite the turmoil in her heart, her professional side recognized the brilliance of the campaign. It was exactly the kind of innovative thinking that had drawn her to him all those years ago.

“Sarah,” Ethan's voice snapped her back to reality. “You'll be heading up the content curation team. I want you to develop a rubric for evaluating submissions. Can you have that ready by Friday?”

She nodded, grateful for the distraction of work. “Absolutely. I'll have a draft for you to review by Thursday afternoon.”

As the meeting wrapped up, Sarah found herself both dreading and anticipating the challenges ahead. Working closely with Ethan would be a test of her professionalism and her heart, but she was determined to prove - to herself and to him - that she was more than capable of rising to the occasion.

Sarah's heart pounded like a jackhammer against her ribcage, threatening to burst through at any moment. She gripped her pen tightly, knuckles white, as she scribbled notes with feigned focus. Anything to avoid meeting Ethan's piercing gaze.

"Sarah, your thoughts on the influencer outreach strategy?" Ethan's deep voice cut through her internal chaos.

She swallowed hard, willing her voice to remain steady. "I think it's solid," she managed, her tone more clipped than intended. "We should consider micro-influencers too. They often have higher engagement rates."

"Excellent point," Ethan nodded, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

Sarah's hand trembled slightly as she reached for her water glass, the cool liquid a stark contrast to the heat rising in her cheeks. She silently cursed her body's betrayal, years of carefully constructed walls crumbling under Ethan's mere presence.

Focus, dammit, she chided herself internally. *He's just another colleague. Nothing more.*

But as Ethan's cologne wafted towards her, memories of lazy Sunday mornings and passionate nights flooded her senses. Her breath hitched, a soft gasp escaping before she could stifle it.

"Everything okay, Sarah?" Lisa from HR asked, concern etched on her face.

"Fine," Sarah lied, plastering on a smile that felt more like a grimace. "Just a bit warm in here."

As the meeting droned on, Sarah waged an internal war between professionalism and raw emotion. Each stolen glance at Ethan was a battle lost, each shared idea a bittersweet reminder of their once-effortless connection.

As the meeting concluded, Sarah gathered her notes with shaky hands, desperate to escape the suffocating tension of the boardroom. She made a beeline for the door, her heels clicking a staccato rhythm on the polished floor.

“Sarah, wait up.”

Ethan's voice froze her in her tracks. She turned slowly, her heart pounding like a caged bird against her ribs.

“Hey,” she managed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ethan stood before her, his blue eyes searching her face. “It's been a while,” he said, running a hand through his dark hair.

“Ten years,” Sarah replied, the words hanging heavy between them.

An awkward silence stretched out, filled with unspoken regrets and what-ifs.

“Sorry about the business in there,” Ethan quipped, “I had to keep it professional.”

“No worries,” Sarah quickly said, trying not to look at him straight-on.

“You look...” Ethan started dropping his eyes down the length of her, then faltered. “Good. You look good.”

Sarah nodded, her throat tight. “Thanks. You too.”

Then Sarah gazed down at his hand by accident. She couldn't help but notice the absence of his wedding ring, a fact that sent her mind spiraling into dangerous territory.

“So, um, how have you been?” Ethan asked, his usual confidence seeming to waver.

THE REKINDLE FLAME

“Fine,” Sarah lied, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her blazer. “Busy with work, you know.”

“Yeah, of course,” Ethan nodded, his eyes never leaving her face. “Listen, Sarah, I—”

“I should go,” Sarah cut him off, unable to bear whatever he might say next. “Lots to do before the campaign launch.”

“Right—yeah,” Ethan stepped back, his expression unreadable. “We'll talk more later?”

Sarah nodded noncommittally, already turning away. As she walked down the hallway, she could feel Ethan's gaze burning into her back, igniting a fire she thought long extinguished.



three

THE NEXT DAY

Sarah's heart hammered against her ribcage as she approached the glass-walled boardroom. The clicking of her heels on the polished floor echoed through the hallway, a staccato rhythm matching her pulse. She took a deep breath, steadying herself before pushing open the door.

The room fell silent as she entered, all eyes turning to her. Sarah felt a flush creep up her neck but kept her chin high, striding purposefully to an empty chair. Her colleagues' gazes followed her, a mix of curiosity and anticipation.

Ethan stood at the head of the table, his presence commanding the room. His deep blue eyes locked onto Sarah for a moment before sweeping across the gathered team. "Good morning, everyone," he began, his voice rich and authoritative. "Today, we're diving into our new social media campaign for Luxe Cosmetics."



Sarah's fingers twitched, itching to grab her pen and start brainstorming. She forced herself to remain still, hyper-aware of Ethan's every movement.

