

To Be
Continued

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NOW

BOOK TWO

GRACE WOODS

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To Be Continued Now

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Author's Note:

Welcome to book two of the To Be Continued Trilogy. It's thrilling to share this racy and inspiring love story with you. Just a heads up, in book two there are brief mentions of gun violence and sexual misconduct. There's also imagination, devotion, and chemistry so hot the periodic table blushes.

You're in for a joy ride.

WHY ARE YOU HERE?
Ashley Barris locked eyes with the man sitting in the SUV parked below her living room window. Though it was dark and his face was unreadable, his eyes reflected the dim amber of the streetlight.

“Please,” she whispered, though no one could hear the one-word prayer except her cat, Bamba, who was nuzzling her leg. Ashley wasn’t sure if she meant *Please go* or *Please, come back into my life*. All she knew was in this moment, every nerve in her body was buzzing with unnamed want, and her blood thrummed through her, forceful, like river rapids inside her circulatory system, raging against the confines of her body.

“Luke,” she whispered. His name tasted sweet in her mouth, like a favorite dessert she’d gone without for too long and now craved.

In fact, she was starving for him—a full-body hunger. After she’d left him two weeks ago, furious about his willingness to plunder the earth for corporate greed, she’d done everything she could to erase her memories of him. Just today, she’d blocked his texts and deleted him from her contacts. She’d set all but one of his gifts aside in a bag to take to the thrift store—it was too painful to have them around. She’d even stopped eating certain foods that reminded her too much of him.

But seeing Luke tonight at the Lift House Gala, breathing him in—that masculine, musky, citrusy scent—feeling his presence and, even more powerful, feeling the way her heart leapt up when she saw him, the way her breath caught in her chest, well, she was overwhelmed.

In this breathless moment, it didn't seem to matter anymore that Luke was an oil executive whose company she protested—a company that even now was one of several planning to drill in the Arctic. At this very moment, all she could remember was how beautifully her body blossomed beneath his touch, how whole she felt when they were together. *Two sides of the same coin*, he had once said to her.

No, no, no, don't do it, said her armored self as she reached into her purse, but her fingers were full of *yes* as she found his contact and pressed Call.

Luke answered in the silence before the phone even rang on her end. She heard him breathe in, a serrated pull of air, before he exhaled her name in a ragged petition for mercy. “Ashley.” Her knees noodled at the need in his baritone voice—so vulnerable, so raw.

“Luke.” Her heart stomped and thrashed like a bull in its bucking chute trying to escape into the arena.

In the silence that followed, they gazed at each other through the glass, through the darkness. Ashley opened the window and felt the hot air rush in; Houston summer nights offered little respite from the heat. She could hear his Chevy wasn't running, and a smile almost found her lips. Luke knew how idling car engines infuriated her.

“John's gone,” he gritted.

From where he was sitting, Luke would have seen John Truman, her date from the gala, drive away just moments after her living room light turned on. The statement was Luke's way of asking *why* John had left. As if she would have asked him in.

Did he really think she would see someone else so soon after she'd left *him*?

"He's gone," she echoed.

"Thank god."

She could barely see into the dark car, but she could make out his hand pushing through his hair to massage the top of his head. It made her long to run her fingers through that black silk again, to feel the light spring in the curls as she tugged. He exhaled long and slow.

"Luke, why are you here?"

"I had to see you, Ashley. I miss you. I miss your smile. I miss your soft hands in my hands. I miss your laugh. I miss you telling me to get out of the shower already. I miss your terrible puns and your science geek way of seeing the world. I miss the smell of you and the warmth of you in bed beside me and hearing you speak Spanish on the phone with your mentee. I miss everything about you. And then when I saw you at the gala with John, I..." His voice broke. "I heard what he said to you. How he's hoping for *something real, something beautiful, something lasting* with you." The words sounded ripped from his throat.

Ashley's mouth was dry. No words would come.

"Is that what you want, Ashley? John?"

"Luke—" Her voice was thick with warning.

"Are you sleeping with him?"

"Stop it. No."

