

Balance



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THE AMPED SERIES: BOOK ONE

M. J. WOODS

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PUBLISHING

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The Amped Series: Book One

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I

Aidan

Summer 1989

In the room I share with my brother I pack my red backpack, the one with the broken zipper that mom put a safety pin on. I stuff in the peanut butter sandwich I made yesterday when no one was looking. I take three cookies that I hid in my dresser drawer, the ones Aunt Emma bakes at her farm and brings to us.

Every Friday night before Mom goes to work, Aunt Emma visits. We go to sleep listening to the sound of them talking and laughing or sometimes crying.

On Saturday mornings, we are alone. Mom has been at the hospital all night taking care of the sick people.

But Father is here today.

And he is angry.

I have not seen him in three sleeps. I keep track with chalk marks on the wood floor underneath my mattress.

Always three sleeps, and then he is back.

He is shouting that there is no bourbon. He is out of cigarettes. Mom is not here to cook anything.

“That bitch is never here to put food on the fucking table,” he hollers. “No food and no fucking smokes and no goddamn booze.”

He is mad.

Not grouchy mad, like Mom sometimes is.

The Scary Mad.

I do not want to stay here.

I think about Aunt Emma and Uncle Eli's farm to keep me not scared.

That is my favorite place to be. They have chickens and cows, and there are so many places to run and play and hide. Sometimes in spring I get to feed the new calves. That's the best. They have an old brown dog too. He loves to lick our hands after we eat cookies.

If the farm was close I would go there, but it is too far for my legs.

I can walk by the lake and follow the shoreline down to the fishing shack.

Because I don't want to be here.

Mom always says she does not know how I walk so far. She says it's a good mile. The first time I went there by myself she was mad.

Not mad like Father gets, but I got a good talking to that day.

Then one day she changed her mind. I can go there whenever I want now.

Especially when Father is the Scary Mad.

"As long as you're careful," she said.

"Don't end up with a fishhook in your eye," she said.

I will fish when I get there like I always do. Maybe I will catch some perch to cook so Father is not angry anymore.

First I have to wait until he falls asleep. I can sneak away then, right through the front door. I stay put, waiting to hear him stop yelling. He will sit in the chair soon. When he snores, it is safe.

Thaddeus is hiding under his bed with the flashlight Mom gave him, hugging his scruffy brown teddy.

I wish he would throw that teddy away. It is so old and dirty and embarrassing. He should grow up already. But Mom says he needs it.

Thaddeus can't come with me because Mom says no. Even if he wanted to, his legs could not carry him all the way like mine can. He's too little.

I peek under Thad's bed. He has the nice bed, the one with the mattress high off the floor. My bed is on the floor in the corner of our room.

My brother lays on his belly looking through a book, looking at the pictures.

He is only three. He can't read.

Mom says I could read when I was three. But Thad is different.

Not different because I am the big brother. And not *bad* different. Just different than me.

I hear the loud snoring through the crack in the door. It sounds like a big bear is sleeping in the living room. I put my backpack on my shoulder and whisper to Thad not to come out until Mom gets home.

She will be home soon, I remind him. She is always home in the morning on Saturdays.

I sneak past Father while he sleeps in the big chair, the one that Mom likes to sit in when he is gone. It's the only one big enough for Thad and me to sit next to her while she reads us stories.

I open the screen door and hope that it will not squeak, but it does.

Father does not wake up.

I trip over his big boots on the porch outside the door, and I crash to the floor.

“Boy!”

No.

“Boy! Is that you?”

No. Please no.

“Where you off to, boy?”

I hear him get up and come for me.

No. No. No.

The door squeaks again when he opens it.

“What you got there?” He stands over me in his bare feet and torn pants. His shirt is off.

It's hot today.

He smells like he always does.

Like sweat and smoke and beer.

I can see the tattoos on his arms. He has big arms, lots of muscles. The scariest picture is on his shoulder. A skull with red eyes.

I am lying on the porch floor.

He snatches my backpack out from under me.

He unzips it fast.

He is so mad.

He dumps it upside down and the food falls to the floor.

“You think you can hold out on your ole’ man, boy? These are Emma’s cookies.” He puts a whole one in his mouth and smiles.

The scary smile.

No. No. No.

