



I still

REMEMBER

Harper Bliss

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Preview

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Warning: This title contains graphic language and f/f sex.

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Her hair is styled differently now, but her eyes are still the same dark-chocolate brown. They stare at me with the same amazement that buzzes through my unsuspecting bones. Amy Waters. Twenty years ago I loved her with an intensity I didn't understand. I never told her, but looking at her now, at the way the edges of her mouth quirk up, suppressing that distinct pout I dreamed of for months on end, I realise she must have known.

"I have the name Jane Smith here in my appointment book." Amy's eyes quiz me. Or maybe they mock me for the dreariness of my chosen alias. I never was really good at reading her. Too much emotion in the way.

"People tend to freak out when I book under my real name."

"And they don't when you show up?" She bites her lip. There are many reasons why this situation could unsettle her. None can be as nerve-racking as unexpectedly standing eye-to-eye with the girl—a woman now—I silently adored in high school.

"Sure, but then at least I'm present to manage the fuss." I look different in real life than I do on TV. Some call it dressing down, but I'm never more comfortable than in jeans and t-shirt. On the air, my face is covered in layers of make-up and the top half of my body—the only part visible—is styled down to a tee by Jake and Andrew, *The Morning News with Elise Frost's* wardrobe managers. Sans make-up and in leisure wear, I hardly ever get recognised. This time it's different though. Amy and I, we have history. And I had no way of knowing she owned The Body Spa.

"How long are you in town for?" Is that a tinge of accusation in her tone? Of course, it's my fault we lost touch. We had laid out our plans. That's what best friends do in high school. They think it will be the two of them forever, think that ten years down the line they'll be bridesmaids at each other's wedding. Only, I always knew my future didn't hold the kind of wedding Amy started planning for herself as soon as she turned twelve.

"For the weekend. It's dad's sixtieth." I shuffle my weight around as I try to identify the tumbling feeling in my stomach. So much has changed since we last saw each other a few days after our high school graduation. I barely even thought of Amy the past few years. We're grown-ups now, and as good as strangers. Still, all that was left unsaid between us seems to rush through my mind now.

"How is Ralph?" Amy's voice is still a well of calmness. It always was, even when she leafed through bridal magazines at the age of sixteen and dreamed out loud about marrying Brett. I wonder what happened to her dreams. Does she have the two suburb-required children? Good heavens, did she marry Brett?

I shrug off Amy's question because I don't want to discuss my father. This small talk seems so inappropriate, so lukewarm, so out of sync with my memories of her. "How are you, Amy?" I ask, painting on a smile.

She wears a black spaghetti strap tank top, showing off spectacular collarbones. Her dark curls are pinned up into a bun, but she always had a mane that couldn't be tamed and a few stray ones frame her face. She looks tanned and healthy.

"Twice married, twice divorced." She wiggles her fingers as if she's proud of the fact they hold no rings. "You?"

I can't help but think of Celia and how we left things back in New York. She moved out more than three months ago but the bed still feels empty without her. And didn't I just ask Amy how *she* was doing? I didn't even hint at inquiring about her marital status, but here she is, offering up the information freely, as if it sums up her entire life since we lost touch.

"My love life's a bit of a disaster, but I can't complain about the rest." I smile apologetically. I don't know why I always do that when I refer to my career and how it has skyrocketed over the last few years.

"I watch the news every morning. It was so strange at first, you know. That you were this girl I played hooky with..." She pauses for a moment. "Shared my first cigarette with." The gentle lines on her face crinkle into a melancholic expression before she sends me a wide smile. The Amy smile. The one that always got me. "And gosh, you come across so well on the screen, Eli—" She hesitates again. "Do you still go by Eli?"

No one has called me Eli since Amy. Eli expired the day I left town—and Amy. I shake my head and grin, because I can't help myself.

"Ahum." A girl in white slacks who I hadn't even noticed before clears her throat. I suspect she's my designated massage therapist.

"If you don't mind, Sarita," Amy addresses her. "I'll be taking care of Ms Smith myself."

"Sure." Sarita turns on her heels and leaves the reception area.

"I hope that's all right," Amy is quick to say.

My pulse quickens at the thought of Amy's hands on my body. "Of course." I give her my camera smile—the one that hides everything.

"Please, follow me." She moves from behind the reception counter and leads me to a door on the right. As teenagers, we were always about the same height, but she seems so much taller now. She wears a pair of black linen trousers that flow around her long legs. We walk into a waiting area with low couches and soothing music. "Would you like some tea first?"

"Sure." I nod eagerly. One part of me can't wait to get on Amy's massage table, but at the same time my heart hammers frantically in my chest. I watch her as she pours two cups of tea from a pot next to the kettle. Her movements are graceful and easy, just like I remember.

We'd been swimming in a small pond behind Amy's house. It was cordoned off from their garden by a bunch of pine trees and, as the afternoon progressed, the sun dipped away behind the trees, leaving us with early evening shadows. We were wet from the water and the sky was the colour of summer: blue streaked with soft yellows and dashes of pink I never understood. The colours that would forever remind me of Amy.

