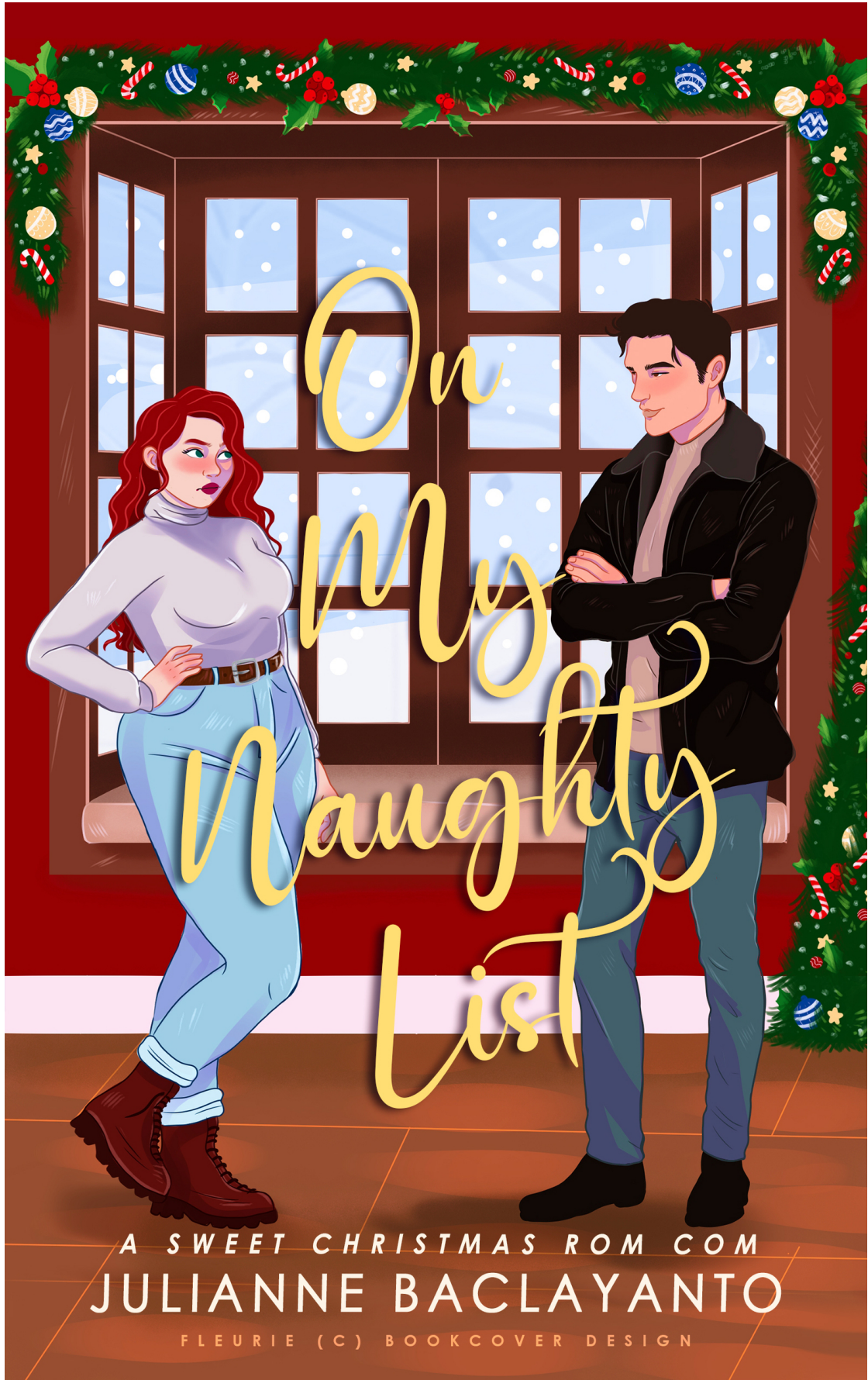




# On My Naughty List

A SWEET CHRISTMAS ROM COM  
JULIANNE BACLAYANTO

FLEURIE (C) BOOKCOVER DESIGN



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*On My Naughty List*

*A Sweet Christmas Rom Com*

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*To my twelve-year-old self who wrote her first (admittedly awful) book  
in the hopes of one day being a real author—we did it!*

*And to anyone who's ever had a dream.*

## One

# Anabelle



*“At the next intersection, turn right onto Cherry Street.”*

The GPS called out directions over the sound of my Christmas Jams playlist as I turned on my signal and slowed to a stop ahead of the red light. I leaned forward and peered through my increasingly snowy windshield, trying to read the street signs above me between the motion of my wipers.

*Does that say Cherry Street? Or Churro Street?*

You’d think after growing up in Woodberry—and living there until I was eighteen—that I wouldn’t need the help of a GPS in order to get there. Well, you’d be wrong. The truth was that I hadn’t been back to my little Connecticut hometown in a long time. Much longer than I cared to admit.

The car behind me honked impatiently, apparently not appreciating me taking my sweet time to turn. After much deliberation, I decided that the street before me was, in fact, the Cherry Street in question and proceeded through the slushy intersection. In an attempt to better concentrate on the road (and avoid another unsolicited honk which would have surely brought my sensitive self to tears), I begrudgingly turned down



the music just as the melodious sound of Mariah Carey's "All I Want For Christmas Is You" blared through my speakers.

Normally, I would have been in much better spirits while listening to the best Christmas song ever written. This time of year was usually my favorite: the glistening snow, the festive songs, the hot cocoa and gingerbread houses. That feeling of magic in the air; like everyone was just a little bit happier than they normally were.

But not today. Today there was no magic, no festivity, and I was certainly not happier than usual. And for good reason.

As I pattered further down the street, the town's larger-than-life stone entrance sign came into view. "Welcome to Woodberry!" it read, though I wasn't sure exactly how welcomed I felt. Despite its quaint small-town charm and picturesque atmosphere, this place had never been very good to me. It was the place where I got bullied all throughout high school, where I got my first (and thus far, only) heartbreak, and where my overly critical, handful-of-almonds type of mom was currently waiting impatiently for me to arrive. Needless to say, I wasn't exactly thrilled to be back.

