

## Chapter Two: The Dance

Amber tossed her head back, laughing as she swayed to the beat, her arms raised high above her head. The music pulsed through her, a steady rhythm that matched the thrum of excitement coursing through her veins. After weeks of heartbreak, the girls' trip had been exactly what she needed—a much-needed break from her ex and the monotony of post-breakup sulking.

The day had been perfect. A spa session that melted her tension, followed by a decadent dinner and enough drinks to make the edges of the world blur into something light and carefree. Now, on the dance oor, surrounded by her best friends, Amber felt alive again. She twirled, the lights ashing across her skin as she moved without a care, her heart free for the rst time in months.

Unaware of the prying eyes around her, she lost herself to the music, letting it carry her. Her friends danced beside her, laughing, smiling—just as they had promised they would when they dragged her out of her apartment and into this girls' trip to the casino.

“You’re going to feel like yourself again after this weekend, I swear,” her friend Claire had said, her voice full of determination.

At rst, Amber had resisted. The breakup had left her in pieces, her self-condence shredded. But here, in this club, surrounded by friends who loved her, she nally believed them.

The last notes of the song faded, and just as Amber moved to spin again, she felt a presence behind her. Strong hands settled on her hips, and for a second, she froze. It wasn't like anyone had tried to touch her all night—most of the men had given her a wide berth, likely sensing that she wasn't in the mood for attention.

But something about the touch was different. It wasn't possessive or overbearing; it was steady, grounded. Protective, almost. And the smell—oh God, the smell—hit her like a wave. Cedar, smoke, and something dark and spicy, wrapping around her senses in a way that made her head spin.

Curious, Amber turned slightly, just enough to catch a glimpse of him over her shoulder. Her breath caught in her throat.

The man behind her was tall—really tall, easily over six feet, with a solid, muscular frame that made the space around him feel small in comparison. His hair was slightly tousled, like he'd run his hands through it after a long day, and his jawline was sharp enough to cut glass. He had the kind of presence that demanded attention, and yet, there was something reserved about him, something quiet. His eyes were focused on her, and they held a kind of intensity that sent a shiver down her spine.

Amber's heart raced, but she glanced over at her friends. Claire, Anna, and Tessa had been keeping an eye on her since they arrived at the club. Claire immediately caught Amber's look and raised her eyebrows suggestively, her lips curling into a playful smile.

“Oh my God,” Claire mouthed, her eyes widening as she subtly gestured toward the man behind Amber.

Anna leaned in toward Claire, her blonde hair swaying as she followed the conversation. “Yes girl yes!” Anna mouthed back, grinning from ear to ear.

Tessa, the quietest but most observant of the group, nodded approvingly, giving Amber an exaggerated thumbs-up. Her green eyes twinkled with mischief as she gestured for Amber to keep going. “He's gorgeous,” she mouthed, silently cheering her on.

The silent exchange with her friends bolstered Amber's condence. She wasn't sure what she would have done without their encouragement. This was what the girls' trip was all about—letting go, taking chances, and having fun again.

The man's voice brought her back to the moment, low and rough in her ear. “Hey,” he said.

Amber's heart skipped a beat, but she forced herself to relax, to play it cool. “Hey yourself.”

For a moment, they moved in sync, the music carrying them as they swayed together. She wasn't sure why she didn't pull away. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was the adrenaline of the evening, but something about him drew her in, made her want to stay close. His cologne was intoxicating—like standing too close to a bonre on a chilly night, the warmth wrapping around her in a way that made her forget everything else.

“Having fun?” he asked, his lips close to her ear.

Amber smiled, her nerves settling into something more playful. “Trying to.”

The man let out a low, approving hum, his hands tightening slightly on her hips as he pulled her closer. She could feel the solid warmth of his body behind her, the strength in his grip. But despite the closeness, there was a strange sense of control to him, as though he was holding something back. His touch was rm but not aggressive, his movements smooth and measured.

Amber bit her lip, glancing over her shoulder again. “You don't seem like the club type.”

He chuckled, the sound sending another shiver down her spine. “I'm not.”

“Then why are you here?” she asked, curious despite herself.

The man's stormy eyes darkened slightly, and for a moment, Amber thought she saw something raw and primal icker in his gaze. But just as quickly, it was gone, replaced by a more neutral expression.

“I could ask you the same question,” he replied smoothly, dodging her question with one of his own.

Amber laughed, shaking her head. “Fair enough. Girls' trip. You?”

The man's lips quirked into a half-smile. “Business.”

“Uh-huh,” Amber said, narrowing her eyes at him playfully. “What kind of business?”

His smile widened just a fraction, but he didn't answer. Instead, he leaned in slightly, his lips brushing against her ear as he murmured, “The kind that doesn't belong in a place like this.”

The words sent a thrill through Amber, and she wasn't sure if it was the alcohol, the adrenaline, or the man's presence that made her feel so bold, but she didn't back down. Instead, she turned fully to face him, her eyes locking with his.

“Well then,” she said, her voice soft but teasing, “maybe you should take me somewhere quieter.”

His smile turned darker, and Amber swore she saw a icker of something dangerous behind those stormy gray eyes. “Maybe I should,” he murmured.

Before she could react, Claire's voice called out, “Amber!”

Amber glanced back at her friends, who had gathered closer to the edge of the dance oor. Claire was practically bouncing with excitement, her eyes wide with amusement and approval. “We're going to grab another round! You good?”

Amber gave her a quick nod, her heart still racing. “Yeah, I'm good!” she called back.

Claire winked, clearly pleased with the situation. “Don't do anything we wouldn't do!”

Amber rolled her eyes, but a grin tugged at her lips. With a nal, reassuring glance from her friends, she turned back to the man, feeling a rush of exhilaration course through her veins. The music continued to pulse around them, but now, it felt as though the entire room had faded away, leaving just the two of them in their own private world.

She could feel his eyes on her, sharp and unwavering, like a predator assessing its prey. Yet, despite the intensity of his gaze, Amber didn't feel threatened. If anything, she felt... safe. Protected. His presence was overwhelming, yes, but not in a way that frightened her. Instead, it made her feel grounded, as though he was anchoring her to the moment.

They danced in silence for a while longer, their bodies moving together in a rhythm that felt natural, effortless. Amber's heart pounded in her chest, the alcohol and adrenaline making her bolder than she'd been in a long time. She couldn't deny the chemistry between them—the magnetic pull that had kept her from pulling away.

The man leaned in again, his breath warm against her ear. “You look like you could use a break.”

Amber smiled, turning her head slightly to meet his gaze. “I might.”

He smirked, his eyes glinting in the low light. “What do you say we get out of here? I know a place where we can get a drink. Somewhere quieter.”

The offer hung in the air between them, tempting and dangerous. Amber's mind raced, her heart pounding as she considered it. Every instinct in her body screamed at her to say yes, to let herself live a little, to stop overthinking and just go with it.

“I don't know,” she said, though her voice was playful rather than uncertain.

His smirk widened. “Maybe I'll even tell you a few of those secrets you're so curious about.”

Amber raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued even more. “Secrets, huh?”

“Maybe,” he said, his voice low and teasing.

For a moment, she hesitated, glancing once more at her friends. They were still at the bar, laughing and talking, clearly enjoying themselves. Claire caught her eye and gave her a thumbs-up, mouthing, “Go!”

Amber smiled, the decision already made for her. She turned back to the man, her eyes glinting with excitement.

“Alright,” she said, her voice soft but condent. “Let's go.”

The man's smile turned into something darker, more dangerous, as he gently took her hand. “After you.”

With one last glance at her friends, Amber let him lead her off the dance oor, her heart racing in her chest.