“Damn good, ain’t they, boy?” He still has the scary look. “Best thing Eli did was marry your mama’s sister. That woman knows her place.”

I keep quiet, but he gets mad some more.

“I’ll show you what you get for hoardin’ food in my house.” He is yelling in his scary voice. “That’s my mouth you’re stealing from, you little shit. You need a lesson ‘bout respect.”

He disappears into the house with the sandwich and the rest of the cookies.

I can get away if I hurry.

Maybe taking the food away was my lesson.

Maybe I am safe.

I look up the dirt driveway, thinking about where to go.

But the screen door squeaks again.

I did not hurry fast enough.

Father stands over me.

He takes off his belt.

No. No. No.

I don’t get up. I don’t run. It will be worse if I run now.

A man does not back down.

A man does not run.

A man takes it.

That’s what Father always says.

He folds the belt in half and snaps it together. The crack makes me jump.

“What? You scared, boy?”

“No.” My voice does not work very good.

“No what?”

“No, Father.”

“Ain’t no boy of mine gonna be a scared little shit. Now get up and be a man!”

I scramble to get to my feet, but I'm not fast enough for him. He yanks me by the shirt and drags me.

My sneakers skid across the planks of the floor. He is so strong.

He lets go and I face the wooden bench on the porch, the white one with the peeling paint. Mom makes us sit there to wait for church so we don't get dirty.

I lean my hands on the bench to take my punishment.

I shut my eyes tight as he pulls up my shirt.

I think about church and the beautiful sound of the choir.

I think about feeding the cows.

I think about Aunt Emma pulling cookies out of her great big white oven at the farmhouse.

And I count.

Thwack!

One.

Thwack!

Two.

I don't know how many I will get to. Sometimes I only get to five.

Sometimes all the way to twenty.

Thwack!

Three.

I will not cry.

I can hear movement in the house.

No, Thad. Stay in the house.

I hope he can hear my mind.

Stay in there, Thad.

Do. Not. Come. Out.

I open one eye and look up. Thad is standing inside at the screen door. I see his teddy through the window. The sun shines on the brown fuzz.

"Father?"

No. No. No.

Do not interrupt. Go away, Thad! Go away!

I want to scream, but nothing comes out.

I do not feel the belt anymore. I only feel the sting on my back.

I turn around and Father is gone. He is nowhere.

I look through the screen door, through the window.

Thad is gone too.

I run as fast as I can over the rocky driveway, up the dirt path that leads away from our cabin and all the other cabins along this side of Mirror Lake, all the way up to the road.

Something seems different.

I am bigger than before, stronger.

The trees that line the dirt road seem smaller, the uphill path is just an incline.

I make it to the end, to a clearing beyond the trees, and then to the main road. The pavement is so hot it is releasing steam.

Thaddeus is in the road.

He is bigger too – but he is lying in the road next to his Lotus. The brand new one I bought for him when he turned twenty.

But I bought that in California. This is New York.

And it's all ruined now.

The grill is smashed in. The windshield has a gaping hole in it. Shattered glass is everywhere.

My brother isn't moving.

Something dark lies next to him.

I run to him, screaming for him, looking down at his body.

It doesn't look like my brother.

There is no life in his soft eyes.

The grin he always has is absent.

There is blood everywhere.

On his clothes, on his head.

In a pool next to him on the pavement.

Thaddeus!

I wake up screaming my dead brother's name.

Again.

This is the third time this week.

For a moment I'm thankful the recollections of childhood in my nightmares are actually the *less* violent ones.

I'm grateful the dream about the accident is the same as always, except for the setting.

This I can deal with.

Perception is everything.

But the sheets beneath me cost more than a half year's rent in that foul, dilapidated cabin I dreamt of and they are drenched with sweat.

This will not do. I cannot leave my housekeeper to deal with this.

I rub my hands over my face, trying to settle myself into reality, rising to strip the bed.

I'm in the present.

It's May.

May 2016.

Sunday.

I can launder the sheets before Mrs. Schmidt comes in tomorrow.

They need it anyway, after last night's inescapable bar-fly-fuck.

Fuck up, more like.

I groan aloud at my lack of discipline brought about by the stress of the last several days. I was not in my right mind.

It was a slip.

I drank one too many and lost control.

And I never lose control.

Not anymore.

