

## Ardent Flames

Cigarette smoke furled up to the ceiling, leaving a stinging sensation in the air. The barstools squeaked under the weight of several patrons, smiling and joking with one another. It felt warm and homely within as dim lights brightened the tables. The girl checked her phone once more. She knew she shouldn't worry; Jaime was almost always a few minutes late.

Constant chatter filled her ears as she surveyed the door. A musician sat in the corner, adjusting the height of the microphone and tuning his guitar slightly. Tapping her fingers impatiently would get her nowhere. A small bell tinged, alerting her of a newcomer. A tall man with curly obsidian hair met her eyes. He grinned, removing his scarf and coat, and placing them on a nearby rack. The room now seemed more pleasant and full of life.

"Why, Bec, I barely recognized you!" Jaime embraced her while Rebecca steadied her grip so her drink won't spill. He gripped her tightly after just finding each other after so long. His eyes shone bright blue in the dim lighting as he ordered a drink, taking in Rebecca.

"It's been so long, Jaime, almost-" She cut herself off, trying to count the numbers.

"Twenty years, I believe. You don't look a day over twenty-one, though." He winked as the bartender delivered his glass with a slight tap on the counter. Rebecca flushed.

"Chivalrous as always, James," She teased. He shrugged as if that much would have been obvious. The first few chords of a guitar pulled her from her thoughts. The musician was preparing to sing another song. James took a drink and extended his hand.

"Looks like we're way overdue for a dance," He challenged, offering his arm.

"No way. I haven't danced since high school. And with all these people-"

"No one will care, Bec. It will be just us," Jaime pleaded. The sincerity in his voice made her almost do a double-take. Almost. She stubbornly remained in her seat as he sighed a tad defeated. But his hopeful smile didn't fully fade.

"Maybe you'll change your mind after a few drinks," He joked. He always mentioned that she needed to let loose and not be as uptight. She slapped his arm scoldingly. He pretended to be wounded, clutching his arm.

As she observed him, she couldn't help but notice his ironed shirt and pressed pants. Unlike his rock band tees and ripped jeans she usually thought of when she thought of him. Instead of his wild, unkempt hair that she remembered, it was cleanly cut and tamed.

"What's up with your outfit? The nicest thing I've ever seen you wear was a tee-shirt with a tux printed onto it." Jaime laughed and drank. Deeply. Rebecca couldn't stop herself from doing the same. The world became brighter and, all the same, protective from inevitable darkness that was too soon to return. When the effects died, and reality resurfaced.

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Everyone had come and mostly gone. The last call had been announced, so it wasn't long before the bar would close for the night. Rebecca felt lighter, her head spinning slightly. It had been a long time since she'd been at a bar for more than an hour or two at most.

Jaime took her hand, his eyes dazed and cloudy. Definitely not a man who was thinking clearly. He pulled her up from her seat, and they flew out into the crisp air that was so much different from the bar's coziness.

"You asked me-" His thoughts were barely stitched together. Jaime leaned closer. The streetlights illuminated his sapphire eyes.

"About my clothing." He stopped as if he was a schoolgirl sharing a secret.

She glanced back at him, concern blooming in her chest. Their gazes locked. She looked at her boots, embarrassed as if she was sixteen again.

But Jaime didn't look away from her.

Her eyes settled on his once more. His eyes were on her lips.

He looked entranced. Seduced with her stare.

Her insides tightened, and her heart hammered. His eyes traced her figure, the aura of longing strong in his gait.

His fingers came up to brush her flushed cheeks. But this meant something she was tempted to say yes to. His grip was earnest, his touch soft. He undressed her with his gaze.

The night was cold, but she was lit up on the inside. She wanted to close her eyes and savor the movement, savor everything about him. Fall into this terrible idea, but after the excruciating denial, pulling away was the last thing on her mind.

He brushed his touch against her lips and tilted her chin up invitingly. She felt herself begin to sink into his embrace—

His finger. The pale skin.

Where a wedding band would sit.

*His ring.*

"Jaime—" She pushed him away. Thoughts and doubts consumed her mind, and refused to turn off. Looking him over, she found the realization washing over her, sinking into her bones.

*He's married.*

Her mind became a blur; her mind fractured. All of her high school days came flooding back. A girl buried in her grades and books, contrasting her best friend who made everyone feel welcome. He was the one who wouldn't hesitate. Rebecca had never told him, and now he was taken. Taken in a way that she would never be able to get back.

Her throat closed up. She shook her head, claspng the hand that was just grasped within his.

"You don't understand, Bec, I never told you, but I—" His voice seemed to rush and crack as if he would never get the chance to say it again.

"You're drunk. You don't know what you're saying," Rebecca rationalized, the alternative edging ever closer.

"I do." Jaime interlaced their hands. Rebecca felt a flare of anger. And regret.

"I can't have you. Not like this."

It struck her as real as any blow could, affirming what she didn't want. Jaime wasn't married to her, and she would not take part in something so adulterous even though the temptation of it was eating away at her soul.

It would be so easy to give in, but his actions in the shadows—that he would go behind his wife's back and remove his vow-binding symbol from her...

Rebecca tore away from his grip. Jaime retreated from her, but the sharp ache within his heart only grew. A look of shame was painted on his face as he looked at the polluted sky. The stars were blotched out, and his mind was only filled with the "what ifs" of his life.

She spun on her heel, tears soaking her face.

His longing voice called her name, but she didn't listen. She had to go. Away. Before, she made a mistake that she wouldn't regret.