*"At the stop sign, turn left onto Maple Avenue."*

I drove past the entrance sign and turned into my familiar snow-covered neighborhood, starting to recognize the area around me. I passed by the movie theater where I worked the summer before my sophomore year, the hair salon where I mistakenly tried to get highlights on one particularly boring

Saturday afternoon, and finally the high school where I had spent the bulk of my miserable teen years.

To say those were the worst years of my life would be an understatement. Having grown up with a freckled face, carrot-colored hair, and baby fat to spare, it's no wonder I got picked on at school. It didn't help that when I stood next to my best friends Hailee and Aaliyah—two of the most stunning women I knew—I looked somewhat akin to a blob.

*“At the roundabout, take the third exit.”*

Well, I *thought* I looked like a blob. Back then, I had such low self-esteem that I would compare myself to them every day, constantly wondering why I didn't have a body that looked like theirs. Why I was the odd one out.

That, coupled with my tumultuous relationship with my mother and the sudden heartbreak that completely shattered my world in junior year, is the reason why I moved to New York City the second I graduated. Unsurprisingly, it had been nothing but blue skies and smooth sailing since then.

*“You have arrived at your destination.”*

I slowed down as I approached my childhood home, idling on the side of the street after maneuvering a pretty impressive parallel parking job. With each of my parents' cars and my brother Simon's truck parked in the freshly shoveled driveway, there was no room for me to pull in—which just went to further the feeling that I was no more than a visitor here.

I stared out the window at the two-story colonial I grew up in, taking in the charming picture of snow-crest picket fences, stone pathways, and grandiose columns. It looked the same as it always had: perfectly polished, the picture of refinement.

*Nope, not ready yet.*

I put my car back in reverse and wiggled out of my prime spot, which would no doubt be taken the second I vacated it. I wasn't quite ready to face the symphony of questions my parents already knew the answer to (*Why did you wait so long to come see us? Do you have a boyfriend yet? We're not getting any younger, are you planning on giving us grandbabies anytime soon?*), and passive-aggressive comments about my appearance.

To my mother's great dismay, I never did finish the diet program she bought for me and instead chose to embrace my curvy figure. As a teenager, I tried to hide my body in any way I could. I wore baggy sweatshirts and flared yoga pants (as was the bottom of choice in my day) even when it was warm out. I never dared to show an inch of skin at the risk of being laughed at, or worse—called the infamous F-A-T.

That word was my greatest fear growing up and the subject of many a nightmare. At the time, it felt like the worse thing that could happen to you was to be called the 'f' word. It wasn't until I started the Fashion & Design program at NYU that I learned how to dress for my body type, and quickly realized that I could actually feel good about my appearance. More than that, I realized that the more confident I became, the more men seemed to be interested in me.

I was shocked to find there were a lot of men who actually found my curvy figure attractive. *Sexy*, even! It had never occurred to me that my body type was something some people actually desired since I had been conditioned to be ashamed of it all my life. Having hated my round hips and full thighs ever since I bought my first pair of jeans, it came as quite a shock to me in my twenties that men loved to grab them in bed.

And now, despite the fact that I was working as an actual professional model in New York and had even landed a *Teen Vogue* cover earlier this year—it was called “Beauty Across the Waistlines” and yes, it was the highlight of my entire life—my mom still managed to find it within herself to make comments about my weight. Persistently.

“Just thirty pounds, it wouldn’t take that long!” she would suggest, like clockwork, every time we spoke on the phone. The thing was, I didn’t *want* to lose thirty pounds. I loved my body and wished she could too.

*Must caffeinate.*

A large dose of coffee would be just the thing to prepare me for the day ahead. After all, I needed an extra boost today—and not just because I was tired from the drive. On top of the usual stress I experienced when visiting my parents, I had extra worries this time around since I was planning on doing something completely unprecedented in my family: introducing them to my boyfriend.

I had recently started dating the very attractive and very worldly Dr. Blake Townsend, who was going to meet me in

Woodberry the day after Christmas to spend New Year's with us. I hadn't yet told my parents about him in an effort to avoid the slew of never-ending questions, but was now officially running out of time.

To make matters extra anxiety-inducing, this meant that I would be staying in my hometown for two whole weeks between now and New Year's Day—which I hadn't done, well, since I lived there. I had gotten away for years with making day trips for the odd birthday and holiday, but this was going to be the first time in a long time that I would stay overnight.

I punched in the address to Bean & Co.—the local coffeehouse whose mocha was unparalleled in deliciousness—on my GPS in desperate need of a pick-me-up. As I made my way over, I passed familiar streets lined with lit-up Christmas trees, street lamps decorated with bows and garland, and colorful wreaths hanging from shop windows. The whole town was decked out to the nines as if Santa himself would personally be judging a decorating competition. Despite my reservations about being back here, one thing was for sure: Woodberry knew how to do Christmas right.

Turning into the parking lot outside the coffee shop, I located a prime fifteen-minute spot right in front of the door and, for once, thanked my lucky stars. I stepped out of the car, straightening my long cream-colored peacoat and ironing out the wrinkles on my fave winter outfit: straight-leg linen pants, a tight black v-neck that perfectly accentuated my figure, pleather booties, and my staple mini Prada bag. Sure, most of it came from second-hand stores or bargain bins, but no one here would

be the wiser. My freshly blown-out hair bounced on my shoulders as I made my way to the door, flickers of golden red locks reflecting in the shop window.

*Look good, feel good.*

I repeated my mantra to myself, trying hard to remember that the days of teenage cruelty and embarrassment were far behind me. I was older, more confident, and marginally more successful now. All I had to do was keep a positive attitude and this trip would go over without a hitch... Right?