"We're aiming for a fresh, youthful approach," Ethan continued, gesturing to the sleek presentation slides behind him. "Something that resonates with Gen Z while maintaining the brand's luxury image."

Sarah's mind raced, ideas already forming. She glanced around the table, noting her colleagues' reactions. Some nodded along, while others seemed lost in thought.

"Any initial thoughts?" Ethan asked, his gaze sweeping the room before landing on Sarah.

She hesitated for a moment, memories of late-night brainstorming sessions in college threatening to overwhelm her. Pushing them aside, she leaned forward. "What if we focus on sustainability? It's a huge concern for younger consumers, and Luxe has been making strides in eco-friendly packaging."

Ethan's eyebrows rose, a flicker of approval in his eyes. "Interesting angle, Sarah. Let's explore that further."

As the meeting continued, Sarah found herself slipping into a familiar rhythm with Ethan, their ideas bouncing off each other like they used to years ago. It was exhilarating and terrifying all at once.

God, why does he still have this effect on me? she thought, stealing glances at his strong jawline and the way his hands moved as he spoke. *Jordon-who? It's been ten years, for crying out loud.*

Sarah's breath caught in her throat as her eyes locked with Ethan's across the polished mahogany table. The world around her seemed to blur, fading into a hazy background as memories flooded her

consciousness. Late nights in the college library, stolen kisses behind bookshelves, heated arguments that ended in passionate reconciliations - it all came rushing back in a dizzying whirlwind.

His deep blue eyes, still as captivating as ever, held a mix of emotions she couldn't quite decipher. *Was that regret? Longing? Or just her imagination running wild?*

“Sarah?” Ethan's voice cut through her reverie, snapping her back to reality. “Do you have any thoughts on the target demographic?”

She blinked rapidly, willing herself to focus. “I... yes,” she stammered, her heart pounding like a jackhammer in her chest. *Get it together, Everett*, she chided herself silently.

Taking a deep breath, Sarah straightened her spine and smoothed her expression into one of cool professionalism. She wouldn't let their complicated past derail her career aspirations. *Not now, not ever.*

“I believe we should focus on millennials transitioning into more established careers,” she said, her voice growing stronger with each word. “They're at a stage where they're looking to invest in quality products but still value innovation and social responsibility.”

Ethan nodded, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. “Excellent point. Let's dive deeper into that demographic.”

As the meeting progressed, Sarah forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand, pushing thoughts of college heartbreak and what-ifs to the back of her mind. But every now and then, when Ethan's gaze lingered on her a moment too long, she felt that familiar flutter in her stomach, a bittersweet reminder of what once was and what might have been.

Ethan's deep, resonant voice filled the boardroom, commanding attention as he outlined the campaign's objectives. "Our goal is to increase brand awareness by 30% within the next quarter," he stated, his authoritative tone leaving no room for doubt. "We'll achieve this through a multi-platform approach, leveraging both traditional and digital media."

Sarah's eyes darted between Ethan and the presentation slides, her mind a whirlwind of ideas. The way he carried himself, exuding confidence and expertise, was both impressive and infuriating. She couldn't help but think, That could've been us, presenting together, if only...

No. She shook off the thought, refocusing on the task at hand. As Ethan clicked to the next slide, Sarah's creative instincts kicked into high gear.

"We should consider incorporating user-generated content," she blurted out, surprising herself with her eagerness. "It could significantly boost engagement and authenticity."

Ethan paused, his piercing blue eyes meeting hers. "Interesting idea, Sarah. How would you envision implementing that?"

As she elaborated on her suggestion, Sarah felt a familiar spark of excitement. Despite the complicated history between them, their professional synergy was undeniable. It was like college all over again – late nights brainstorming, finishing each other's sentences. Only this time, the stakes were much higher.

And so was the tension, she thought, acutely aware of Ethan's presence at the head of the table. *God, why did he have to look so damn good in that suit?*

Sarah's heart skipped a beat as Ethan nodded approvingly at her suggestion. Their eyes locked for a moment too long, a silent acknowledgment of their shared past crackling between them.

“Great input, Sarah,” Ethan said, his voice carrying a hint of warmth that wasn't there before. “Let's explore that further in our strategy sessions.”

Strategy sessions.

The words hit Sarah like a ton of bricks. She'd have to spend hours alone with him, working closely on this campaign. Her pulse quickened at the thought.

“When do you want to schedule those?” she asked, striving for a casual tone despite the sudden dryness in her throat.

Ethan glanced at his watch, a gesture so familiar it made Sarah's chest ache. “How about we start tomorrow afternoon? Say, 2 PM?”