Despite her sharp tone, Luke's answering sigh was saturated with relief. "Good." He inhaled a tortured, ragged breath. "Tonight, watching you two together, it was ripping me apart, wondering if you—"

Ashley remembered the look on Luke's face, how he'd recoiled. He had so much strength, but in that tender moment when he'd overheard John confessing his attraction to her, she'd seen how vulnerable Luke was, too.

“Say something.” His tone was needy and low. “I need to hear your voice, Ashley. Say something.”

“Thank you for coming tonight.” She kept her tone slightly formal, cloaking it in an audible armor for her own protection. “To the gala, I mean. I was surprised to see you, but I’m grateful you supported the Lift House. It’s so important for the teens.”

There was a brief pause in which she heard only the quiet song of Luke’s breath and her own beating heart, an intimate duet. Ashley was astonished by how deeply their connection was communicated in that silence. Finally, he spoke. “I want you to say, *Come upstairs*. I want you to say, *Let’s talk*. I want you to say we have a chance.”

She felt a caving in her chest. “I’m not going to say that, Luke.”

“Then I’ll say it. Can I come up? Let’s talk.” He stepped out of the car into the lamplight, still looking up at her window. The streetlamp washed him in an amber glow, and she took in his strong arms straining against his rumpled dress shirt, his fit waist and long legs. Even when he was standing still, she could sense a wild energy that paced through him, as if he were trying not to charge her building and run up the stairs to meet her. Electricity tangled through the nerves along her spine, firing like lightning into her limbs.

Ashley wanted to say yes. She was tired of protecting herself. Tired of pretending she wasn’t utterly devoted to this man. Tired of the war in her—how could she adore his heart and mind but hate his actions? Exhausted, she felt her resistance to his urging start to weaken.

One. Two. Three. Four. Feeling out of control, she’d subconsciously begun to count streetlamps on the block. She shook her head. “Better not come up.”

“Then you come down.” In the lamplight, she could see his face—unmasked, hopeful, eager. Could he see her expressions as well?

She paused, and he capitalized on her hesitation. “Okay. Not tonight. But tomorrow. Tomorrow morning, I’d like to cash in two hours of my Spanish lessons.” Luke had bought ten hours of Spanish instruction from Ashley in the gala’s silent auction—and had paid an exorbitant price. “It was slightly underhanded, I suppose, for me to buy those lessons, but it gave me hope, Ashley, hope that you would see me and remember, remember who I am, who *we* are. And we carry our hope with us—”

“—until it *becomes* us.” Ashley couldn’t help but finish Luke’s sentence. It was a phrase that his beloved childhood nanny, Rena, had often used when he was a child. After meeting Rena, Ashley had started to use the phrase, too—even had thought it during her speech at the gala. Funny, the things that become glue between two people, like a common lexicon. It both hurt and healed her to fall into this easy connection between them.

Luke made a purr of satisfaction deep in his throat when she spoke the familiar words. “Yes, Ashley. And look what we’ve *become*. I learned so much about you tonight when you delivered your speech about how you’d run away from home and became a resident at Lift House. The more I know of your story, the more I’m astonished by you. I know my work bothers you, but I’m not a villain. It’s not that simple, Ashley. There’s more to my story, too. Let me share it with you?”

Ashley inhaled, but she didn’t say anything. Was she really considering letting him in again?

“Go with me to the museum tomorrow? I’ll pick you up.”

Ashley looked up to the sky, where she couldn’t see the stars shining through the glow of the city. *So much hidden light.*

“I’ll meet you there.”

“Really?” His surprise made her smile.

“*Por supuesto que sí.*”^{*} *Oh, I’ll give you Spanish lessons,* she thought with a smirk, a plan unfolding in her mind. But the smirk became steely as she thought of other lessons she’d hoped she could instill upon him—like how fragile the earth’s ecosystems are and how important it was for him to change the focus of his family’s empire from oil to renewables. “I’ll meet you there at noon.”

“Good night, then, Ashley. Dream of me?” He held up a hand toward her window, as if from the distance he was cradling her face, then climbed into his Chevy, and the SUV roared to life. She winced.