I opened the door to the heavenly smell of coffee beans roasting and cinnamon buns browning just as a tall and beefy man was exiting the store. I, of course, promptly slammed into him in true Annie fashion, knocking over the pastry bag he was holding in the process.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry! I’m such a klutz.” I blurted, cheeks already starting to redden with embarrassment when I bent down to pick up his fallen goods.

*Typical.* Why wouldn’t I make a fool of myself exactly one minute after arriving in town?

“Don’t worry about it—” I heard the stranger start, causing my stomach to instantly knot at the sound of his familiar voice.

Nuh-uh.

It couldn’t be.

It *wouldn’t* be, not today.

I braced myself before slowly glancing up at the man I'd just body slammed, only to be met with the face of the last person on earth I ever wanted to see.

## Two

*Leo*



“**R**ise and shine!” my mother exclaimed in her usual overly-cheerful voice—which I normally found endearing when it wasn’t abruptly waking me up—as she burst through the door.

The sound of her footsteps moved toward my window to yank open the curtains, nearly blinding me as light flooded into my childhood bedroom.

“It’s a beautiful day today.” she insisted, though the words were lost on me in my current groggy state.

A single, solitary grunt was the only thing I could manage in response before burying my face in my pillow to shield my eyes from the light.

“You can’t stay in bed all day, Leonardo. It’s not healthy!”

“Five more minutes...” I pleaded.

It had been the same routine every morning for the past week. I blissfully slept in until 11 a.m., at which point my mom would come bursting in to wake me up and save me from the apparent harmful effects of *sleep*.



As I'd repeatedly explained to her, I was on a new schedule thanks to the late shift I was now working at Willow's Bar and Grill, where I had recently been promoted to night manager. I had been steadily working my way up the food chain since I started as a host five years ago, when I was just looking for a part-time job to help me pay off my college tuition. And now, after years of hard work, overtime, and crappy pay, I had finally been rewarded—with the gift of never getting any sleep.

My new shifts started every night at five and were technically supposed to end at one a.m. when we closed, though it never worked out that way. There were always a few stragglers who loitered around way past last call, resulting in me coming home just past two in the morning. Hence the sleeping in late.

Despite my many attempts to ignore the wake-up call, the damage had been done. My mom had once again gotten her way. Huffing, I rolled over and reached for my phone as she exited the room with her patented satisfied smile on her face. Unsurprisingly, I noticed I had a text waiting for me from one of the newer servers.

· **Zack:** can't come in tonight, im sick

*Shocker.*

I was pretty sure that was a load of shit since he seemed perfectly fine yesterday (and since he basically pulled this stunt every other day), but I chose to let it slide. Frankly, he wasn't a very good server and we'd probably make more tips without him there to spill drinks on the customers. Unfortunately for me, I couldn't fire him even with my new manager's authority because

he was—drum roll, please—the owner’s nephew. Nepotism at its finest, folks.

I reluctantly stumbled out of bed and scrounged around for a clean shirt to wear, coming up empty. After opening the closet and scanning over my options, I settled for an old hoodie hiding way in the back and made a mental note to pick up some more clothes at the apartment today.

Even though I was currently staying with my mom in the house I grew up in, I didn’t actually still live with her. I had a place on the other side of town (which wasn’t saying much in Woodberry) but had decided to stay with her over the holidays so she wouldn’t be alone.

After everything that went down with my dad, I knew this wouldn’t be an easy time for her. I mean, it wasn’t necessarily easy for me either, but I was doing everything in my power to make these next couple weeks go by as quickly and smoothly as possible for us. If that meant living with my mom in my childhood home for the next fourteen days (and getting a daily wake-up call), so be it.

I pulled on my worn jeans, baseball cap, and tattered jacket before making my way downstairs to find my mother sitting at the kitchen table, perusing her recipe book.

“What do you want for dinner tonight?” she asked me absentmindedly, flipping through the pages.

Though she cooked for us every night, I only got to eat whatever meal she had made the following day for lunch since I was always at the restaurant during dinnertime. Sure, they gave

us one free meal during our shift to keep us from starving to death, but it was nowhere near as satisfying as a Carmen Rojas meal.

“Anything you make will be delicious, mamá.”

“Suck up.” she smiled, giving me a side-eye. “And what’s this ‘*you make*’ business? Don’t think you’re getting out of helping me this time.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” I quipped, grabbing my keys and wallet from the table. “I’m heading out, want the same as usual?”

She gave me an expectant look that said *of course*, and I kissed her cheek before heading for the door.

It was a fairly warm day for December when I stepped outside into the mid-morning sun, and I was relieved to find that the snow last night hadn’t left a layer of ice on my windshield. I hopped inside my car and headed for my apartment first, remembering my desperate need for clean clothes.

After all of five minutes spent getting across town, I arrived at my old, dingy apartment building and hurried up the stairs, ignoring the peeling paint and permanent mildew smell that lingered in the stairwell. I jiggled the key in the door and nudged my way inside the one-bedroom studio, instantly shivering when I stepped in. Seems I had forgotten that I set the thermostat low while I was away... Was it really worth freezing my ass off just to save fifty dollars on my heating bill?

I headed for the dresser and picked out a few shirts, sweaters, jeans, and some extra boxers, then walked over to the kitchen to

get a grocery bag I could shove the clothes in, stubbing my toe on the island in the process.

Okay, so the apartment was pretty cramped. I might have been able to afford something bigger if Simon, my best friend and neighbor since we were kids, had gone in on a two-bedroom with me. But according to him, he “couldn’t afford to move out right now”, which was bullshit because he was twenty-six and had saved up a pretty penny working at the garage.

I had a feeling he just didn’t want to leave the cushiness of living at home where his parents did everything for him, including his laundry. I, on the other hand, wanted to be independent as soon as humanly possible. Even if it meant living in this shitty apartment by myself.

With enough clothes to last me a month now in hand, I headed back downstairs and out to my car where my next stop would be Bean & Co. It had become a little tradition between me and my mom that every time I came over, I brought coffees and her favorite treat from the local cafe with me. But since I was staying at her house for the next little while, it was *suggested* to me that we continue the tradition every morning.