“Perfect,” Sarah replied, her voice steadier than she felt. She scribbled the time in her planner, hyper-aware of Ethan's gaze on her.

As the meeting wrapped up, Sarah found herself stealing glances at Ethan. His strong jawline, the way he ran his hand through his hair when deep in thought – it was all achingly familiar. She caught herself wondering what it would be like to run her fingers through that hair again, to feel his lips on hers, his dick...

Stop it, she chided herself. You're colleagues now. Nothing more.

But as Ethan's eyes met hers once more, a small smile playing on his lips, Sarah knew she was in trouble. She dated Jordon, her ex-boyfriend for about two years, but she was with Ethan for not more than six months. It was a short fling—a college romance—but boy did it leave an impact on her. This campaign was going to be the death of her.

Sarah shifted in her seat, the leather creaking softly beneath her. The air in the boardroom seemed to thicken, charged with

unspoken words and lingering glances. Her skin prickled with awareness, every nerve ending alive and humming.

“Any other questions?” Ethan's voice cut through the tension, snapping Sarah back to reality.

She shook her head, not trusting her voice. The silence stretched, elastic, and loaded with possibility.

“Right,” Ethan cleared his throat. “Let's take a five-minute break before we dive into the details.”

As her colleagues filed out, chattering about coffee and bathroom breaks, Sarah remained rooted to her chair. Her mind raced, unbidden memories flooding in like a broken dam.

*Late nights in her dorm room. Naked under the covers, her roommate is out for the evening. She remembered how thrilling and freeing it was to be as loud as she could be that night—and boy, was she **loud**. Having sex five times that night—he said it was a record for him ...*

“Sarah?” Ethan's voice, softer now, pulled her from her reverie. “You okay?”

She blinked, finding herself alone with him in the boardroom. “Yeah, just... thinking about the campaign.”

Ethan's eyes, those deep blue pools she'd once lost herself in, searched her face. “You sure that's all?”

Sarah's heart thundered in her chest. “What else would it be?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his features. “Nothing, I guess. It's just... being back here, working together... it's bringing up some memories.”

“Yeah,” Sarah admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “For me too.”

Sarah stood abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor. “I should grab some coffee before we start again,” she said, her words tumbling out too quickly.

Ethan took a step towards her, his cologne—a heady mix of sandalwood and citrus—enveloping her. “Sarah, wait. Maybe we should talk about—”

“The campaign?” she interjected, forcing a smile. “Absolutely. I’ve got some great ideas I can’t wait to share.”

She edged towards the door, her heart racing like a trapped bird. Ethan’s brow furrowed, his hand reaching out as if to stop her.

“That’s not what I—”

“Oh! I just remembered,” Sarah cut in, her voice unnaturally high. “I need to send a quick email before we reconvene. Wouldn’t want to forget.”

She darted out of the room, leaving Ethan’s unfinished sentence hanging in the air. In the hallway, Sarah leaned against the cool wall, her breath coming in short gasps.

Get it together, she chided herself. You’re a professional. Act like one.

But as she made her way to the break room, Sarah couldn’t shake the feeling that she was running from more than just a conversation. She was running from the past, from possibilities, from the magnetic pull of what could have been.

And what, a traitorous voice whispered, could still be.

Her mind swirled with a dizzying mix of emotions. Excitement bubbled up like champagne, fizzing through her veins at the prospect of working on such a high-profile campaign. But it was tempered by a heavy undercurrent of apprehension, the weight of unresolved history threatening to drag her under.

“This is ridiculous,” Sarah muttered to herself, earning a curious glance from a passing colleague. “He's just another coworker. Nothing more.”

But even as the words left her lips, she knew they were a lie. Ethan had never been just anything.

Memories flooded back unbidden—late nights in the college library, stolen kisses between bookshelves, dreams, and ambitions shared over cheap coffee. And then, the bitter aftermath of misunderstandings and wounded pride.

