

Despite what my family says, I am, in fact, an understanding person.

Yes, I have opinions. But I like to think that simply means I have good taste.

That's it. That's what I am. A person with good taste.

A person who tries to understand why my older sister insists on wearing open-toed shoes without first polishing her toenails. A person who tries to understand how anyone could watch *The Notebook* without bawling their eyes out. How my brother can sleep at night knowing he didn't floss that day. How *anyone* could dismiss yoga without even trying it.

All these things and more, I try to understand.

But I will never—ever—understand what I've just seen on this crisp, sunny first day of May. I grappled with it. I abhorred it.

I am *appalled* by it.

I blinked, staring out the window of my old Jeep Wrangler. Surely, this would not take place in Camden, in broad daylight, in the Hannaford parking lot.

But no, I wasn't mistaken—the evidence lay on the ground in all of its coffee-stained, Styrofoam glory.

The driver of the black Ford truck, parked haphazardly between two yellow lines, had committed an inexcusable offense, punishable by at least a five-hundred dollar fine.

Littering.

And this wasn't any kind of littering. This was so much more than casual, throw-your-paper-napkin-out-your-window-in-the-dead-of-night littering. This was blatant, daylight *Styrofoam* littering.

I pushed open my car door, nearly forgetting my keys in the ignition. No doubt he thought no one noticed his blatant disregard of nature and civilization. Little did he know, Amie Martin was on the prowl. Amie Martin—short in stature, perhaps having a bit of a bad hair day, but powerful in all things that involved the betterment of humanity.

I threw my shoulders back, the beaded earrings I'd made the night before jangling lightly in my ears. I pushed up the sleeves of my army-green jacket and strode across the parking lot to the black truck.

"Excuse me!" I called as I approached.

Nothing.

I continued toward him.

Don't pretend you can't hear me with your window fully down.

By the time I reached the driver's side of the truck, I fumed. Men. Men, and their callousness toward people and relationships and innocent animals and the environment.

"I said, excuse me!"

A head of dark blond hair turned toward me.

My steps faltered and my mouth grew dry, the fury in my chest changing to shock and, to my horror, a tiny bit of longing.

August Colton grinned at me with twinkling cerulean blue eyes. "Amie."

My name hung in the air between us as his gaze tangled with mine. I waited for something more. A "You look good," or "It's been too long," or "I missed seeing you at Christmas."

All the things I wanted to say to him.

I shook my head, scolding myself for faltering in my mission. Surfer-boy good looks tended to do that to me.

He shoved a box of chicken wings toward me. “Want one?”

I gritted my teeth. “I’m fasting.”

His eyebrows rose. “Oh, is that part of your new . . . spiritual explorations?”

I blew out a breath, fanning the hair from my face. “No, it’s not part of my *spiritual* explorations.” I didn’t mean for the words to come out so snappy. It wasn’t August’s fault my idea to create a group for those seeking spiritual truth had flopped. Sure, I could have given it more effort last summer. Could have been less *flighty* about it, as Bronson said. But a little support from August wouldn’t have killed him.

Who knows, maybe it would have made all the difference.

“Whoa, sorry. So, is everything okay? Are you having a medical procedure done or something?”

A medical procedure? Oh. My face heated as I remembered Mom having to fast and drink some horrible-tasting fluid before having a colonoscopy last year. “I’m fine. Great, really.” Great. “Fasting periodically is actually a great way to increase autophagy in your cells.”

Autophagy . . . that was the word, right? Or was it autophony? I was forever mixing up words.

“Autophagy?”

“It’s your body’s way of cleaning out damaged cells to regenerate healthy ones. It’s fascinating. You should google it.”

“I will.”

No, he wouldn’t. Since when did he care about anything I thought important?

“You want to sit in my truck?”

It was a pretty truck. Several steps up from the beat-up Chevy he’d driven around in high school.

But no. I hadn’t stalked over to play nice.

“You littered.”

“What?”

I pointed at the Styrofoam cup, clear as day, on the patch of grass by the curb of his truck. “I saw you. You threw it right out the window without any regard for the birds who might chew it up and choke on it or the people who have to pick it up for you—”

“Amie—”

“You always were selfish though, weren’t you, August? Never giving a care about what’s humane and right. Sauntering through life, worried about your hair and your stupid surfboard and—”

“Amie.” My name came out in a near growl, his jaw firm and eyes smoldering as he said it. Without warning, I remembered those smoldering eyes fixed upon me in an entirely different way. I remembered the feel of his hands brushing along my sides, the scent of him all musky and sweet, the taste of his lips on my own.

I blinked, forcing the unbidden—and unwanted—thoughts away. “What?”

“I didn’t litter.”