I pulled into my usual spot and headed inside, greeting the baristas I had become familiar with over the years before ordering at the counter. I had gotten used to my little morning ritual and enjoyed the familiarity of it all. Living by myself could get lonely sometimes—even in a small town like Woodberry where everybody knew each other. Most days I wouldn’t talk to a single soul until I got to work, so I was starting to enjoy taking

my daily trip to the town center. Mostly, I knew it gave my mom something to look forward to every morning, and I would do just about anything to make getting through the holiday season easier for her.

After a couple of minutes, my large black coffee and small two-cream-one-sugar were ready for me at the bar, along with a slice of their famous coffee cake. I put the cups in a tray and grabbed the pastry bag with my free hand, calling out a thanks to the barista before heading for the door.

Except right when I pushed it open to leave, I felt someone who was walking in crash into me. The bag in my hand went plummeting toward the ground in one fell swoop, but luckily I managed to save the coffees in the tray.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry! I’m such a klutz.” the stranger instantly blurted, bending over to pick up the bag.

“Don’t worry about it—” I began, just as I realized who had nearly knocked me over.

*No. Way.*

I had to do a double take to make sure my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me. What was *she* doing here?

“Never mind, I’m so *not* sorry.” said Anabelle Spencer with a smirk as she looked up at me, my fallen coffee cake in hand.

I scrambled to find a retort, a little thrown by her presence in our hometown. I hadn’t seen her in years, and honestly, I wasn’t complaining about that fact. Knowing her, and the distaste she had for me, she might just have knocked into me on purpose.

“Well well well, if it isn’t little Anabelle coming to grace us with her presence. Found some time in your busy schedule to come visit the common folk?”

She rolled her eyes in return and shoved the pastry bag back into my hand.

“No wait, don’t tell me.” I continued mockingly. “You have a big photo shoot in Woodberry?”

Was it weird that I knew she was modeling now? Sure, I’d seen her in a few ads and even on the cover of a magazine over the years, and I’ll admit I couldn’t help taking a look every now and then. But I sure as hell didn’t want her thinking I had a genuine interest in her career, or in her for that matter.

She shot me a sarcastic smile, narrowing her eyes. “I’m actually here to spend the holidays with my family. Running into you is just an unfortunate by-product.”

I gave her a once-over, noting how out of place she looked in this small suburban town she once called home. It was clear she was no longer the girl next door I grew up with, but now an upper-class New Yorker who stood out like a sore thumb. I quickly realized that she definitely wasn’t photoshopped in any of her pictures since she regrettably looked just as stunning standing in front of me now.

Her smoldering eyes were locked on mine in a glare that I assumed was meant to intimidate me, but really only managed to make me go weak in the knees. I brushed the feeling off and straightened, doubling down on the seething attitude she was throwing my way.

“I’ll be sure to stay out of your way then, your highness.”

“Fantastic.” she replied with a flick of her hair before blowing right past me into the coffee shop.

## Three

### Anabelle



**L**eo freaking Rojas.

Of course I had to bump into him today, as if I wasn't anxious enough already. Sometimes it felt like the universe was out to get me.

In all the times I'd spent imagining what it would be like to see him again, none of them had gone down quite like it just had outside the coffee shop. I clearly still had a ton of pent-up anger for him stewing inside, seeing as my knee-jerk reaction had been sarcasm and hostility.

Leo was the first boy I ever loved and the first and only guy to ever break my heart. We had a complicated nearly twenty-year-long history that I really didn't feel like fixating on at the moment, given everything else I had on my plate.

Sure, he looked even yummier than I remembered and smelled like an angel sent from heaven. And fine, when he looked at me with those gorgeous deep brown eyes, my stomach started doing Olympic level somersaults. But I had a boyfriend now. A boyfriend who was also attractive (like 95% as hot as Leo) and



super successful, so I couldn't care less about my former next-door crush. Or at least, I told myself that I didn't.

I got up to the counter and ordered my mocha, tagging on a coffee cake at the last second after smelling how delicious Leo's was. I figured I could give it to my mom as a peace offering for having canceled my last two visits, and to butter her up for the whole Blake reveal. If nothing else, my little run-in with my arch nemesis had given me one good idea.

I pulled out a crumpled ten-dollar bill from my purse and handed it to the barista, dumping the change I received in return into the tip jar. "Jingle Bell Rock" played overhead while I whipped out my phone and waited for my order off to the side, deciding to send off a quick text to Blake.

• **Me:** Made it here safely, miss you already! Hope you have a great day -xo

He hadn't necessarily asked me to text him when I got here, but I figured he'd like to know. I checked my email next and typed out a couple of replies to my agent for some castings next month, mostly for more swimwear work.

"Here you go, have a nice day." the young barista announced, handing me my coffee.

"Thanks, happy holidays!"

I walked back to my car, having only used ten of my fifteen allotted parking minutes, just as my phone dinged to signal an incoming text.

• **Blake:** you too

Meh, so he wasn't the most verbally affectionate guy around. We had only been dating for a few months, and he made up for his monotone texts in other ways. He showered me in gorgeous gifts and spared no expense on our lavish dates, taking me out to the most expensive restaurants, exclusive clubs, and even for a weekend ski trip in Vermont. I guess those were the perks of dating a handsomely paid (and handsomely faced) podiatrist.

I made my way back to my parents' house, parking further down the street this time since my prime spot from earlier had been taken as predicted. I popped open the trunk and pulled out my tattered suitcase, which was impossibly heavy for its small size due to my inability to pack light, and rolled my way down the slushy sidewalk.

*Deep breath. You can do this.*

I stood on the front porch, goodies in one hand and luggage in the other, building up the nerve to knock on the perfectly decorated door.

Suddenly it whipped open, revealing my smiling father's face in front of mine. "Annie-Bananie! I thought I heard someone outside."

