

# *But i Love Him*



AMANDA GRACE

August 30

ONE YEAR

I lie in pieces on the floor. A hundred different things surround me: shards of a destroyed wooden jewelry box, some cracked CDs, a few ripped books, a shredded picture of Connor and me. I think my insides must look like they do, all churned up and cracked and unrecognizable.

My lip bleeds, staining my sleeve every time I wipe my mouth. My chest is hollow and empty, as if he ripped out my heart and took it with him when he left, the door slamming so hard the picture frames crashed to the floor.

All I feel is pain, one big wave of it crashing over me again and again, relentless. I ease back on my elbows until I'm lying flat on the ground, staring upward at the shadowy ceiling.

It's nearly dark. How long have I been lying here? The blackness reaches the corners of the room and fills everything. Once that darkness was a cocoon, enveloping us and protecting us from everything outside the door. Together, we hid in the dark, hoping the world would leave well enough alone and we could find peace.

But nothing can protect me now, least of all the darkness.

No *one* can protect me now. I pushed them all away. I lost everything. I gave it to him, and he gave me this.

I think my wrist is broken, because every time I move it, pain tears up my arm and steals my breath away.

Tonight was so much worse than anything before it. Tonight he didn't stop after the first slap. His rage spilled and bubbled and grew, and he destroyed everything he could find, and still it didn't stop.

I don't know if he left in order to find more things to break, or if it was the only thing he could do to stop it.

I don't understand how so much changed in a year, how I lost myself.

August 23

ELEVEN MONTHS, TWENTY-FOUR DAYS

Even with all the things he'd told me about his father, I'd never actually seen the monster. Sure, I'd met him many times before, but he seemed oddly human, too normal to do the things Connor told me about. The monster was a mythical thing, the villain in a twisted fairy tale.

I know right now, as I watch the flames dance and lick at that pretty white lattice, that I never fully understood it. I never really *believed* it.

I do now. It is real. And all of Connor's stories have come to life.

His father has lost his mind. His mom is sobbing, curled in a ball in the middle of their front lawn. I'm glad they live in the country, where people can't see this from the street. Otherwise I think we might all be arrested.

"I paid for this and I can tear it down!" He rips another piece of lattice off the porch. It cracks and splinters and pieces of it shower down on the flower beds. Nancy's pot of roses falls too, shattering on the cement walkway. It is just another thing he will take from her and never apologize for.

The splintered lattice goes on the roaring pile with the rest of it. The flames grow, ever skyward, gobbling everything he gives it.

Connor and I are at the edge of the yard, hidden in the shadows of the big oak tree. Jack knows we are there, but he's so lost in his own fury I think he may have forgotten. I want to grab Nancy and pull her into the shadows with us, but she's so close to him. She's begging him to stop. I don't know how she can do that; I am afraid of him.

He seems bigger today: taller, thicker, and stronger. There's something almost inhuman about him.

He has to be drunk, though he's not stumbling. A sober person wouldn't burn down their own front porch. A porch he just built a month ago. Nancy spent a whole weekend painting it, and they sat on it in lawn chairs and admired their work.

And now it's in shambles.

"Ann, you don't have to be here," Connor says, as he leans against the tree

and pulls me into him. I don't reply. I just bury my face in his chest as his arms wrap around me. I can hear the wood crack and splinter as his father rips another piece from the porch. It is half gone already.

"Why is he doing this?" I ask.

"Why does he do anything he does?" Connor says. His voice is dull, empty. To Connor, this is an inevitable part of life, something to be endured so that he can get to the better stuff.

It was supposed to be Nancy's birthday dinner. Connor hadn't wanted to go. He doesn't like to see his father at all anymore. That was the purpose of getting his own apartment. The farther he is from his father, the better.

But for his mother, he would do anything. His mother has nothing left. I don't see her often. She's invisible most of the time. But when I do see her, I don't look her in the eyes, because they are empty. She's not yet fifty, but her hair is gray and there are deep lines in her face. There is a sadness about her that never leaves. An intensity of such deep sorrow I can't stand to be in the same room as her. She's haunted by her life, and I wonder what she is waiting for, if she will live this way forever.