It was the height of my crush on her, a few weeks before we'd leave high school forever. All my energy went into trying to keep my eyes off her as she adjusted her bathing suit while we let the last of the heat dry our skin. I tried so hard not to look at her that all I did was stare in the distance.

"What's wrong, Eli?" Amy playfully pinched me in the side, catching me by surprise. I swatted her hand away as if it were a vile mosquito, quickly regretting my impulsive reaction. To mask the turmoil ripping me apart inside, I shot her a quick grin before rolling on top of her and

pinning her arms above her head.

I stared down at her, every cell in my body tingling. Her dark eyes smiled up at me and a surge of something I couldn't control swelled inside my gut. I closed my eyes for a second and saw what was going to happen next. I was going to lean down and kiss her. I saw myself do it on the back of my eyelids. I could almost taste her lips and smell beyond the heady mixture of sun and lotion on her skin.

When I opened my eyes, it seemed as if hours had passed, but it was still the same Amy squirming below me on the grass. It was the same pond giving away its summery sparkle to the falling darkness. Amy's eyes were still the same mocha brown and her hair the same shock of wild curls, but I had changed. I'd never come so close and, suddenly I realised it was the closest I would ever get.

"Eli?" Amy's voice never really suited her until now. It was always the voice of a grown woman with endless legs, strong hands, and pronounced collarbones.

"Sorry. Miles away." I take the cup of tea she hands me and, awkward as I feel, sip from it immediately. The tea is scalding hot and I burn the tip of my tongue but I don't say anything.

Amy looks at me over the rim of her cup while she, wisely, blows on it to cool the liquid. Her eyes radiate a softness I don't recognise. But we are different people now, even though I feel myself slipping into my teenage skin again—and adoring Amy silently. Me, of the endless chatter on TV, the never-ending banter I've made a career of. A few minutes with Amy and I'm sixteen again.

"Why don't we get on with it." She places her cup on a small table next to the chair she sits in, one leg folded over the other. She looks at me, her eyes almost watery now, and in that one glance I see it. In that instant, I realise she always knew. "I give a mean massage, even if I do say so myself." She erases the moment with a quip and a smile and I don't know what to think.

The words *massage* and *Amy* seem to flash in my mind in big red letters. My brain can't process the two of them together, as if it has neatly shelved any physicality away from the memory of Amy.

This morning when I drove past The Body Spa in my rental car, it just looked like a good place to book a massage. Now, it seems to have become a feverish dream location from puberty. A throwback to a time in my life I remember fondly, but don't revisit very often.

"Sure." I get up and we stand shoulder to shoulder, just like years ago in gym class.

"This way." Was that a tremble in Amy's voice?

Our arms brush together and, despite being fully dressed, it still has an instant impact on the flow of blood in my veins.

"It's only a massage," I tell myself. I treat myself to one every weekend. Usually, I nod off about halfway through to wake up invigorated after. Usually, the person administering the massage is Raj, a man with golden hands whom I'm not attracted to in the slightest.

The situation is quite different today, because, no matter how I twist or turn it—no matter how many years have passed—Amy is still that dark-haired girl who walked to school with me every single day of our senior year. She's a woman now, but twenty years ago, my heart beat in my throat

every time she waited for me at the corner of the street. Emotions I deemed erased by life a long time ago, seep back inside my brain as we walk to the therapy room.

And I know what comes next. I'm a massage aficionado and, usually, I don't even think twice about it. It's second nature to me and massages are simply not a clothed activity.

"You can undress over there." Amy points to a door. "You'll find a towel. Please take everything off."

She might as well have planted a kiss on my lips, that's how flushed I suddenly feel.

Amy's tone is professional though, as is her demeanour. She adjusts the volume of the music in the room. "Do you mind if I put on something a bit unconventional for a place like this?"

I shake my head as she locks her iPhone in the dock without waiting for my reply. I already know what she has in mind.

Legs shaking, I head for the locker room. I close the door and lean my head against it for a brief moment. From the other side of the wood I hear the first notes of 'Round Here'. Amy and I listened to it endlessly the year we turned sixteen. No song could ever be more ours.

Nostalgia washes over me as I slowly undress. I scan myself in the mirror on the wall. A TV job has made me vain enough to hire a personal trainer. For all its shallowness, I take great pleasure in spotting a hint of tricep when I watch myself back on screen. I run a finger over my arm, but can't begin to imagine what it will feel like when it will be Amy's finger. I know that I somehow need to steel myself for what's to come. But it's just me and a towel in a dressing room. And a slew of ragged memories.

I wrap myself in the plush cotton of the towel. It's wide enough to cover me from the top of my breasts to under my knees and long enough to fit snugly around my body. I take a deep breath before stepping back into the therapy room.

Amy waits for me with a big smile, Adam Duritz's voice humming in the background. I may have dreamed of a situation like this twenty years ago—Adam's warm voice and me about to get naked for an eager Amy—but if I did, I forced myself to forget long ago. My brain is busy taking it all in. I'm also nervous and, truth be told, quite turned-on by the sentimental strangeness of it all.

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