"Hi, Dad." I chimed while attempting to drag my suitcase in.

He reached over and pulled it in for me in one easy tug, like the chivalrous man I knew and loved. Clearly, he was not the reason I had been avoiding coming back.

I took a moment to breathe in the familiar smell of my old home and to chuckle internally at my dad's attire. He was

wearing one of his favorite tacky Christmas sweaters which featured Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer on the front, complete with a fuzzy pom-pom nose. He made it a point every year to exclusively wear Christmas-adjacent clothing all throughout December, each one getting more ridiculous than the last.

“How was the drive? Not too slippery on the roads?”

“Nope, I was super careful.” I said, omitting the part where I nearly slid into a snow bank. “How’s everything with you?”

“Oh everything’s fine, not much happens around here. We missed you kiddo, your mom’s cooking up a storm in the kitchen but she—”

“Anabelle!” my mom called out as she came around the corner, as if summoned by the mention of her name.

She glided down the hallway like a pageant queen who just won Miss Universe, pulling me in for a hug as the familiar smell of Chanel and hairspray filled my nose. And it was... Kind of nice.

*Okay, so maybe this won't be as bad as I thought?*

“Let me look at you!” she gushed, pulling away to inspect me from head to toe. “You look so much older, I barely recognize you! Maybe if you bothered to visit more often...”

*Spoke too soon.*

“I know, I know. I’m sorry, it’s just been so crazy for me lately, but I’m trying to do better. I actually wanted to talk to you guys about something—” I started before I noticed my mother’s raised eyebrow in the direction of the pastry bag in my hand.

“Sweetie, a moment on the lips...”

*Forever on the hips.* That was a sentence I had heard far too many times throughout my childhood and had tried desperately to forget. Unfortunately for me, it seemed to be engraved in my brain along with the look of disappointment she currently bore.

“Actually, it’s for you.” I said weakly.

My dad cleared his throat uncomfortably then turned around and exited the room, as was his M.O. in awkward situations. That was the thing about my dad: if even a hint of confrontation presented itself, he was out of there faster than you could say “help”.

“Oh, thank you.” my mother stammered while she scrutinized the contents. “I’ll just save this for dessert.”

*Of course you will.*

“Um, I think I’ll go unpack.” I said quickly before she had the chance to object.

I had learned early on that was the best way to deal with my mother—by running away before I could say something I regretted. I didn’t care if it made me a coward, so long as it meant I didn’t have to argue with her. Clearly, I took after my dad.

I hurried up the stairs in an effort to evade the conversation, letting out pained grunts as I lugged my heavy suitcase behind me. I set it down once I reached the top and pushed open my bedroom door, a sudden sense of nostalgia overcoming me. I hadn’t been back here in ages.

Even during my rare day trips for Thanksgiving or the odd birthday over the years, I had actually never taken the time to wander upstairs. I absolutely refused to stroll down memory lane; I wanted to be in and out as quickly as possible to minimize the damage to my pride. Until today, that was. Now I had no choice but to stay in my childhood bedroom for the next two weeks.

*What did you get yourself into, Annie?*

I ditched my suitcase next to the door, noticing a pair of socks falling out from behind the worn zipper that had started to come undone, and plopped myself down on my bed. This was it, I could already feel my morale fleeting. As I lay down and closed my eyes, I tried to remind myself how far I'd come since the last time I slept under this ruffled pink comforter.

"Wow, five minutes and you've already given up." teased a familiar voice.

I sat up to find my older brother Simon leaning against the door frame, seeming to enjoy my pain a little too much.

"Seriously, I don't know how you do it. I just got here and I already want to pull my hair out." I groaned, rubbing my temples to stave off the impending migraine.

"Living at home does have its perks. Mom's comments aren't one of them."

"If you ask me, the disadvantages heavily outweigh the perks."

“Speak for yourself.” he joked, taking a seat on the desk chair opposite me. “Free food, free laundry, and I don’t have to pay bills?”

Simon had been living with my parents since, well, forever. He had said he was going to move out once he graduated college, but that never happened. He would tell them that he couldn’t afford to move out on his own yet, or that there weren’t any places available, or whatever new reason he came up with that week.

“*Please* tell me they’re charging you rent.”

“A little.”

I laughed sheepishly, knowing no amount of money in the world could get me to move back here.

“She’s hard on me too, you know. I get it.” he offered, noticing the look of despair on my face.

I gave him a single snort in reply. Though I appreciated the sentiment, I seriously doubted it.

“No really, she’s always on me to find a girlfriend or move out and *‘be independent already’*”

“Well, she’s got you dead to rights there.” I laughed. “You’re twenty-six Si, doesn’t it bother you that you couldn’t bring a girl home even if you managed to find one?”

“Ha. Ha. I’ll have you know I *can* bring girls home, they just never seem to want to come back.”

Yeah, I could see that. At this age, if a guy brought me back to his parents' house after a first date, it would be the Ghostville Express for him.

“Speaking of undesirable men such as yourself, I ran into Leo at the coffee house today.”

He and my brother had been best friends for as long as I could remember, having grown up right next to each other. The three of us would hang out all the time when we were kids, walking to and from school together since we apparently lived too close to take the bus (which was, in my opinion, a totally unfair rule), and hanging out at the park on the weekend.

Granted, I was more so *forced* to tag along because my mother wouldn't let either of us go anywhere alone, but I generally didn't complain if I knew Leo was going to be there. Not only had he always been devastatingly gorgeous, but he was one of the few guys at school who was actually nice to me.

Most of them were just entirely unaware of my existence when they came up to our lunch table to ask Hailee out to a movie or invite Aaliyah to a party on the weekend. The crueller kids, however, would shoot spit wads at my head in homeroom and call me “Fannie” under their breath when they passed me in the hallway.