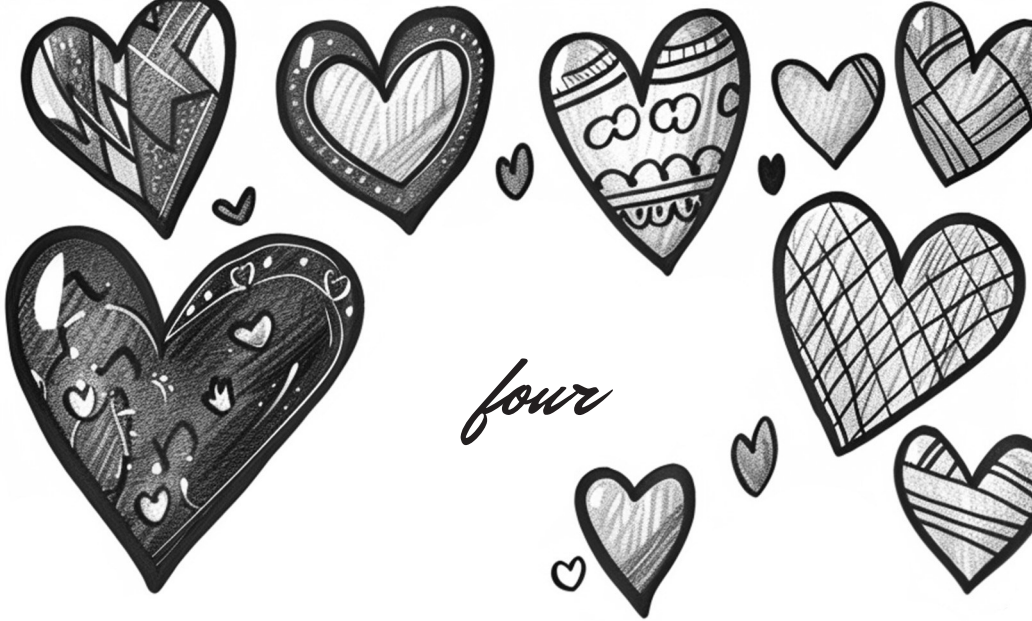
Sarah shook her head, trying to dispel the ghosts of the past. She paused at the end of the hallway, drawing in a deep breath. The scent of fresh coffee and printer toner filled her nostrils, grounding her in the present.

“You've got this,” she whispered, squaring her shoulders. “It's just another project. Another chance to prove yourself.”

But as she started walking again, Sarah couldn't ignore the magnetic pull she felt towards Ethan. It was as if an invisible thread connected them, tugging at her heartstrings with every step she took away from him.

“Focus on the work,” she told herself firmly. “That's what matters now.”

Yet even as she steeled herself for the challenges ahead, Sarah couldn't help but wonder if fate had other plans in store.



four

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee hung in the air, a bitter perfume that couldn't mask the sudden tension. Sarah's hand froze midway to the sugar dispenser as her eyes locked with Ethan's across the small break room. Time seemed to slow, each second stretching like taffy as memories flooded back—the way he kissed with his whole body, the electricity she felt from a simple touch.

She tore her gaze away, focusing intently on stirring her coffee. The clink of her spoon against the mug echoed loudly in the silence. Sarah's heart raced, a constant rhythm that matched the tap of Ethan's fingers on the countertop. She risked a glance at him from the corner of her eye.

God, he still looked like candy. Those deep blue eyes that had once looked at her with such intensity now carefully avoided her gaze. The years had been kind to him, adding a touch of silver at his temples that only enhanced his rock star looks. Sarah swallowed hard, tamping down the sudden urge to run her fingers through his hair.



This is ridiculous, she thought. We're adults. Professionals. I can do this.

Taking a deep breath, Sarah squared her shoulders and turned to face him. "Hey, Ethan," she said, proud of how steady her voice sounded. "How's the Larson account coming along?"

Ethan's eyes widened slightly, surprise flickering across his chiseled features before he schooled his expression into polite interest. "Sarah," he replied, his deep voice sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. "It's, uh, going well. We're finalizing the pitch for next week."

Sarah nodded, desperately searching for something else to say. The silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken words and lingering regrets. She could almost taste the tension on her tongue, as bitter as the coffee she clutched like a lifeline.

Come on, Everett, she chided herself. You can do better than this. You're a marketing expert, for crying out loud. Sell yourself!

"That's great," she managed, plastering on a smile that felt too bright, too forced. "I'm sure it'll be amazing."

Ethan's eyebrows shot up, a flicker of genuine surprise crossing his face. He cleared his throat, his hand unconsciously running through his dark hair. "Thanks, Sarah. That means a lot, coming from you."

The compliment hung in the air between them, heavy with implications. Sarah's heart raced, her mind scrambling for a safe topic.

"So, um, have you seen the latest market research on social media trends?" she blurted out, inwardly cringing at how desperate she sounded.

Ethan's lips quirked into a half-smile, a ghost of the boyish grin she remembered from their college days. "Yeah, I've skimmed it. Pretty interesting stuff about the rise of micro-influencers."

Sarah latched onto the topic like a drowning woman grasping a life raft. "Absolutely! I think it's fascinating how the landscape is shifting. We might need to adjust our strategies for the Morton account."