Sí, she whispered, though the phone call had ended. *I absolutely will dream of you.* Just last night, she’d dreamed of ecstatic lovemaking, her dream body recalling with ease just how good it was between them. With a sigh, she pressed her forehead to the glass and watched the Chevy’s red taillights disappear. It would be a long time before sleep would find her, not until after she let her fingers do what they were longing to do, Luke’s name floating from her lips.



Ashley woke the next morning to a room full of sunshine and the bright ping of an incoming text. 8:06? How had she slept in like that? She rolled over and picked up the phone.

John: Hey beautiful. Meet for lunch?

Ashley sighed and leaned back into her pillows.

Ashley: Sorry, I have plans

John: Cancel them

Ashley: Can’t

John: Let me pick you up for dinner?

^{*} Yes, of course.

Ashley: Sorry

John: Rain check?

Ashley stared out into the brightest of mornings, not a cloud in all of Texas. Would the day come when she would want to make good on that rain check?

John was a wonderful man, a handsome, generous, kind, and smart man. And they were compatible in so many ways, both invested in education, community service, and protecting the environment. Sure, she'd thought about what it might be like between them, though he'd been strictly off-limits when he was the principal at her school. He was amazing. And he was interested in her.

But he's not Luke.

And there it was. Her heart was planted and rooted in another garden. No matter how hard she had tried to push Luke away, disheartened as she was by his involvement with fossil fuels and his commitment to perpetuate global dependence on oil, she was still drawn to Luke.

You can't change a man, her mom had said, but you can find new ways to meet him.

How her mom had so much wisdom about men was beyond her. Ashley's dad had disappeared from their lives when Ashley was four; Ashley hadn't seen him since. And as far as she knew, her mom had never dated after that. Still, her mom's wisdom echoed true. *You can find new ways to meet him.*

As much as she told herself she was meeting Luke today to honor her commitment to the Spanish lessons, she knew that was a lie. She was meeting him today because, painful as it was, her heart and her body completely belonged to him.

Nothing's changed, said her brain. You're just setting yourself up for heartbreak again.

Ashley sighed.

John: ??
you there??

There would be a time to talk more honestly with John about her feelings—once she figured them out herself.

Ashley: yeah.
Rain check, please?

CHAPTER 2

LUKE WAS ALREADY WAITING outside the museum when Ashley walked up the stairs to the giant marble building. Ashley paused mid-step to take him in—his raven hair slicked back on top, dark, loose curls hanging down past his ears. His sharp jawline. His blue eyes already locked on hers. Even at rest, his full lips were always set toward a smile, a sweet predisposition. At the moment, he was smiling broadly, as if her appearance was the best gift he could ever receive. Nothing reserved about it.

Seeing his smile, Ashley felt as if each cell of her had just grown wings, and all at once, they fluttered.

Doomed.

He was dressed in a light gray T-shirt that hugged his fit torso, leaving little to the imagination, and the short sleeves showed off his well-defined arms. Ashley blushed, her body warming as she remembered how good it felt to be wrapped in those arms. His jeans hung low on his waist, showing off his flat midriff. She remembered tracing her fingers down the dark line from his belly button to his— *Oh*. Catching herself in the memory of exploring his body made her instantly self-conscious and awkward. Suddenly, walking up the museum stairs felt as if she were walking in a carnival fun house full of moving floors and

deceptive mirrors, and she was not quite able to figure out how to put her foot onto the next step.

Luke closed the gap with long, easy strides, stopping on the step above her. At six foot one, he was over half a foot taller than she was, but the added height of the step made her tilt her head even more to look him in the eye.

“You look breathtaking,” he murmured, causing a sweet tremor to ripple through her chest. Ashley looked down at the navy cotton sundress she had chosen, simple and humble, light and comfortable. He didn’t follow her gaze, keeping his eyes locked to her face. “The dress is lovely on you, but that’s not what I’m talking about. *You* are beautiful, Ashley.”

Her heart thudded hard against her ribs. While one part of her told her to not succumb to his flirtation, another part whispered, *Game on*.

Ashley looked at him innocently. “¿Te refieres a las ojeras debajo de mis ojos?”*

Luke raised an eyebrow, clearly not understanding what she’d said, but his grin responded to her tone, which had come out slightly flirtier than she’d expected.