Rhonda or Rachel (or whatever her name was) did not constitute some ideal fantasy lover, some celestial goddess that I just had to have. She was not the end-all, be-all woman of my dreams.

I know better than to think such a creature exists.

Truthfully, she hadn't even been a great lay.

She was pretty, sure. Blonde and cute with firm tits (thankfully real), and she was an insatiable flirt. She had a nice smile. Her navel flaunted a piercing between where her tank top ended and the waistband of her (short) shorts began.

She had fallen all over me, like women always do. Before I could even open my mouth to ask for a drink, I got the batting eyelashes, the stare-down like she would much rather devour me than listen to anything I had to say.

Like I've never been given that look before, honey.

She was just like the rest, happily unaware that appearances don't mean shit when you carry internal scars like mine.

Normally this attention would be enough to turn me in the opposite direction, fleeing the scene like a wanted criminal. I'm long past consuming the attention of every woman that passes by me giving me that look.

I wasn't looking for some inflation to my ego.

But then she sang karaoke from behind the bar while she waited on customers. She didn't sing well, really. Just that she was brave enough to do it had me taking notice.

Music always helped me take notice.

And the song she chose – “You're So Vain” by Carly Simon.

Unexpected and clever choice. She directed it at me, though we'd never even met.

I sipped a whiskey, then another, let her chat me up. I answered questions like where am I from and what am I doing in a place like this.

It was a change of pace for me. No one ever asked me that in California. Everyone knew who I was there, and I didn't frequent places 'like this'.

Renee (or was it Rita?) didn't seem like a complete dolt, but she didn't come across as intellectual either. There were no supremely interesting conversations to be had with this one.

She admitted she wasn't especially good at being a college student. Her Stanton University classes were done for the year. Bartending would pay the rent, which was news to me. When I was at Cal Tech as an undergrad over ten years ago, bartenders were typically male.

Chalk one up for feminism, I guess.

As a barmaid she could afford to pay for a summer of freedom before her senior year and escape going home to mommy and daddy in...where was it again?

Oh yeah. Pennsylvania.

Last night with Robin was an exception to my learned distaste for the chase. (That was it, *Robin.*)

Between the stress of my past and present colliding, the eventual one-too-many shots she poured, and my new surroundings (where I can blend

in semi-unnoticed), she piqued my interest enough that I entertained her flirtations.

It didn't hurt her cause that she was the antithesis of Stella Ireland.

They were nothing alike.

Yeah, this one had that in spades.

Blonde, not raven haired. Sweet, not a sociopathic bitch.

And she didn't seem the type to wield her influence – whether that influence be feminine wiles or some other, more powerful form – to manipulate a man. To twist him into doing whatever the fuck she wanted him to do on her whim, only for the sake of her entertainment.

Yes. The “anti-Stella” was exactly the girl I needed in that moment.

I use the thought to resolve that it wasn't so bad, what I did last night.

When her early shift waiting on weary businessmen at The Wall ended, I brought the lady back here. I got off, she got off (not in that order because I am, first and foremost, a gentleman), and she got the consolation prize of a ride home in the Lincoln with Byron.

After spending hours in a dark barroom in this small city in Central New York with men twice her age, she had to rate the evening I'd given her in the top five of her most memorable.

My man Byron took her home at midnight. No walk of shame for my never-to-be-seen-again woman of the evening. She deserved better for her willingness to participate in my distraction and agree to my terms.

She definitely wasn't a law student at the University. She was too young and before coming up (or coming at all), she signed the non-disclosure after barely glancing through it.

I saw her eyes bug out once she realized just who it was she was agreeing to spend the night with, mumbling something about thinking I looked familiar. But then she handed over her phone to Byron, as required. She let me do whatever I wanted to her, and though it was nothing out of the ordinary – no bondage or sadomasochism, for Chrissakes – she thoroughly enjoyed it. I had her screaming in less than twenty minutes and multiple times after that.

Just like the long parade of women that had come before Stella.

My techniques have never failed to disappoint the opposite sex, at least not since I'd schooled myself. A man can only go so far on instincts and

libido. I'd done my research over the years, learned what women liked and didn't. Figured out that none of them were the same, yet all of them were same – they all needed to be convinced to get out of their own way (or more importantly, out of their own heads) to enjoy themselves.

The hidden key to every one of them was different, the teeth of each carved in a diverse intricacy to unlock a different door.