I jabbed both hands at the coffee cup on the ground. “Oh, really? What would you call this, then?”

“My worst fear.”

I cocked my head to the side, my head spinning. August’s worst fear. Shouldn’t I know what that is?

“An *empty* coffee cup?” I guessed.

“Come on, Ame, we dated for six months and you don’t remember my worst fear?”

I swallowed. Maybe August hadn’t been the only one less than invested in our relationship.

I shook my head. “I got nothing.”

“Spiders.”

My insides twitched. I wasn’t much a fan of the eight-legged creatures myself. I crouched down, cautiously, peering into the

cup. Inside, perched at the very bottom, was a hairy black-and-yellow spider with a body the size of a quarter.

I shot up. “Ew!”

“If he didn’t crawl out by the time I finished my lunch, I was going to dump him out. Figured it would be the most”—he cleared his throat—“humane thing to do.”

My chest deflated. “You weren’t littering?”

What did it say about me that I almost wished he had been littering simply so I didn’t look so foolish?

“Nope. After I escorted our hairy friend onto bigger and better things than the inside of an old coffee cup, I was going to pick up my trash and be on my way.”

I blew out a gust of air, fanning my long blonde bangs out of my face. “Guess I owe you an apology, huh?”

“No worries. I know saying you’re sorry has never been your strong suit.”

Something tiny but sharp pinched my insides. I racked my brain for what apology I might owe August. If anything, he owed *me* an apology for that horrible day we broke things off a little less than a year ago. He’d accused me of being selfish, inward-focused, and spoiled. He couldn’t see I only wanted the best for my family, the best for him, the best for my community, the best for the world even. At the time, I accused him of being selfish, too, of refusing to see how his actions affected others.

But apparently, he still believed me to be in the wrong. Well, I’d show him I could give an apology.

“August, for what it’s worth—I *am* sorry. I shouldn’t have stormed over here like the litter brigade.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Litter brigade, huh? Is that a thing, because I’d nominate you as president.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks.” Another silent moment passed between us. “I guess I should get to my shopping. Mom sent me with a list a mile-long.”

“How’s things going at the good ol’ B&B, anyway? Tripp said you all barely got a rest this past winter and things are in full swing again.”

I don’t know why—or maybe I do—but my gaze can’t hold August’s at the mention of his older brother. My sister’s husband. True, I spent most of my teenage years mooning over the oldest Colton. But that ship had sailed the moment he’d chosen Josie. I was happy for them. *Of course*, I was happy for them. I was not the spoiled, can’t-handle-not-getting-my-way youngest Martin child I’d been in elementary school. I loved Tripp like a brother now, and that was that.

“We’re busy. How about you? Congratulations on graduating, by the way. You going to be some big-shot architect, now?”

“No danger of that while working for Grandpop and big brother.”

Oh. “You’re working for Colton Contractors? I didn’t realize.” For some reason, the news niggled at me. I suppose, deep down, I’d wanted bigger things for August. A big city where he would build skyscrapers and bridges, make his mark on the world. Not boring little Camden, where each day looked almost identical to the next. Where one relegated themselves to the good ol’ family business.

I swallowed. There was nothing wrong with small towns if that’s what one wanted. If that’s what *August* wanted. But I didn’t have to hunker down and accept the same fate. My life could be different.

I could break free.

“Yeah, I’m happy about it. Grandpop isn’t getting any younger and the company needs a good architect.”

He’d grown up in the last year. He exuded a confidence and stability he hadn’t possessed when we were dating. Something about that drew me at the same time my brain screamed for me to turn and run, fast.

Talk about spiders. I refused to fall back into August's web.

"That's good, August. Real good. I'm happy for you."

"What about you? How's your art selling?"

"It's selling."

Not a lie. My enviro-friendly lampshades sold in the Camden shops faster than I could make them. The problem was, I couldn't make them all that fast. My profit often ended up being less than an hourly minimum wage. While I'd experimented with a price increase, sales had suffered drastically. Until I could figure out how to make my lamps faster, my profit margin would suffer.

"I actually got accepted to Parsons School of Design."

If I could save up enough money for living expenses, I'd go. I pushed my hair over my shoulder. While I'd qualified for some financial aid, Mom had offered to help with the rest, but I had refused. Mom wasn't getting any younger. Not that she was *old*, but she'd started the bed and breakfast only a few years ago. She needed to save for her own future, for the unexpected. I was a fully functioning woman who could provide for myself.

And once I found the perfect summer job, I'd do just that.

"Where's that?" Was I imagining the flash of disappointment in August's eyes?

"New York City. I'll be moving there in the fall."