“I see the Spanish lesson’s begun.” He reached up as if to pull a strand of honey-brown hair back from her face, but he stopped himself. Her cheek felt the absence of his fingers. “How did you sleep?”

“*No dormí.*”**

“You said you couldn’t sleep, right?”

Ashley nodded, raising an eyebrow in approval. Of course, his French would help him decode some of what she said—that and living in Texas most of his life, where he would have been surrounded by Spanish.

* You mean the dark circles under my eyes?

** I didn’t sleep.

“I hope you were awake thinking about *me*.” His voice lowered, and his eyes flashed. “Perhaps you knew I was dreaming about you. All. Night.”

Double doomed. Her breath emerged in shallow pants. Her heart was so defenseless around him, yet her values still had their dukes up.

“*Desearía que hubieras estado soñando en cómo salvar el planeta. Eso sería muy sexy.*”^{*} She fluttered her eyelashes and threw her most beguiling smile his way.

“I heard the word *sexy*. That sounded good.”

She chuckled in a *you-missed-the-best-part-of-what-I-said* way.

“You do know that Spanish lessons usually involve helping your student *understand* the language, right?”

“*Correcto.*”^{**} She grinned at him smugly. “Okay, Luke. Lesson one. Repeat after me. *La perforación petrolera en el Ártico es peligrosa y debe detenerse.*”^{***}

Luke repeated the words in short phrases, and though his pronunciation made him sound like the gringo he was, he was careful and clear in his echoing of her speech about not drilling in the Arctic. The words on his lips made her smile.

“What did I say?” he asked.

“You said, ‘I like learning new things.’”

“Lucky for you, I am already a fool and don’t mind being used for your”—he shrugged a shoulder—“amusement.”

A blush bloomed in her chest. “*Bueno.*”^{****}

“Come on.” He angled his head toward the front door. “There’s something I’ve been looking forward to showing you.”

* I wish you had been dreaming about how to save the planet. That would be very sexy.

** Right.

*** Oil drilling in the Arctic is dangerous and should be stopped.

**** Good.

Ashley followed Luke in, and they walked past the ticket line to the main entrance. Luke flashed a membership card at the guard, who gave Luke a happy salute, and they were both ushered in. Ashley wrinkled her brow, and he smiled at her confusion.

“They know me here.”

She followed him through the main atrium toward the back exhibition halls. Past a black allosaurus skeleton. Past a saber-tooth tiger that growled when kids fed it coins. It had been many years since she'd been in the museum—perhaps the beginning of college when she was earning her degree in environmental science with a minor in chemistry.

Ashley felt a little giddy, and it wasn't all due to being near Luke. It was also the place. She stopped and stood a moment to take it all in. Luke paused beside her and gave her a questioning look. She was so overcome with nostalgia she forgot all about the game she'd been playing, speaking to him only in Spanish.

“It's just—I remember the first time I came here. I was in fifth grade on a school field trip, one of my first trips into the opulence of the city, and I remember thinking this giant marble building was the closest thing to heaven I could imagine.” She opened both hands, as if holding the memory. “There's so much knowledge here. So much to explore. I wonder why I don't come here more often?”

“What exhibit was your favorite?”

“Oh, the rocks. I loved the rocks.”

Luke smiled a secret smile. “Gems and Minerals. My favorite, too. Let's go there now.”

When they got to the exhibit entrance, Ashley looked up and startled at the placard there. The Jeremiah James Dalton Gems and Minerals Hall.

“Wait.” She touched Luke’s shoulder and immediately pulled her hand back, stunned by the electricity. “Is this where you wanted to bring me?”

Luke grinned.

An older woman docent walked up to them, smiling broadly. “Welcome, Mr. Dalton. Nice to see you again. It’s been a while. The rocks have missed you.”

“Hi, Marcy.” He gave her a generous, genuine smile. “Let me introduce you to my friend Ashley. Ashley, Marcy.” The two women shook hands. “Ashley hasn’t seen the exhibit for a long time, I think, but once upon a time, it was her favorite.”