As they delved into the intricacies of social media marketing, Sarah felt herself relaxing slightly. This was familiar territory, safe ground where they could interact without the weight of their shared history pressing down on them.

But even as they discussed click-through rates and engagement metrics, Sarah couldn't help but notice the way Ethan's blue eyes lit up when he talked about creative concepts. It was the same passion she'd fallen for all those years ago, now tempered with experience and a touch of world-weariness.

God, why does he still have to be so damn captivating? she thought, struggling to keep her focus on the conversation and not on the way his tailored shirt hugged his broad shoulders.

Sarah's gaze inadvertently traced the sharp line of Ethan's jaw, her mind drifting to memories of stolen kisses in dimly lit college hallways. She quickly averted her eyes, but not before catching a flicker of something in Ethan's expression. *Recognition? Longing?* She couldn't be sure.

Ethan cleared his throat, his voice dropping to a lower register that sent an involuntary shiver down Sarah's spine. "You know, I've heard about your insight into consumer behavior from other colleagues. It's... refreshing to work with someone who really gets it."

He leaned in slightly, the scent of his cologne – spicy and familiar – enveloping her. Sarah's heart raced, her body instinctively responding to his proximity.

“Thanks,” she managed, her own voice barely above a whisper. “Your creative direction has always been top-notch, I’ve heard. I guess some things never change.”

“Thanks,” she managed to say.

“I transferred to Pinnacle-South after hearing such great achievement here,” Ethan continued, “I’ve also heard of your accolades.”

That last word was a little too husky for comfort, Sarah thought, clearing her throat.

The air between them felt charged, crackling with unspoken tension. Sarah was acutely aware of every millimeter separating them, of the warmth radiating from Ethan's body.

This is dangerous territory, she thought, even as she found herself mirroring his posture, unconsciously angling towards him. *We can do this. We can. It was just a fling. A short-term romance. We're coworkers now. We can't go down this road again.*

But despite her internal warnings, Sarah couldn't bring herself to step back or break the moment. The coffee room suddenly felt impossibly small, the rest of the world fading away until it was just the two of them, trapped in a bubble of shared history and rekindled attraction.

Sarah's gaze flicked to Ethan's lips, then back to his eyes. A memory surfaced, his lips on hers. She chuckled softly, surprising herself.

“What's so funny?” Ethan asked, a half-smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Sarah hesitated, then decided to throw caution to the wind. “Remember those all-nighters we used to pull in the library? Supposedly studying, but really just...”

“Making out in the stacks?” Ethan finished, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief. “How could I forget?”

The tension between them shifted, nostalgia softening the edges of their shared past. Sarah found herself relaxing, despite the rapid-fire beating of her heart.

“God, we were so irresponsible,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m pretty sure I failed that Econ midterm because of you.”

Ethan laughed, the sound rich and warm. “Hey, I offered to tutor you. Not my fault you found other activities more... engaging.”

Sarah felt a blush creep up her neck, memories of those “tutoring sessions” flashing through her mind. She bit her lip, torn between embarrassment and a surprising surge of desire.

What am I doing? she thought, even as she found herself leaning closer. *This is Ethan. My ex. My coworker. This is a terrible idea.*

But the pull of their shared history, the electricity of their reconnection, was proving impossible to resist.

Ethan's voice softened, his gaze distant. “You know, I still think about that night on the rooftop. The one after finals.”

Sarah's breath caught. *That night had been...magical. Terrifying. A crossroads neither of them had been ready to face.*

“The stars,” she murmured, almost to herself. “I’ve never seen them so bright.”

“It wasn't just the stars that were bright that night,” Ethan said, his eyes locking with hers. The intensity of his gaze made her feel like she was falling.

Sarah unconsciously leaned in, drawn by the gravity of the moment. Her professional facade crumbled, leaving her raw and exposed. “Ethan, I—”

He mirrored her movement, closing the distance between them. “I know,” he whispered, his voice husky with emotion. “Me too.”

The air crackled with unspoken words and unfulfilled promises. Sarah's fingers twitched, aching to reach out and touch him. To bridge the gap of years and misunderstandings.

God, we were so young, she thought, a bittersweet ache blooming in her chest. *So stupid. So in love. Was it love?*

Ethan's shoulders relaxed, his usual confident posture giving way to something more vulnerable. “Sarah, I've always wondered—”

The coffee machine suddenly gurgled to life, startling them both. Sarah jumped back, the spell broken. Reality came crashing back, reminding her of where they were. Who they were now.

But as she met Ethan's gaze once more, she knew with certainty: this was far from over.