If I look her in the eyes, I'm afraid I will see myself. I'm afraid I will see my future. I'm afraid of the camaraderie we may develop because of Connor and his father. And if she sees herself in me, then this is hopeless. If she looks at me and pats me on the back and just *knows* how I feel, then I'll know this is all wrong.

I will just *know*.

But Connor will not become this. Connor knows what he does is wrong. He's getting help. He promised me. We talked about it for so long, and he's going to do it now. He even brought home some information on counselors in the area. We'll work through it together, and break this cycle, and it will be because of me and because I believed in him. He's never had that before. He's never had support like I give him, and it changes him. It makes him believe in himself, too.

I won't be like everyone else. I won't abandon him when things get rough. We're both adults now—me, eighteen, him, nineteen. If we work together, the world can be ours. We won't need anyone else.

I pull away from him and look across the yard again. Darkness is falling but the blaze is growing. My little Mazda is only twenty feet away. The lawn is so dry. The fire could spread. It could burn everything.

“Do you think my car is okay?”

“Maybe.”

His cheek is cool against my temple. I feel safe, wrapped up like this, even though a maniac is burning the house down one piece at a time, just a few feet away. I wonder how far he will go. Would he burn the whole house? Will he turn everything into ashes?

I know Connor is not afraid of him anymore. He told me it’s been three years since his father last tried to hit him, and Connor swung back for the first time. That was the last time anything got physical between them. Connor is now three inches taller than his dad, with thicker arms and wider shoulders.

And yet his father seems so big right now.

“Do you think we should leave?”

“You can, if you want. I won’t leave her.”

I knew he would say that.

“He’ll get bored of the porch and turn on her. But he won’t do it if I’m here.”

I nod. “Maybe she’ll go with us.”

“She won’t.”

And I knew that too. She cares more about her husband than herself.

I don’t know what made him snap like this. The fire was already raging when we arrived, and there’s too much chaos to find out what set it off.

He probably doesn’t remember anyway. Rage like this doesn’t answer to reason.

I can’t shake the fear I feel of Jack. This isn’t right. I don’t think his mind is even functioning; he’s just running on senseless rage. Dangerous, scary, senseless rage. It makes me anxious with fear. The tremors run up and down my legs, will me to leave this yard. I’m torn between wanting to save myself and wanting to be here for Connor.

“I think we should go,” I whisper. No matter how close I get to Connor, it’s not enough. I can’t disappear.

“I think *you* should go. You don’t need to be here for this. You don’t need to see him like this. I can handle it,” he says.

I nod. I know I should stay for Connor but I’m itching to get away from here, to leave this scene behind. I know it’s going to haunt my dreams tonight: the hysterical sound of Nancy’s sobs, the maniacal gleam in Jack’s eyes, the rigid, solemn look on Connor’s face. He’s not shocked by what he sees.

And that’s the worst part. It’s the realization that this is normal to him. That it’s just another day in his fucked-up life. Jack is guilty of everything Connor accuses him of. And it’s making me sick. I need to get out of here. I need to lie down.

I turn away from Connor, toward my car, just as Jack yanks another chunk of lattice off the porch and flings it in the fire. The wood crackles and I jump back from a barrage of sparks, stumbling on a rock.

Jack takes offense at this. In three steps he’s in front of me, his face flaming with anger, and I back up so quickly I slam into my car with a loud bang.

Connor is between us like a bolt of lightning, shouldering his dad away from me. “Don’t you touch her,” he says, his voice so low and menacing it makes my stomach twist into knots of dread. Connor’s anger has ignited to match his father’s. “Don’t you *ever* touch her.”

Their faces are inches apart. Time has stopped; everything is frozen. My breath has left me and I wait for it. I wait for the fists to fly and the blood to pour.

But Jack just tears his gaze away from Connor, looks over at me, and then turns back to the porch. With renewed vigor, he rips another piece loose.

It is over and I am gone. Connor kisses me quickly and then I tear out the driveway, gravel flying behind me, before I can change my mind.

It is nearly pitch-black in his room. The only light comes from the tiny night-light that shines into the glass heart.

I stare at it, from my place in bed. I stare until my sight blurs and all the blues and greens and amber colors blend into one mosaic.

Sometimes at night, I wake up and stare at the heart for hours, thinking of all it means to me, and to him. I think of how I worked for so long to give it to him. How I collected each piece from the beach, how I glued it all together into one big sculpture.