“Oh, it’s many people’s favorite.” She nodded. “Certainly mine. And widely considered the finest collection in the world, rare specimens gathered from mines and private collections around the globe over the past century and a half. In fact—”

As the docent and Luke chatted a moment about recent additions to the exhibit, it occurred to Ashley that Luke showing off his family’s museum wing could be construed as pompous. As if she cared about his dirty oil money. But there was something so childlike and authentic about his excitement in being here and something so humble about the way he interacted with the docent—not just polite, but excited, both geeking out as they discussed hexagonal crystal systems and “precipitation events in ascending hydrothermal solutions.” Her own inner geek perked her ears. Luke’s eyes sparkled as he listened to the docent. He was so alive it made her come to life, and she realized in this moment she was seeing the best side of him—the enthusiastic, curious, most human side of him.

“Come on.” Luke broke her reverie, respectfully not touching her but gesturing her into the exhibit.

They wandered through the night-dark halls, the only light coming from the cases, illuminating the stones. Ashley loved

thinking about the chemical compositions and how they resulted in the most extraordinary colors and shapes. Though she'd just been laid off during budget cuts two weeks ago, her years of teaching high school chemistry gave her a strong academic background to understand what she was seeing.

But Luke's interest in rocks went way beyond academic discipline. His degree had been in geology, but as they looked at long green gypsum crystals and the curiously perfect dark cube of pyrite and the unusual golden flakes of wulfenite, Luke described to her the stories about the places the minerals had been found and stories about the miners who had found them. He related, too, the energies associated with most of the different gems and minerals. "Just because the energy is ineffable doesn't mean it isn't real," he said.

She stood for a while in front of a striking red crystalline specimen.

"The rhodochrosite crystals are rare," Luke murmured, his mouth close to her ear. "Look at the perfect, prismatic cleavage, almost all at right angles."

Was it the nearness of him, the tease of his scent without his touch, or the dark forests in his voice that gave her the shivers? Ashley closed her eyes as her whole body focused on the warmth of his breath on her ear, her neck.

"Look at it," Luke purred. Her eyes fluttered open. "Imagine the metamorphic forces that made it. Sometimes, when I watch you come, Ashley"—his voice deepened—"when I watch you come, it feels like this: a revelation of explosion, a beauty born out of contact with magma, a bright crimson release forged from unrelenting heat."

And then he walked away, focusing his attention on the next window full of stones, leaving her wanting, almost gasping, gaping at the rhodochrosite that was now a visual metaphor for the

earth-shattering bliss she'd experienced with him in their love-making. Her whole body ached with the loss of his presence.

Now who's playing with whom?

When her heart rate slowed and her breathing calmed, Ashley moved to stand beside him. He was staring at a crystallized gold structure. "*Te gustan las rocas.*"*

Luke ignored that she was playing a game with him and lifted a hand toward the case, keeping his gaze focused on the glittering mass. "Isn't it marvelous? Look what the earth can make. Look what it gives us. With heat. Pressure. Time. This."

He gazed at it intently, admiringly. "When I was a boy, I would come here and stare at these rocks for hours. I fell in love with them, with the earth. That early curiosity became a doorway for me with my work—the thrill of learning more and more about the earth's building blocks. All rocks have energy stored in them. All rocks have stories. All of them, including oil, are expressions of how the earth shares its remarkable gifts with us."

Ashley stared at the gold crystals rising, almost in the shape of a dragon.

"I wish my great-great-grandfather could see this: this crystalline gold, this room with his name on it, his legacy. This exhibit began as his private collection. He struggled as a wildcatter, but he had dreams. He had dreams of becoming wealthy, *not only* so he could be rich, *but also* so he could share his wealth. As you know, his motto that's been passed down through our family is *not only, but also.*"

"Not only, but also," Ashley echoed. She remembered well the first time Luke had told her about this motto. It was during their first open discussion about his company promoting fossil fuels versus renewables.

* You like rocks.

“My great-great-grandfather said you need to pay attention to the soil, to give the land respect. That’s how he started Dalton Oil.” He turned to face her, and though the room was dark, his eyes glittered, as if they were blue tourmalines that belonged here in the hall of gems.