Sarah's heart raced, her breath catching in her throat. The weight of their shared history pressed down on her, suffocating yet oddly comforting. Like a familiar sweater, worn and frayed at the edges.

Before she could second-guess herself, Sarah reached out, her fingers lightly grazing Ethan's forearm. The touch sent electricity crackling through her veins, awakening long-dormant feelings.

“I've missed this,” she whispered, her voice barely audible over the hum of the coffee machine. “Missed you.”

Ethan's eyes widened, a mixture of surprise and longing flickering across his chiseled features. His gaze dropped to where her hand rested on his arm, and for a moment, Sarah feared she'd overstepped.

But then his fingers found hers, intertwining gently. The warmth of his skin against hers felt like coming home after a long, exhausting journey.

“Sarah,” he breathed, her name a prayer on his lips.

She watched, mesmerized, as his thumb traced small circles on the back of her hand. Each movement sent shivers down her spine, igniting a fire she thought had long been extinguished.

What are we doing? Sarah's mind raced, even as her body leaned into his touch. *This is crazy. We can't go back. Can we?*

But as Ethan's piercing blue eyes met hers, full of unspoken desire and tentative hope, Sarah realized that maybe, just maybe, they could write a new chapter. One where the past didn't define them, but informed a wiser, more *mature* love.

The moment stretched between them, fragile and electric, teetering on the edge of something profound.

Sarah's heart hammered against her ribs, the rhythm matching the ticking of the clock on the wall. Time seemed to slow, the world narrowing to just the two of them.

“Ethan, I—” she started, her voice husky with emotion.

He leaned in closer, his breath warm against her cheek. “I know,” he murmured. “I feel it too.”

The air between them crackled with tension, years of unresolved feelings threatening to burst forth. Sarah's fingers tightened around Ethan's, anchoring herself in the moment.

Is this real? she wondered, drinking in the sight of him. *Or am I going to wake up alone in my apartment again, haunted by what-ifs?*

Just as Ethan's lips parted, about to speak words that could change everything, the coffee room door burst open.

“...and then I told Johnson, 'That's not a focus group, that's my grandmother's bridge club!'”

Raucous laughter filled the room as a group of coworkers spilled in, their voices shattering the intimate bubble Sarah and Ethan had created.

Sarah jumped back, her hand falling away from Ethan's as if burned. She plastered on a smile, hoping her flushed cheeks weren't too obvious.

“Hey guys,” she managed, her voice unnaturally high. “Just finishing up here.”

As she grabbed her mug and hurried towards the door, she caught Ethan's gaze one last time. The look they shared spoke volumes, a silent promise that this conversation wasn't over.



five

THE NEXT DAY

The aroma of freshly ground coffee beans enveloped Sarah and Hannah as they nestled into a secluded corner of **Caffeine Dreams**. Soft jazz hummed in the background, mingling with the gentle clink of ceramic mugs and hushed conversations.

Sarah's fingers tapped a restless rhythm against her latte, her eyes fixed on the swirling patterns of foam. She couldn't bring herself to meet Hannah's gaze. The weight of unspoken words pressed against her chest like a lead apron.

"So," Hannah ventured, her voice gentle. "What's on your mind, sweetie? You've been fidgeting since we sat down."

Sarah's throat tightened. She forced herself to take a sip of coffee, buying time. The rich liquid scorched her tongue, matching the heat of anxiety rising within her.

"I..." she began, then faltered. *How could she explain the storm of*



emotions Ethan's presence had stirred up? The memories that haunted her like persistent ghosts?

Hannah leaned forward, her green eyes filled with concern. "Hey, it's just me. Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Sarah's fingers traced the rim of her mug, around and around. A perfect circle, like the cycle of regret she couldn't seem to break free from. "It's about Ethan," she finally whispered.

"Ah," Hannah nodded, understanding dawning on her face. "The new guy at work. I thought he might have something to do with your mood lately."

Sarah's gaze darted up, meeting Hannah's for a split second before dropping back to her coffee. "Is it that obvious?"

Hannah's laugh was warm, without judgment. "Only to someone who knows you as well as I do. You have a high-school crush?"

Sarah took a deep breath, steeling herself. The coffee shop suddenly felt too small, too intimate. But if she couldn't open up to Hannah, who could she turn to?

"We have... history," she admitted, the words feeling inadequate to describe the complexity of her past with Ethan.

Hannah's eyebrows shot up. "History? Like, *'we hooked up at the office Christmas party'* history?"

Despite herself, Sarah let out a soft chuckle. "Definitely more than a drunken hook-up. We were... together. In college."

"College?" Hannah echoed, surprise evident in her tone. "Wow, that's... unexpected. How did I not know about this?"