I wonder if he stares at it like I do. I wonder if he realizes what it means, that he'll always have a piece of me no matter what happens. Each piece of glass is another piece of myself I gave to him.

It's too bad I didn't keep any pieces for myself.

I have been lying here for hours, waiting. I know he will come back when she is safe and his father has left, and not before.

It is four a.m. when he climbs into bed beside me, and I haven't closed my eyes yet, even though they've grown so heavy it's like they're filled with sand.

I'm wearing his ratty T-shirt and boxers, and he wraps an arm around my waist once he's beside me. I pull the quilt higher so that half our faces are covered, only the tops of our heads poking out.

"I hate days like this," he says, his voice hardly above a whisper. Sometimes, when he does this, I think he's still afraid his father will hear his words. He doesn't remember that we're in his new apartment. He doesn't remember that his dad is miles away.

"I know," I say, because there are no other words.

"I wish she would just leave him."

"Me too." And I do. I wish it more than anything. It would fix everything for us. All these issues would melt away if she would just get away from him and live in peace. All the stress in Connor's life would evaporate, and then he'd be truly happy.

Silence fills the room until it is heavy. It bears down on us. It suffocates me.

"I'm sorry." The words are empty but I have to say them anyway.

"It's been a long time since he's done anything like that."

I nod.

"I'd never let him hurt you, you know."

I know that. Just as I know Jack does hurt me. He just does it through Connor's hands.

"He's held a gun to my head before," Connor says.

I've heard this story. A dozen times. But I know he will tell me again, because it is his way of getting past it. He'll talk until there is nothing else to say, and I'll listen until he falls asleep. And then it will be my turn to be haunted, my turn to toss and twist all night as I try to forget the stories and the images, to forget the way his voice will crack during the hardest parts of the story.

But the worst part of all is that I will imagine a little boy in these stories, a helpless little boy that still lives inside Connor.

"I was sitting in his truck. He went inside a Seven-Eleven. For ice cream, he said. Said he'd get me a choco-taco, my favorite."

The worst stories always come in the darkness, when I can't see his face. I can feel his breath on my neck and his arms wrapped tightly around me, like I'm his anchor. But I can never see his face.

I don't want to.

"I changed my mind. I wanted an ice cream sandwich. A fucking ice cream sandwich."

There's blame in his voice. But not for Jack. For himself. As if it's his fault, as if his dad would be someone else if only Connor didn't do things the wrong way.

"I was eight. So I got out of the truck. I pushed through the doors and the bell jingled. And my dad was standing there, a gun pointed at the clerk. When he looked over at me, the guy took his chance and swung a bat at my dad, but he missed.

"So I became his hostage. He pointed the gun at my head and told the guy to give him the money or he'd shoot me."

This is the part where he stops, where his voice cracks a little.

Tonight the story is different to me. Tonight I believe it. All these stories he's told me before, they seemed like tall tales. Exaggerations. It's not that I thought Connor would lie, it's just that I'd met Jack. He was just a regular



guy. And it didn't seem like one man could be as evil as the one in the stories. That one man could cause so much pain.

But tonight I saw it, saw the monster unleashed, the one who had been there all along, and I know it is real. I know he's capable of what Connor says he is. And tonight the story comes to life in my mind, and I know the look that would have been in Jack's eyes when he did this.

"But the guy had already hit the silent alarm. The cops pulled up outside while he was standing there, jabbing at my head with the gun. It wasn't loaded, but I didn't know that."

He shifts a little. The bed creaks. He knows he doesn't have to continue, that I know the rest, but he does anyway. "It took an hour for the police to get him to drop the gun. A fucking hour.

"I was eight," he says again. "What kind of fucked-up person does it take to hold a gun to your own kid's head? They only gave him two years for it because he didn't put bullets in it. Plus parole. With good behavior he was out before I was ten."

I never have words to say, so I'm always silent. There are no words for this.

"Sometimes I wish he would have loaded it and pulled the trigger," he says.

I stiffen. I don't want our conversation to turn that direction. His anger I can handle. I can smooth out the bitter memories and hold him, and he will forget for these moments. I can do that for him; I can make the anger go away.

But his sorrow is harder. He drowns in it and I can't pull him free.

"No. I love you. Don't wish that."