Nope. Hadn't imagined it. Perhaps I was vain to relish the fact that August obviously still had feelings for me. Perhaps it was selfish and spoiled—all the things he'd accused me of the day we'd broken up—but in that moment, I didn't care. I savored the twinge of satisfaction that I meant something to August Colton after all.

We bid goodbye shortly after, and once I entered the foyer of the grocery store, I peered back for a last look. My heart swelled at the sight of him crouched low to the ground, gently dumping our eight-legged friend out of his coffee cup.

Then, he picked up the Styrofoam and climbed back into his

truck. I might have imagined the last look he gave as he surveyed the Hannaford foyer, but I don't think I did.

August had always held a flame for me.

Too bad, in the end, he simply wasn't the man I thought he was.

August Colton pulled out of the Hannaford parking lot with a whole lot more on his mind than lunch.

After nearly a year of living life Amie Martin-free, he couldn't deny how this latest encounter shook him up.

Shook him up good.

He'd never been able to resist her—the classic American beauty—that long blonde hair and those blue eyes the color of a clear sky, her feistiness, her honesty, the way she challenged and provoked him. He even missed the way they'd argued. More so, how they'd made up.

He kept his window down, allowing the cool air to rush over his face. No denying he'd come home with hopes they could start things up again. But was it wise to pursue a girl who'd dumped him once, who was probably still secretly hung up on his big brother, even if she would never admit it?

Amie Martin didn't admit weakness, after all.

His phone rang out on his Bluetooth, and he answered. "Hey, big brother."

"August, where are you? Grandpop is having one of his connip-

tions, and now that you're on board, I expect you to be here when the ball drops."

August rolled his eyes. "Chill, man. I went to grab some lunch. Isn't that allowed?"

"Not when the secretary's having her first grandchild and my wife is going to birth my own child any minute now."

He groaned. That's right, Eileen had called out that morning, saying her daughter was in labor. Since August had been out visiting customers this morning, he'd forgotten the office was short-handed.

"I'm on my way."

Tripp allowed a burst of air to escape through the phone lines. "Good. I have a couple estimates I need to get to this afternoon, and between you and me, Grandpop either needs a nap or some Priscilla Martin time. Maybe you can help me convince him to give it a rest when you get here."

August chuckled. "Sure thing." He didn't understand why Grandpop and Priscilla Martin, his high school sweetheart who just happened to be Amie's great-aunt, didn't up and get married already. They could take naps together. Much more fun than going solo if anyone asked August's opinion. "I'll be there in five. Maybe you can take a nap, too." No denying his brother had been on edge lately, what with the upcoming arrival of his baby.

"No time for naps. Thanks, August."

August.

Not "little brother" or "surfer boy" or "colossal screw-up"—all names Tripp had called him at one time or another. His ship had finally come in.

Sure, he may have had some rough teenage years. He may have had a little too much fun—maybe *way* too much fun—his first year of college, but he'd managed to straighten himself out. Thirteen months ago, he'd even thought he was on the road to settling down. With one woman. With Amie Martin.

But it had all gone wrong. His confession had thrown her over

the edge. She'd whipped out her holier-than-thou card and flashed it in his face when what he needed most was understanding, not condemnation.

He pressed the gas pedal harder, gaining speed up Route 1. Yes, best to forget those bottomless eyes, legs as long as California and curves more enticing than thundering waves on a beach. He needed to focus on his new job, on serving the family business, and on proving himself to Grandpop and Tripp.

That was a full-time job in itself. No sense adding a firebrand like Amie Martin to the mix.



I SCANNED THE LIST OF JOB SEARCH RESULTS ON MY LAPTOP AND sighed, taking a potato chip and munching it thoughtfully from where I sat at the dining room table of our living quarters in the Orchard House Bed and Breakfast. I had planned to break my fast with a protein shake and some trail mix, but the thought of job hunting called for something a little more comforting than nuts and raisins.

Truck driver, no.

Pharmacy Technician . . . that could work if I was certified, but no doubt such a certification would take at least a couple of months. A couple of months I didn't have.

A local burger joint position. Ugh. If I had to witness the behind-the-scenes of fast food I might keel over and die from disgust.

Cashier at a home improvement store. A possibility. If I got really desperate, that is. I suppose I could keep it in mind.

Marine technician, no.

Speech pathologist, no.

Pizza delivery driver . . . they made good tips, didn't they? As long as I didn't have to deliver to one of my peers from high school. I imagined myself donning a ballcap and shapeless polo t-

shirt as I walked a Hawaiian pizza up to Jenny Simcock's house. I cringed as I imagined Jenny's conniving smile. Jenny, the girl all the high school guys had called "easy." The girl who couldn't name one element on the Periodic Table and who thought Macbeth wrote Romeo and Juliet.

The girl who had apparently pulled herself together and was now a practicing CPA in downtown Camden, handling other people's money while growing her own.