Yet they all possessed that hidden key.

And once you got through the door, there it was waiting for you. That sacred place, glowing brighter than a bare bulb in a black room.

A place above all, superior to Heaven or Earth. Worth Herculean efforts to unlock.

In that moment when a woman unravels enough to let you in and completely open herself to you, she is at your mercy in every sense of the word.

I found it one of the most exquisite sights to behold.

I'd experimented with enough women, not discriminating in any particular way.

I never had a type.

Before Stella, I was careful about the women I chose, but not in the sense of her background or specific appearance. Not because of the size of her ass or whether her hair was blonde or red, whether her skin was the color of melted caramel or dotted with enough freckles to make a constellation if you connected them in ink.

Variety had always been a well-stocked spice in my sex life.

Until I got tired of the one-hundred-percent-predictable outcome that variety led to.

At least in part, the reason I had been able to prove myself so capable with women was the result of my experience with varied, glorious specimens of them throughout my twenties.

But eventually it just got old, always leading to some sort of complication.

If a woman of the hour turned into a woman of the month (or longer), it would turn out she was after my money or my connections, or she had a hang up of some sort that would change my perception of her from appealing to repulsive.

Or even more terrifying, she'd want full-blown intimacy.

Why wouldn't I let her in? Why didn't I want her company longer than a few hours at a time?

Didn't I want a commitment sooner or later? A family someday? I wasn't getting any younger (now chasing down thirty-five as my next milestone birthday).

I really shouldn't lose sight of that, one girl had said.

Fuck no and there's the door. Thanks anyway, Princess.

All of this hassle was precisely why I thought Stella Ireland would have been my emancipator from a life of same-old, same-old.

I could concentrate on my business dealings and my philanthropic endeavor that would take everything I had to birth it into this world.

As it turned out, I was unmistakably (and possibly irrevocably) wrong.

Since figuring out just how wrong, I put an end to my arrangement with Stella and finally got my shit together to come back to New York to do what I had been planning for years. Last night had been my first return to that same-old, same-old parade.

Just as I remembered, it wasn't satisfying beyond provisional entertainment.

With Robin I wrapped it, like I always do, as much as I hated doing it. I never trust the words "I'm on the pill". *Ever*. That may be true, but I have no idea if you're *clean*, darling.

You don't get the privilege of the real feel.

After I'd pleased her to the point of fever pitch until she could take no more, I politely saw her out. Home she went, without so much as a 'Hey stud, can I get your number?' (though she did hint that her next shift at The Wall would be Tuesday). Not noteworthy to me, as I'd never step foot in that pub again.

She left before one day turned into the next, with enough time for me to sleep off one too many.

And before the dreaming began.

My nightmares have been hindering my rest since I returned to New York. I've been in the city of Stanton for almost a month.

I sleep less here, dream more.

Maybe coming back here was a mistake.

Coward.

I shudder, hearing the bastard's voice in my head.

Fuck you. I do not run. You're the coward.

I head for my closet intending to deposit the sheets into a clothes hamper, but I don't have one yet. The rest of the household items I requested won't be delivered until tomorrow when Mrs. Schmidt will be here to set everything up the way I like it. Only the major furnishings are here now.

My suits were ordered from Manhattan and arrived when I did. The cedar shelving was just added to yesterday with clothing for a spring warm up.

I need clothes for all seasons here with Central New York weather being so fucking unpredictable. I'm not used to it after being in California so long.

Everything in my loft is still fresh and new. I inhale, letting the smells ground me, pushing away my recall of the scent of stale tobacco and cheap beer from my nightmares.

Construction here only finished two months ago, and it took four weeks more to get the details just right. The work for the HVAC updates was a bitch in this old relic of a building (though the historical charm was a draw for me), and even without the hoops the city had me jumping through for the required permits, this alone put the project behind schedule. I was on a first-name basis with the electrician. Painters came back three times to fix mistakes.

I supervised everything from the West Coast, which made for a challenge. After two years of construction (and once I showed up on-site), a never-ending punch-list had been completed with greater speed and, at my insistence, to perfection.

Now the real work could begin.

I toss the sheets on the floor and head for the bathroom to do the necessary, then splash some cold water on my face. I catch a glimpse of my eyes in the mirror. They are tired, yet steely enough to cut through the reflection. The blue irises shake me alert. I pound a fist to my chest in an effort to push me past the edge of emotion and full on into action.