And yet as I say it, the fight has gone out of me. I used to try so hard. I used to vehemently fight him. I used to struggle with everything I had to get him to stop the wars he waged with himself. I'd wipe his tears and talk to him for hours, until my eyes felt like sandpaper and I could hardly speak and I fell into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

But I don't have it in me anymore. I'm losing him to it.

The long silence stretches between us and I wait for it. Wait to discover which way he is tipping.

"I love you too," he says, and kisses my neck.

I sigh in relief. For tonight we have won.

I turn back toward him and kiss him, and he rolls into me, kissing my cheeks and lips and chin and neck, and in seconds we are lost to it.

These are the only moments we have left. These precious seconds where the passion blots out everything else, and it is just us. The rest is a war neither of us can ever win.

But I have already waved my white flag.

I have already surrendered.

August 15

ELEVEN MONTHS, SIXTEEN DAYS

I've made a mistake. A huge, monumental mistake.

I forgot Connor's truck broke down. I forgot he was going to be waiting for me when I walked out of Subway. I've only been back on the job for two weeks, and it's already putting a strain on my relationship with Connor.

And now he's seen me. He's seen me laugh and push Mark, the new guy.

And I know what he's thinking, and I know where his mind is going, and I know without asking that he's *steaming*, waiting for me. I know the fear he has of losing me overpowers everything else, even his common sense. I know deep inside he trusts me, but I know his raging insecurities will always prevail.

He's so afraid of losing me that he can't see I'd never leave him.

And I know he had to have seen the way Mark hugged me with one arm, just a loose sideways hug, but still a hug. He won't believe me when I say Mark means nothing. He'll just replay that hug over and over in his mind and he'll spin a story that's so far from the truth.

I've been so careful for so long. It was bound to happen eventually. I was bound to slip and do something like this. Why do I even wonder why I have no friends anymore? Why do I even wonder why no one talks to me? It's my own doing. It's my own fears that something will happen and I'll say the wrong thing to the wrong person, and they'll interfere somehow. And this is what will happen.

Even Abby knows it. It's why she stays away without me telling her to. It's why she smiles that sad smile when she sees me.

It's why she's stopped trying to be my friend. She was the last to give up. The last to surrender me to Connor.

I hate this. I hate it so much, this waiting as we walk toward my car, Mark having no idea what's about to happen and me knowing it too well.

I'm afraid. I hate that I'm actually afraid of him right now. I hate that I know what this silence means, and all I can do is wait for it to explode.

I feel claustrophobic and I'm not even in the car yet. I consider running. Away from him, away from everything. I could go five, ten miles before I had to stop. I'd be halfway to Aberdeen by then. Our tiny ocean town of Westport, Washington, is a town of nothing. I'd be gone in ten minutes.

But that won't solve it, and maybe this time he'll talk to me. He's been getting a little better, now that he's away from his dad so much. He's been cooling. Adjusting. Maybe this time he'll understand, and he'll see that Mark is just some random guy who means nothing at all, and we can use this to grow from.

I know that's going to happen, if I stick with him long enough. He just needs some guidance, some love, some understanding. He wants so badly to become that person.

But of course that's not the case. When he clicks his door shut, and before I start the car, he grabs my wrist and squeezes, too hard. It's always too much, too intense, too everything.

“Forget the store. Take me to the apartment. Now.”

And for some reason, the whole ride there, the whole deathly silent ride, I keep hoping that my car will break down too and I'll have to get out, that we'll never make it to his apartment.

But we do. I pull up at his fourplex, parking so carefully, perfectly between the white lines. I stare at the other three doors, hoping no one is home in those apartments. It's a tiny building, two apartments downstairs, two up. Connor's is on the upper left, with a big crooked number three nailed to the door.

I follow him up the old wooden stairs, my heart pounding. I can hardly feel the thin railing as it slides underneath my hand, guiding me toward the front door with the peeling red paint.

We're barely through the entry before he shoves me, hard, and I'm sent sprawling all over the floor. I bang my elbow and a jolt of electricity shoots up my arm. I hear the door slam behind me, and the pictures on the wall rattle with the force.

I lie there longer than I should, trying to keep my breathing down, trying to suppress the instinct to curl in a ball. I know his moods can turn with the right

words. I know if I think clearly, I can steer him back toward being himself again.