But Leo was different. Even though he was an older, popular jock who absolutely didn't need to be nice to me, he always went out of his way to do it anyways. If he ran into me in the hallway, he'd help me carry my books to class. If he saw that I was sitting alone at lunch because Hailee and Aaliyah were at their club

meetings, he'd drag Simon along and sit with me to keep me company. And if he happened to catch one of those infamous spit-wad throwers in the act, he'd go over there and give them a piece of his mind.

He made me feel seen. When we were together, I didn't fade into the background anymore—I felt noticed, like the words I said and the things I did were important. I eventually started to consider him a real friend, not just a friend of my brother's.

That is, until I made the unfortunate mistake of developing a crush on him. I hadn't done it on purpose, but Leo was the type of guy who made you feel special whenever he was talking to you; like when he looked at you, you were the only two people in the world. You couldn't help but fall for him.

"I'll never understand what happened between the two of you." Simon said, shaking his head dismissively.

Simon had been completely in the dark about what went down between me and Leo. I never told him the reason we stopped talking, partly because I knew it might ruin their friendship and partly because talking about it broke my heart all over again.

The fact was, Leo was smart, kind, incredibly handsome, and all-around a really great guy. Until the day he wasn't.



## Four

*Leo*



**T**he worst part about spending your first Christmas alone with your mom after your parents' messy separation? Running into the girl next door who broke your heart.

I had successfully avoided bumping into her ever since she moved away, until this morning that was. I didn't realize how much seeing her again would affect me, having replayed our conversation in my head the entire ride home. She clearly still hated me, and to be honest it didn't exactly give me a warm and fuzzy feeling to see her either. Had I been totally in love with her since I was seventeen? Yes. Did she rip out my heart and dance on it like I meant nothing to her? Also, yes.

I decided to forget about Anabelle and the whole unfortunate run-in as I pulled into the driveway, determined not to let my sour mood sully my mom's day. Who cared if Anabelle was back in town? Not me, that's for sure. I would just have to pretend she didn't exist. Easy as that.

I walked into the kitchen, coffees in hand, to find my mom still sitting at the table exactly where I left her. Though now she

was on her tablet—my gift to her from last year—perusing Facebook rather than her recipe book.

“Fair warning, it spent some time on the floor.” I said, sliding the pastry bag across the table to her before making my way toward the fridge.

“Errr, may I ask why?” she questioned, poking at the goody with a fork like it was a science project.

I pulled out last night’s leftovers and placed the bowl in the microwave, eager to dig into my mom’s arroz con pollo.

“Blame Anabelle, she basically knocked it out of my hand.”

*Crap. So much for forgetting about her.*

My mother’s face turned from confusion to a coy smile at the mention of her name.

“Anabelle, huh? She’s back in town for the holidays?” she practically giggled in delight.

“C’mon now, don’t start with that again.”

My mom had loved Anabelle from the moment we moved in next door. She continuously gushed about how smart and polite she was, always volunteering to help with the dishes when our families had dinner together and going out of her way to get my mom a birthday present every year.

They had developed a close relationship over the years, even closer than ours used to be. She would come over and help my mom cook on the weekends, share her newest books with her, and keep her company while my dad worked late. She was

exactly the type of woman my mom wished I would end up with —and for a while, so did I.

“What? I didn’t say anything!” she grinned as the microwave beeped and I sat down next to her to eat.

“I keep telling you mamá, it’s not like that between us.”

“I know what I saw all those years ago. I’m merely suggesting that it’s Christmas, you’re single, she’s single...”

“We don’t know that she’s single.” I replied instinctively and immediately wondered why I even cared.

“You’re right, a pretty girl like her doesn’t stay available for long.”

That much I could agree on. She could at the very least have had the decency to look hideous after what she did to me. It wasn’t fair that on top of ruining my perfectly good morning, I now had to resist the urge to think about the way her clothes clung to every curve of her body.

I had always thought she was cute growing up, with her freckled nose and frizzy orange hair that crowded her face. She was always trailing behind me and Simon, ready to make us laugh with her clumsiness or with a clever quip.

But now... Now she was a woman. She exuded confidence and sensuality, with her piercing eyes, scarlet-colored hair, and shapely figure that had me thinking very naughty thoughts. I didn’t know how to act around this Anabelle, and apparently my default was seething bitterness that I couldn’t call her mine.

My mom appeared to have a sudden idea as she began to tap away on her tablet, smiling wide once she seemed to find what she was looking for.

“Her FaceBook status still says single.” she lilted.

Why did that discovery intrigue me? It wasn't like anyone under the age of forty even updated their Facebook status nowadays. Besides, even if she was single, I was the last person on earth she'd ever go out with.

“Okay, I've heard enough. I'm going to the gym.”

I hurriedly finished off the rest of my lunch, placed my bowl in the dishwasher and headed upstairs to grab my gym bag.

“Love you!” my mom called out when I came back down.

“Love you too, be back in a couple hours.”

I headed out the door and to my car, throwing my bag on the passenger seat before making my way to the gym to clear my head. I usually walked there from my apartment but my mom's house was a little further from it, being on the opposite side of town. Even so, I didn't particularly feel like trudging through the snow for twenty minutes with a smelly duffel bag on my shoulder.

The parking lot was largely empty when I arrived, seeing as it was the middle of the day and most people were at work. I grabbed my bag and made my way toward the entrance, frantically fishing for my gym pass in the side pocket. Once inside, I quickly scanned my card and hurried up the stairs, narrowly escaping—

“Hi Leo!” chimed a voice from behind the front desk.

I stopped and turned around on the stairs, even though I already knew who the voice belonged to.

“Clara! Didn’t see you there.” I blatantly lied, trying my best to feign enthusiasm. “How’s it going?”

“So good, I just finished my last exam yesterday so I’m finally free for the break!”

Clara was a college student who worked Thursdays and weekends at the gym, who I mistakenly dated a couple of times last year. I had seen her working at the desk over the years and definitely picked up on a vibe from her, so I finally bit the bullet and asked her out last summer. We went on a couple dates that went perfectly fine, but for some reason, I just never felt any sparks. It was my own fault; I knew I wasn’t looking to date anyone yet but I had let Simon’s constant insistence that I *put myself out there* get to me.