Suck it up, Pierce.

It's five a.m.

Sunday or not, I'm late.

I dress in shorts and a t-shirt and throw on my running shoes. I grab my phone off the charger at my bedside and find some driving music to motivate me during my usual eight miles through the city streets where I run and run and run.

In the dark, in a city where no one knows me, I run.

“Wake Me Up” by Avicii blares in my ears.

I pass by bums asleep under the bus stop canopy or look up at the occasional window lit by an early riser.

But no one sees me.

I run not to escape, but to chase down demons, using the darkness to see myself.

To bring me back to the surface.

To obliterate haunting memories and remember who the fuck I am.

I am Aidan Michael Pierce.

And I am no fucking coward.

2

Alexis

January 2015

My husband is dead.

It's a frigid Monday in January. I'm wishing I could stay home, sheltered in my bed, but I have to get up.

The dog needs to be let out. I have to work because law school loans don't pay themselves off.

And, oh by the way, that shit accrues astronomical interest.

I hate that the rat race is my only current link to sanity. Start work at seven and come home ten hours later, driving in the dark on every commute. My life seems like a trip through a black hole set on repeat. Maybe somewhere in there, I'd eat. I could actually get behind that idea right now.

Wait. I'm hungry?!

It's a relished thought, since I've spent my first month as a young widow eating infrequently and sleeping soundly even less.

Ben's death was news on local radio and television stations for the first week after I lost him. He was a reporter for Stanton City Channel Eight, and viewers numbering in the thousands watched him on their flat screens daily.

Every sign-off ended with Ben's beautiful smile and his anchor-worthy voice announcing that he was broadcasting live from various locations. He was just starting out there, but he had been chosen to sit behind the desk as soon as the current anchor retired.

Losing him has been a shock to his colleagues and to the people of Mirror Lake where we live.

And to me.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Clayton,” the doctor had said. “We did all we could. It was just too late.”

His words sounded rehearsed, but he didn’t owe me any informality. He didn’t know me, which would have been clear to anyone that did.

I don’t go by “Mrs. Clayton”.

Ever.

It didn’t occur to me to ask the doctor to use my maiden name, as I usually did when meeting someone. The words that hung over me like a dark cloud were “too late”.

At four o’clock in the afternoon on the day before Christmas Eve, I sat on the edge of a plastic chair at St. Luke’s Hospital when I should have been at work.

My feet were restless, knees bouncing in anticipation of that conversation. I remember looking down at the orthopedic shoes peeking out from Dr. Newman’s blue scrubs.

But I was not sobbing or screaming in protest.

Just staring.

I did not look the part of a freshly made widow overcome by grief. I didn’t bawl like an actress in an emergency room drama.

Ben was gone. I knew it was true, but I just couldn’t react the right way. There wasn’t much to do or say about it. Husbands die. Shit happens.

Now, a month after Ben’s death, my head is still stuck in that moment.

I should have cried or said something profound. Anything to let Dr. Newman or anyone standing within earshot know, without question, that I was devastated.

No one told me that my initial reaction was wrong, but I can’t shake that it didn’t *feel* right. If I could just fix that moment, maybe I could be okay. Or at least better.

Our little town was a flurry of mourners for a solid week after Christmas. Some flocked to our door with casseroles and condolences. Canadian folks who grew up with Benjamin Clayton crossed the border, making the hour-and-a-half trek to our Central New York suburb to pay their re-

spects. They meandered around the community like tourists, taking selfies on the local ski slopes or at the diner having an American breakfast.

They spoke softly when they talked to me, as if I was suddenly too delicate to hear loud conversation. Sometimes I felt a hand on my shoulder or someone holding my hand in theirs while they babbled on. I couldn't seem to look anyone in the eye.

People who knew him from work or college (and always knew him as *my* Ben) came for the funeral.

"I'm so sorry," they said. "It will take time, but you will get through this. You'll be okay." Or my least favorite, "You're so young, you will overcome this. You've got your whole life ahead of you!"

Their words made them feel better, regardless of how inconsequential they might be for me. I let them go on, nod, act polite.

I know how to put on a façade better than any of them.