Sarah shrugged, a rueful smile tugging at her lips. "It's not exactly something I like to dwell on. But seeing him again, working with him every day... it's bringing up a lot of old feelings."

Hannah nodded slowly, processing the information. “And these old feelings... are they good or bad?”

Sarah's fingers tightened around her mug, seeking comfort in its warmth. “Both,” she admitted. “It's complicated.”

“Isn't it always?” Hannah replied with a wry smile.

As Sarah prepared to delve deeper into her past, a pang of anxiety twisted in her gut. Opening up meant making herself vulnerable, something she'd avoided for far too long. But as she met Hannah's supportive gaze, she knew it was time to confront the ghosts of her past – for better or worse.

Sarah took a deep breath, steeling herself for the confession. “Ethan and I... we were intense. Late nights in the library turned into passionate debates over marketing strategies, which turned into...” She trailed off, lost in the memory of stolen kisses and whispered promises.

Hannah leaned in, her green eyes wide with curiosity. “Go on,” she urged gently.

“We fell hard and fast,” Sarah continued, her voice barely above a whisper. “I thought we were building something real, you know? But then, out of nowhere, he broke it off.”

“What happened?” Hannah asked, her brow furrowing in concern.

Sarah's throat tightened as she forced out the words. “He was engaged, Hannah. To some girl from his hometown. He'd been engaged the *whole time* we were together.”

Hannah's sharp intake of breath echoed Sarah's own pain. “Oh, Sarah. I'm so sorry.”

Sarah nodded, blinking back the tears that threatened to fall. “It was a long time ago, but seeing him again... God, Hannah, I still

wonder sometimes. What if things had been different? What if he'd chosen *me*?"

The vulnerability in her admission hung heavy in the air between them. Sarah's cheeks burned with embarrassment, but there was also a strange relief in finally voicing the thoughts that had plagued her for so long.

"I saw he wasn't wearing a ring," Sarah confessed, her voice barely audible. "And I can't help but think... maybe this is our second chance."

Hannah's eyes widened, a mix of shock and concern flashing across her face. She reached out, gently squeezing Sarah's hand. "Oh, honey," she said softly, leaning in closer. Her auburn curls bounced as she tilted her head, offering a comforting smile. "I had no idea you were carrying all this. Tell me more."

Sarah's fingers tightened around her coffee cup, the warmth seeping into her palms. She closed her eyes, memories washing over her like a tidal wave.

"God, Hannah, it was... intense," she murmured. "I can still remember the way he held me, kissed me—like I was the only person in the room."

A flash of Ethan's deep blue eyes, alight with passion as they brainstormed campaign ideas late into the night. The electric spark when their hands brushed reaching for the same textbook.

Sarah's voice wavered. "We'd stay up for hours, talking about our dreams, our ambitions. I thought we were unstoppable together."

She paused, swallowing hard. "But then it all came crashing down. The day he told me about his fiancée... I've never felt so betrayed, so small."

Hannah nodded encouragingly, her green eyes filled with empathy. "It's okay to still have feelings, Sarah. These things are complicated."

Sarah exhaled shakily. "I just never thought I'd have to face all this again. And now, seeing him every day at Pinnacle... it's like reopening an old wound."

Sarah's mind raced, a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. Her heart fluttered at the memory of Ethan's smile, but her stomach clenched with the fear of being hurt again. She bit her lip, hesitating before meeting Hannah's gaze. She continued, "Part of me wonders if... if there's a chance. For us. God, is that crazy?"

Hannah's brow furrowed, concern etching her features. She reached out, gently placing her hand over Sarah's restless fingers. "Oh, honey. I understand why you're feeling this way, but... are you sure this is a good idea?"

Sarah's heart sank, but she knew Hannah was right to be cautious. Her friend continued, her tone gentle but firm, "Getting involved with a coworker is risky enough, but rekindling an old flame? That's playing with fire, Sarah."

"I know, I know," Sarah sighed, running a hand through her blonde waves. "It's just... seeing him again, it's bringing up all these old feelings. What if this is our second chance?"

"I get it, Sarah," Hannah continued, her voice softening. "But I just don't want to see you get hurt again. Remember how things ended last time? You were a mess for months."

A flash of pain crossed Sarah's face as memories flooded back. Late nights crying into her pillow, the ache in her chest that felt like it would never heal. She swallowed hard.

"You're right," Sarah admitted, her voice barely audible. "It was... brutal."

But even as she acknowledged the truth in Hannah's words, a small flame of hope flickered in her chest. Sarah's gaze drifted to the window, watching pedestrians hurry by on the bustling New York street.