“I want to give the land respect, Ashley. That’s what brought me into the work I do. That and, well...” He took a deep breath. “Everyone knew *my brother* was destined to be the one who followed Dad into the family business. He chose to read books about geology and mining, even at age eleven. Dad was over the moon.”

Ashley let out a soft sigh as two young kids ran past them, playing chase through the exhibit, and their mother called after them to walk.

In the silence, as they waited for the family to pass, Ashley remembered the day in Memorial Park when Luke had first told her about how his brother, Jimmy, had been killed in a terrible accident when the boys were ten and twelve. They’d been playing chase with their sister, Elaine, when Luke had found a gun in their parents’ closet, and in a moment of childish exuberance and play, Luke had fatally shot his older brother.

Ashley and Luke moved to a quieter corner of the hall, and he continued to share his story. “After Jimmy died, I did everything I could to step into his shoes, to make good on his life. I didn’t really know I was doing it until a therapist pointed it out. How I had started to collect monkeys because that was *his* favorite animal. How I had learned to make jokes because *he* was the funny one. I would rather read a book than watch a football game, but to this day, I watch football games with my father because Jimmy would. And I stepped into the family business *because Jimmy would have*. So, you see, working for our family’s business is not just a job for me.” He took a deep breath. “It’s how I fill the hole where my brother would be if I hadn’t picked

up that gun. But I couldn't do my job, Ashley, if I didn't also believe that in some ways, I am being of service to the world."

For a while, they just stood there in the dim, breathing into the loss that was still so present for Luke.

"Sometimes when I come here, I think I can feel my great-great-grandfather, can feel the love he had for me before I was born. I can feel that he would love me and forgive me, even after what I did. It's weird, right, to feel the love and forgiveness of someone you never knew?"

Ashley thought right away of her father. Could she feel her father loved her? Or did she just feel the *wanting* to be loved by him?

"You're a good man, Luke." She gave his hand a squeeze, then reluctantly, she moved to pull her hand from his, but he didn't let her, and she gave in to how good it felt to be touching, her whole body attuning to his as heliotropic flowers attune to the sun. She could tell he felt it, too, a connection that had longing in it, but even more than that, a connection that resonated with *belonging*. His eyes sought hers.

"I'm not worthy of you, Ashley, but I want to be. Being without you these weeks has been hell. Something is shifting in me. I have thought so much about things you've said. I want to be good enough for you."

Something in Ashley clicked. "It was you, wasn't it?"

Luke gave her a blank look.

"It was you who gave the anonymous one-million-dollar donation last night."

He shook his head. "No."

So humble. "You don't need to be modest about it."

"It wasn't me."

Of course he wants to stay anonymous. So in keeping with his character. Ashley feigned belief. "Well, *whoever* it is, I just want

to say thank you to *that person*. It was generous and will make such a big difference to the homeless teens.”

Luke shrugged and pulled her a little closer by the hand. “I did, however, spend five thousand dollars on Spanish lessons, and so far, all I’ve learned to say is *I’m a good learner*. What else do you have for me?” His voice was dark and suggestive, and Ashley’s body immediately responded, softening, melting, her heart pulsing.

“What do you want to learn, Luke?”

“How about, *I’m hungry?*”

“*Tengo hambre.*”

“*Tengo hambre,*” he echoed.

“Good.” She rewarded him with a smile.

“How about, *May I take you to lunch?*”

“*¿Puedo llevarte a almorzar?*”

He dutifully repeated the Spanish phrase, then gave her a pointed look. “And now you say, *Yes.*”

“*Y ahora dices sí.*”

“What did you just say?”

Ashley raised an eyebrow. “*And now you say yes.*”

“Sassy girl.” He leaned down closer to whisper in her ear. “How do you say, *Later I’m hoping you’ll let me eat you.*”

Ashley blushed. “*Te mostraré cómo se hacen realmente esos cristales rojos,*”^{*} she said, referring to the rhodochrosite exhibit they’d seen before.

“Now what did you say?”

“I said, *Let’s go find a café.*”

^{*} I’ll show you how those red crystals are really made.