Their future is not a big question mark. Their twenty-eight year-old husband is not buried after his body gave up on him far too early. He had his whole life ahead of him too. Just a short month ago he was young and ambitious, just like me.

Nothing is *okay*, I think when I see these people. My husband is dead and this lake community is an over-priced housing development built on a glorified swamp.

Life is a big bag of *suck*.

Ben's parents and sister went back to Ontario the week after he died. They volunteered to help with anything I might need. His sister Pam even offered to stay an extra few days, but I declined. I was glad to get our house back to myself.

Wait. *Our* house? *My* house? I don't know how to refer to it anymore. It's just me and the damn dog.

Dr. Newman called on Friday to report that the autopsy results had come in. A clot in the brain, he said. Ben likely felt no pain. He was gone before he knew anything was happening.

"Nothing we could have foreseen, Mrs. Clayton. Sometimes our bodies just don't serve us as we'd like," he said.

I still didn't correct him, telling him to call me Alexis Greene. What was the point? It was case-closed for him. Put that little manila folder away, Doc. Nothing more to do here.

Ben died playing racquetball at the Stanton City Gym, and I'm glad that it didn't happen in our home.

How cold is that?

I shudder at my abrasiveness. Or maybe it's the January chill, seeping in from the banks of snow outside.

You're just pissed. Suck it up, buttercup.

Surely I'll need to start seeing a shrink.

I need to get rid of the inner monologue I can't seem to turn off.

I need to get through this jumbled mess of feelings.

I need to keep myself from driving to Channel Eight to give a certain curvy blonde reporter a roundhouse kick to her jaw.

At Ben's funeral, Melanie Adams had feigned ignorance that Ben even *had* a wife. She was a notorious flirt with a gazillion watt smile and she had been directing it (along with her other body parts) at Ben since he'd started reporting for Channel Eight.

However naïve she believed me to be, I knew a girl like her would certainly have taken note of Ben's wedding band. Not to mention we'd met at the television station before where he had introduced me as his wife. *Twice.*

Yet that was behind me. No reason to care about some woman that might want to lay claim to Ben. I'd never felt the need to be jealous about Ben and other women, but more importantly he no longer breathed the same air we did. Her flirtations and intentions were moot.

I'm capable of suppressing my impulse to kick Melanie Adams in the teeth, but I still feel the urge to talk to someone. Sort through my fog. Figure out what to do next.

I fear walking out my front door for lack of direction, wondering what people will say about Ben Clayton's widow and what she might do.

Will she fall apart? How will she carry on?

When it comes to confidantes, few people come to mind. It doesn't help my cause that two of them are dead.

My father, Albert Greene, died three years ago. Even a visit to his gravesite for my usual one-sided chat doesn't seem therapeutic enough.

The other person would have been my husband of six years. After meeting him my freshman year of college, I found a best friend in Ben. He was my go-to for everything. Without him, I wouldn't have made it through the grief of my dad's passing. Graduating law school last spring, passing the State Bar Exam – all of it would have been an unattainable goal without him.

Hell, even getting dressed was easier with him at my side.

What would I do now? I had no secrets to keep anymore and no one to keep them with. Nothing and no one to guard against.

I could keep on the same. I could work my boring job in Falcon Lake. The firm of Martin & Reynolds had big fish to reel in, and I could go on forever as an underling, riding the coattails of the named partners and their high-paying clientele.

I could keep living in a vanilla house on a quiet street in the same little town I grew up in.

Alone.

Or I could just give up.

Unplug the alarm clock. Let my cell phone battery die. Eliminate contact with the outside world altogether and stay in bed. Stop worrying about working or shaving or showering or eating.

Stop everything.

Just *stop*.

What did it matter when either scenario left me alone?

It doesn't. Just stay here, under the covers, and shut the world out.

I catch a glimpse of future me.

Grossly overweight, a doe-eyed girl with tangled brown hair looking a complete wreck. She would need to grease the doorways just so she could pass through them, except that she can't free herself from the mountains of empty gelato containers and piles of collection notices that surround her in the first place.

I shudder again, goosebumps rising on my skin.

There is only one person I can talk to about Ben openly and about the fact that I might be totally and completely losing it.

I get up and pad downstairs to the kitchen in my unflattering nightgown and slippers, Huck the Bernese Mountain dog lumbering along at

my heels. It's only seven a.m. but I reach for a bag of cookies and fire up my coffee maker.