“What are you up to this weekend?” she continued, a hopeful smile on her face.

“I uh, have a party to go to on Saturday.”

I didn’t know why I was stammering, it really was the truth. I was grateful to actually have plans for once rather than awkwardly evading her invitations to hang out.

After the two dates we went on, I was never able to bring myself to ask her out again. It felt like I was leading her on when ultimately, I knew my heart wasn’t in it. Unfortunately, that meant I had kind of left her hanging—which was why every time

I bumped into her, she seemed hopeful that today would be the day I'd ask her out again.

“Oh.”

“Well, it was nice to see you. I should probably get to it.” I faltered, pointing my thumb over my shoulder toward the locker room.

She gave me a small wave before sitting back down and tapping away on her computer. Of course I felt bad for blowing her off—and for having ended things with her when she had never been anything but nice to me—but I figured it was ultimately kinder to let her down easy rather than continuing to get her hopes up.

I climbed up the stairs and into the locker room, changing into my shorts and tank, and switching out my boots for sneakers. I put in my earphones and selected my workout playlist, making my way toward the squat rack since Thursdays were leg day.

All in all, my workout went pretty well since the gym was mostly empty. I generally didn't have to compete for the good machines or wait around for the plates I wanted when I worked out on weekdays, so I usually ended up taking my rest days on Saturday and Sunday to avoid the weekend crowd (and coincidentally, Clara).

After wiping down my last machine and chugging the rest of my water, I showered off and changed back into my regular clothes, shoving my sweaty ones back into my duffel bag. I hurried down the stairs, trying to decide the best course of

action vis-à-vis the Clara situation. Against my better judgment, I shot a friendly smile over to her as I left and received an enthusiastic wave in return.

So much for letting her down easy.

\* \* \*

*Two more hours.*

I sat on a stool in the kitchen of Willow's Bar and Grill, taking a well-deserved five minute break after picking up the slack from Zack's absence all night. One of the cooks had slid me a plate of fries when he saw me sit down, as was our unspoken rule whenever a server looked like they were about to reach their limit.

Though I was making great tips tonight, I had double the amount of tables and about half of my usual patience. The break from Zack's usual snarky comments and dirty looks was of little comfort to me when I barely had time to enjoy it. If I hadn't already sunk five years of my life into working my way up the Willow ladder, I'd be handing in my resignation tomorrow.

What had started as a part-time job just to earn some extra cash had quickly developed into a largely unattainable dream over the years. As I completed my Business Administration program at the local college, I realized Willow's could be so much more than just the town's rundown and budget-friendly bar. I saw potential for growth given the lack of competing businesses in the area and the high demand for a good place to get a drink.

I knew it was probably overambitious, but I had started to develop a plan for this place which consisted of buying it out from its current owner and rebranding it to a modern upscale bar. I knew it had the potential to triple its revenue if it only cleaned up its image a little and started offering more than just cheap liquor—and I wanted to be the one to make that happen.

The only issue was, I first had to build up a credit score that would warrant the large loan I'd need to afford the buy-out and the extensive remodeling I had in mind. I'd already been able to pay off my car and my student loans thanks to my frugal habits, but I still didn't have nearly enough seed money accumulated. Turns out saving up wasn't easy on a server's salary—even with the pitiful pay increase that came with my recent promotion.

I picked at the remnants of golden fries on my plate, not so much hungry as I was annoyed, just as a voice called for me from outside the swinging doors.

“Coming!” I huffed, pushing myself up from the stool and checking the time on my phone again, willing it to move faster.

The last two hours of my shift always seemed to go by the slowest while the place emptied out and we were left to baby the wasted college kids. Taking car keys from inebriated young guys was practically half of my job, and they tried to fight me for them every time.

Just then, the phone vibrated in my hand and I looked down to see an incoming text from my boss, the owner of Willow's.

• **Dom:** Can you come in early tomorrow? I need to speak with you.



*Well that can't be good.*

## Five

### *Anabelle*



I woke up to my smartwatch buzzing on my wrist, signaling the fourth snooze of the morning. I looked at the time, 6:45 a.m., and hit STOP on the alarm. The vibration was the only way to wake me up since I suffered from chronic insomnia and had to take pretty strong sleeping pills most nights.

I rolled over and rubbed my eyes, feeling momentarily disoriented before realizing where I was. It had been nearly seven years since I'd woken up in this bed and I was currently experiencing mixed emotions about it. The sudden urge to get ready for school overcame me before I reminded myself that I was a fully grown adult who no longer had to subject herself to that misery.

I stood up and stretched, looking out the window to inspect the weather conditions. Most of the snow had melted overnight, leaving the sidewalk just clear enough for a run. I opened my suitcase and rifled through for my leggings, long-sleeve top, and favorite black running zip-up. After pulling on my sneakers and quietly making my way down the stairs (to avoid waking my

family), I slipped through the front door and began running, enjoying the coolness of the December breeze on my cheeks.

Turns out when you weren't being forced to exercise to "work on your figure", it was actually kind of enjoyable. I liked the calm it brought to my mind, the smell of the fresh morning air, and the rush I got on the last mile. I wasn't particularly fast, but I had no intentions of running a marathon anytime soon. If anything, it just gave me some time alone with my thoughts to plan out my day or work off some stress.

About halfway through my route, I stopped to catch my breath and sat on a bench at the park where Simon, Leo and I used to hang out. A surge of childhood memories played in my mind, and an unintentional smile painted my face as I reminisced about all the fun the three of us used to have.

We were just stupid kids doing stupid kid things, but they were probably the best memories I had of my childhood. We'd whip the swinging tire as hard as we could to try to make the others fall off, roll down grassy hills in the summer or push each other down on toboggans in the winter, and play basketball on the court after school. Of course I lost every time we played, but that was only because 1) they'd always team up, forcing us to play two on one; and 2) I had absolutely zero coordination.