"Still," she mused, almost to herself, "people change, don't they? We're not the same kids we were in college."

Hannah sighed, recognizing the determination in her friend's eyes. "Just promise me you'll be careful, okay? Take it slow if you decide to... explore this."

Sarah nodded again, more decisively this time. "I will," she assured Hannah, squaring her shoulders. "But I can't just ignore these feelings either. I need to know if there's still something there."

The thought of seeing Ethan again, of possibly rekindling what they once had, sent a thrill through her body. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

Sarah's fingers tapped a restless rhythm on the tabletop, her mind racing with possibilities. The coffee shop's ambient chatter faded into background noise as she lost herself in thought.

"I'll be smart about it," she said, meeting Hannah's concerned gaze. "No grand gestures or declarations. Just... testing the waters, you know?"

Hannah nodded, her expression a mix of worry and understanding. "And if he's still the same old Ethan?"

Sarah's breath caught in her throat. *The same old Ethan. Charming, passionate, but ultimately unreliable.* She pushed the thought away, focusing instead on the man she'd glimpsed in the office – older, more grounded, his eyes holding a depth that hadn't been there before.

THE REKINDLE FLAME

“Then I’ll know,” Sarah said firmly. “And I can finally close that chapter for good.”

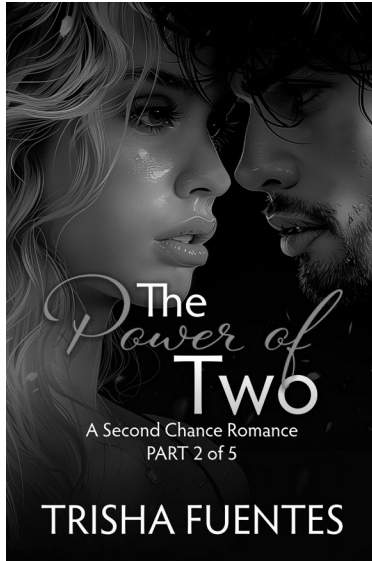
She stood, gathering her things. The decision crystallized in her mind, bringing with it a surge of nervous energy. *Tomorrow at work, she'd seek him out. A casual conversation, perhaps. Nothing too forward, but enough to gauge his reaction.*

As Sarah stepped out onto the sidewalk, the city's energy seemed to match her own. The air hummed with possibility, and for the first time in years, she allowed herself to hope.

To Be Continued
“The Power of Two”
Book 2 of 5

the power of two

SERIAL FICTION



Part 2 of 5

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facing the past

SERIAL FICTION



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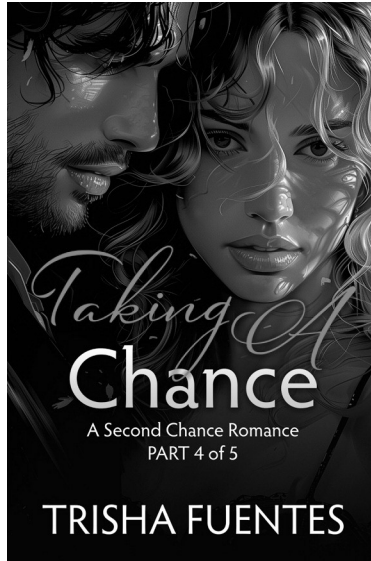
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taking a chance

SERIAL FICTION



Part 4 of 5

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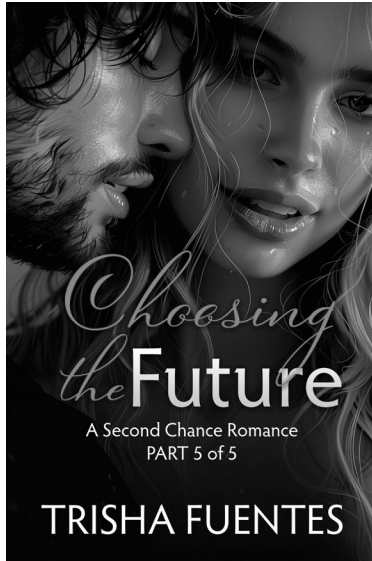
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choosing the future

SERIAL FICTION



Part 5 of 5

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about trisha



Hey, it's Trish...

I'm a Romance Author of 39+ books, plus own a Publishing House of 50+ Pen Name Authors.

I've been writing romance with a whole lot of heat lately. I love to write fun, fast romances with witty leading ladies getting that gorgeous, sexy, yet lovable guy that doesn't take months to finish. Happily Ever After with a little bit of love angst in between. Whether you yearn for Historical or Modern, I always have a story for you!

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