I haven't added fifty pounds to my usual one-thirty-five just yet, but I promise myself I'll eat better tomorrow.

Tomorrow, there will be no dessert for breakfast.

I take my cell off the charger and scroll through the contacts.

No, not my half-sister Jill. We're not that close. She was here for the funeral and left the next day muttering about her too-busy life with her part-time catering business and full-time mommy-hood somewhere in the Arizona desert.

It's not our mother's number I'm scrolling to find either. The one in my contact list probably doesn't even work anymore. I can't remember where she landed last or whom she had landed under.

Marco in Florida? Johnny in Vegas?

Who cares? Moving on.

I find my only option, the last entry of the list. I press Charlie Young and wait with a mouthful of cookie as the phone dials. He's probably sleeping in his tiny apartment some three and a half odd hours south in Manhattan. I expect to get voicemail as I roll my eyes at my pathetic self, sinking to the floor on my ever-growing ass.

He answers immediately, his voice full of concern.

"Lex? You okay?"

"Yes, Charlie. I..." Suddenly I feel like a complete whimp.

Why are you bothering this poor guy?

"Lex. Please. What is it? What can I do?" He thinks I'm in trouble, and now I can add guilt to the jumble of feelings. My mental to-do list grows as I add 'call shrink'.

"I'm okay, really. I'm sorry to bother you. It's just...I need to, you know, talk to someone, I guess."

There's a brief pause. "Girl, you know I'm coming. Call in to work. Get a shower and fire up Netflix. I'm coming."

Tears roll as I feel something ease inside me.

Exhaustion remains, sadness raw and real.

But I am also lighter, saved.

Charlie is coming.

“I trust you already got the gelato,” he says. I can hear the smile in his voice.

“Check,” I say through tears.

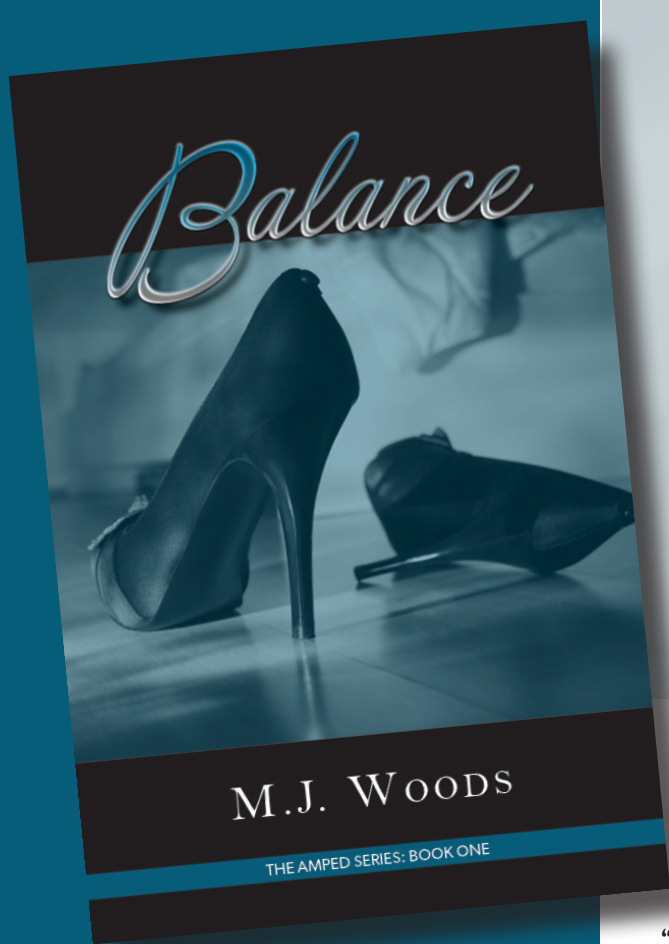
“I’ll be there soon, noon at the latest,” he promises.

I thank him and disconnect, sobbing and hugging the dog while he licks crumbs off my lap.

I thank my angels – my dad and Ben. I thank God. And my lucky stars. And what-the-fuck-ever applies for this guy who is coming to my rescue when I just can’t do it alone.

Thank heaven for Charlie. *

**(Continues) END OF SAMPLE EXCERPT*



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If she fell into his world it would take
everything she had to maintain her

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