Oh, good grief. It wouldn't do any good wallowing in jealousy. I may have floundered through the last few years with a handful of college classes, a couple of boyfriends, and fits and starts with selling my art, but I had to help Mom with the bed and breakfast, right? And now, *now*, I was really going to do something with my life. Sure, it'd taken me a few years to figure out what that was, but I'd done it. I was going to art school. And not just any art school. *Parsons*. In New York City.

I could be proud of that.

If I could just scrape up enough cash to afford a few months in the big city . . .

Maybe my friend Lacy would hire me at the yoga studio. I tapped my fingers on the table. No, Lacy handled everything at the studio swimmingly on her own. She'd even complained her bottom line veered dangerously close to red after a bumpy start the year before.

I didn't want to burden my friend.

A loud knock on the back door made me jump and I knocked a few potato chips off my plate. I peered out the window, my heart skipping a beat at the sight of Tripp.

I swallowed, ordering it into submission. Enough was enough. Tripp was simply a silly schoolgirl crush I couldn't quite shake. Josie would positively die if she knew I still battled such ungodly feelings for her husband. It was wrong. Immoral. And certainly not Christian. Each of my angelic family members would be mortified.

I was mortified.

It wasn't as if I dwelled on him, or even dreamed of him. It was just my body's reaction to seeing him. Like now, when I opened the door and took in his easy smile and steady stance. After Dad died, he'd stepped in to help us in so many ways. He'd let me cry on his shoulder more than once.

Was that what was wrong with me? Was I mixed up in some weird crush due to the loss of Dad? I'd have to google that later. *Dad-loss crush?* Or *Romantic feelings and vulnerability*, or more appropriately, *How do I stop crushing on my sister's husband?*

"Hey, Tripp." I attempted a breezy air. "Josie's not here."

His face fell, reminding me how much Tripp was completely and unabashedly in love with my sister.

When they started dating, Josie told me she would stop seeing him if I wanted her to. She said sisters were more important. Of course, I'd rejected her offer.

And August thought I was selfish . . . selfish would have been denying my sister happiness. Denying Tripp happiness. I had not done that!

"She's not answering her cell. Why wouldn't she answer her cell when she's nine months pregnant?"

"Why don't I get you a drink of water? Come on in."

He obeyed, looking at his phone for what I guessed to be the fifth time in the last two minutes. I pressed a clean glass to the water dispenser in the refrigerator and held it out to him.

"Thanks." He took a long swig.

"Tripp, Josie's fine. If she went into labor, you'd be the first one she'd call. Why don't you track her?"

His eyes lit up and he slapped his head. "Amie, you're a genius."

I shrugged. "That's what I keep trying to tell everyone around here."

He shook his head, tapping on the "Find My Phone" app. "Why didn't I think of that before?"

But before he finished, his phone jingled an upbeat tone and he swiped to answer. "Josie?"

I returned to my computer and the mess of job offerings on my screen to give him some privacy.

"You've been at the house all this time?" A long pause. "Yes, yes, I understand, but it'd be nice if you'd answer your phone, honey . . . okay, see you later. Love you, too. Bye." He hung up the phone and shoved it in the pocket of his jeans. "Your sister is going to be the death of me."

"Let me guess. She was deep into the writing of her latest book and didn't even hear the phone ring."

"You got it." He shook his head, but the gesture held more fondness than frustration. His gaze landed on my computer. "What's that? You looking for a job?"

"Just something for the summer to help me get to the city."

"You think you could handle secretarial work?"

I perked up. "Yes . . ."

"Eileen asked for some time off to help her daughter get settled with the new baby. I've been running around like a chicken with its head cut off trying to keep up with scheduling and phones. You interested in filling in?"

I popped up out of my chair. "Yes!" I flung my arms around his neck, then, realizing the awkwardness this incurred, at least on my end, snatched my arms back. "Thank you, Tripp. I won't let you down, I promise."

It meant so much to me that he trusted me. A real job. Not cleaning at a bed and breakfast or serving fries at McDonald's or even putting my art on consignment at one of the shops down the street. This was a legit job. I scrunched up my shoulders and squealed. "I'm so excited!"

"Okay, why don't you stop by the office tomorrow morning, say eight o'clock?"

"Perfect."

He placed his glass in the sink. “I better run. I have to meet up with August and Grandpop.”

“Thanks again, Tripp.”

I closed the door behind him, excitement bubbling up within my chest as I watched him climb into his truck. Only after he'd pulled out of the drive did I realize that in accepting this job, I'd be seeing on a daily basis, the two men who'd caused me the most romantic grief I'd ever known. My girlhood crush, Tripp. And his brother, August, the one man who'd truly crumpled my heart.