If I do this right, Connor will be back.

“You’re such a slut,” he says, spitting the words at me. “Do you spread your legs for him, too?”

I’m stunned into silence. He’s been cruel before ... but this ... this is coming from somewhere deeper.

“No, God, no. I love you. Only you.”

I hardly cry anymore when he’s like this. I’ve become numb to it, and the tears don’t come like they used to. I just take it and wait, and when it’s over I hold him until he is through hating himself for this, and we pretend it never happened.

But today the tears are brimming at his words. They bruise so much deeper than his fist.

“You’re so fucking stupid, you know that? How could you think he would look twice at you once he has you? I’m the one who’ll stick with you. Who keeps you around. You’re nothing to him.”

That can’t be all I am to him. He can’t be just “keeping me around.” He needs me. Just as I need him. But hearing the words buckles everything inside of me. I fold in on myself and bury my face in my knees and wrap my arms around my legs and try to disappear. I could drown in my own tears.

He hauls me up off the ground, sending waves of pain up my shoulder at the way he jerks me. Then he backs me into a wall, so he has me cornered.

He always does it like this. It’s like he wants me to be trapped. It ensures I never leave until his anger is gone. It ensures he can always fix the things he’s ruined instead of letting me walk out the door with an ugly feeling swirling in my stomach.

I can never walk away with this image in my mind. It is always the aftermath, the tears in his eyes, the begging for forgiveness. But it’s getting messier and more complicated every day. It’s getting harder to remember the apologies before the hits.

Not when they’re coming more often. Not when the sweet spots are

shrinking and the anger is boiling and nothing is going the way I thought it would.

Why? Why does he have to let his anger explode like this?

How does he look at me like this, trembling, crying, and continue to yell? How can he look me in the eyes and be so cruel?

I could never do this to him. Never.

“You have no idea how fucking stupid you are.”

And then he reels back, his hand fisted, and punches.

The wall.

It caves in around me, bits of drywall showering down around my shoulders.

And that is that.

The first hit, the first good, hard hit, usually wakes him up. I can actually see it in his face, this abrupt before and after.

I always know when it shifts. I think maybe the pain, so raw and real, pulls him out of his rage. Today I am lucky. Today it is the wall, and not me.

He blinks, twice, and looks at me. At the way I tremble in front of him.

“Oh. I ...” He steps away from me. There is always a moment like this. A moment where I think he is seeing himself, where he’s reeling everything back inside him, forcing it back down and bottling it back up, and then he turns to me. For that split second before he gains his senses again, I see that same shock and fear on his face as must be mirrored on mine. I see that he has no idea what he’s done. That he had no control of himself.

But it’s not fair. It’s not fair that he lets his rage take over, that he lets it rule him. I don’t know why he has to be two people.

I don’t know why he *gets to be* two different people, and I only get to be me, the one who is here to take what he has to give, and who is here to pick up the pieces afterward.

Me. It’s always me. I don’t want it to be like this anymore. I can’t handle more of this. I’m barely holding it together.

I’m barely holding *him* together.

It's just not fair.

He steps forward to hug me, but I stiffen and he has to force his arms around me to get the hug to work.

And I let out a sob of relief, because it's over. The episode is over. Today he didn't touch me. And I think this may be a good thing, it may mean he's not going to. Ever again. If he can see me with another guy and get this angry and not touch me, it has to mean something. I let myself hope that it means something, because otherwise I'm not sure how much longer I can last.

He holds me and I melt into a mess of sobs, which shocks me. I thought I was done doing this. I thought I could steel myself from this. But I can't handle the roller coaster anymore. I can't handle this up and down.

He lets me slide to the floor and then he pulls me into his lap and he rocks me, back and forth, as I sob so hard I can't breathe and start hiccupping.

"I'm sorry, Ann. I'm so sorry."

I sniffle, my breath coming out in funny little rasps. "I don't want you to be sorry. I want you to stop doing this. I want it to be like it was when we met."

"I know. It will be, I promise. I'll treat you like I used to. I swear."

I nod my head, wanting to believe it.

But even when I stop crying, even when we fall asleep and I'm nestled in his arms, this will leave another scar. No one will see it. No one will know. But it will be there. And eventually all the scars will have scars and that is all I will be, one big scar of a love gone wrong.

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