I thought about the time Leo came to my rescue after I fell off my bike at this very spot, and how he scrambled to find any way to get me to stop crying. I had skimmed my knee pretty badly and it was bleeding like a faucet, which was very jarring for little ten-year-old me. I didn't stop crying until he held his hand

over mine and pressed it against my knee, which eventually helped stop the flow of blood. He then put his arm around me and walked me home, doting on my every need for the next two hours until my parents got home from work (despite Simon's many pleas to go back to the park).

I immediately wiped the grin off my face, determined not to waste my energy on the thought of Leo, and pulled my phone out of my jacket pocket. I sent off a good-morning text to Blake then opened the group chat I had with Hailee and Aaliyah.

• **Me:** guess who's back in town ;)

I stood back up and continued on my way, figuring my friends were probably still asleep at this time, and waved hello as I passed a man walking his golden retriever.

Running through familiar streets on my old route to school, I noticed some changes since I had lived here. There were new developments where empty fields used to be, bright and shiny stores in the place of closed businesses, and traffic lights on previously barren roads. It hadn't really occurred to me that life still continued on in Woodberry after I left, since I had been actively trying not to think about it for the last seven years. I guess I always assumed my hometown would just be sitting there waiting for me, exactly how I'd left it.

I circled back toward my house, slowing down to a brisk walk when I neared my street to bring my heart rate down. I checked my watch and felt pretty happy with my time, considering the route had been longer than my usual one in the city. When I got back to the house, I crept back inside and tried

my hardest to close the door quietly before a voice behind me made me jump.

“Morning, sunshine!” my dad greeted me from the living room, a cup of coffee in hand and the news on TV.

“Morning Dad,” I chuckled as I removed my shoes and went to join him on the couch. “Nice pajamas!”

Today he was sporting checkered red and green flannel pants with a t-shirt that said “*Sleigh it ain’t so!*”.

“Why thank you very much.” he answered proudly. “Were you just out for a run?”

“Yeah, it seemed as good a time as any to explore my old stomping grounds.”

“Good for you, kiddo.”

The look of pleasant surprise he bore on his face made my inner child beam with pride. Clearly, I had some unresolved validation issues that I needed to work through.

“There’s coffee in the kitchen if you want some.” he added.

I got up and wiped the sweat from my brow once my breathing had regulated and my heart had returned to its resting rate.

“Thanks, I’ll take you up on that just as soon as I shower.”

He nodded and went back to his gruesome-looking news report as I strolled upstairs and into the bathroom, where I pulled out my mini shampoo and conditioner bottles from my travel toiletry bag. I knew my parents would already have some

shower products here, but I had become heavily dependent on my five-step hair care routine (complete with a hair mask, detangler, and leave-in frizz tamer) to achieve my signature shiny red locks.

Something I hadn't expected when I signed onto my modeling agency was how much they controlled every aspect of your appearance, right down to your hair. It was practically written into my contract that I had to maintain my current hairstyle and get their permission before making any drastic cuts or color changes, at the risk of being dropped from the agency. So much for individuality.

I hopped in the shower and did my best to speed run through the steps so as to not waste all the hot water since I was now (unfortunately) sharing a bathroom with my brother again. Once finished, I threw my hair up in a microfiber towel and slipped into my robe, exiting the bathroom in a record twenty-three minutes.

"It's about time." Simon huffed the second I stepped out into the hallway.

"It's all yours."

His solitary grunt in return told me he still wasn't a morning person.

"And a good morning to you too!" I grinned before he shuffled inside and shut the door in my face.

I made my way to my room and plopped down on the bed, checking my phone for replies. Still nothing from Blake, but I did

have one text from Aaliyah waiting.

· **Aaliyah:** OMG we should do dinner tonight!!

I smiled as I typed out an enthusiastic “yes!”, eager to see my friends again. It had been months since I’d hung out with them—well, in person that is. We tried to video call at least once a week, though it never seemed to work out that way thanks to our busy schedules. We usually ended up leaving scattered voicemails with our life updates after one of us inevitably forgot our pre-planned call time.

I sent off the text to the girls, moving on to check my socials. My agency had been helping me build a name for myself online for the past couple of years, and it was just finally starting to pay off. I went from being a clueless Instagrammer with about fifty followers (most of which were my friends and family) to now being a verified account with over two hundred thousand of them!

It was important to keep on top of the social scene if you wanted to be anybody in this industry. You had to make a name for yourself if you wanted to get noticed, and that meant interacting with every model, designer, and influencer online. It was basically like you were marketing yourself, and it just so happened to be a big chunk of my job.

After an appropriate amount of scrolling, I checked my emails to find one from my agent waiting in my inbox—and an interesting one at that.

**Subject: Fashion Week Casting Call**

Anabelle, see new casting call for up-and-coming French designer at NYFW below. I know you're on vacation but I think you'd be perfect for it, let me know if you can make it. -Hazel

**ÉTERNELLE COLLECTIVE - NEW YORK FASHION WEEK**

Your chance to walk for Éternelle Collective at #NYFW

**REQUIREMENTS:**

Plus size models requested

Minimum height 5'7

**CASTING DATE:**

December 27

Models must bring measurements and professional portfolios.

*Whoa.*

Did I seriously have a chance at walking for New York Fashion Week?! I couldn't believe my eyes. This had been my dream ever since I started modeling—to get on the runway. So far I'd mostly been doing catalog and swimwear work, with a bit of lingerie modeling sprinkled in here and there. And while I definitely enjoyed what I did, being a runway model was always



my end game. Those were the greats—think Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, and Kate Moss. There was no greater achievement in my eyes, and that's why booking a New York *freaking* Fashion Week gig like this would be huge for me. It would mean I'd really made it in the industry; that all my efforts were finally paying off.

But the date... I couldn't make it for December 27<sup>th</sup>, Blake was going to meet me on the 26<sup>th</sup> to spend the week with my family. I couldn't just bail on our plans, especially after all the trouble everyone went through to accommodate them.

I decided to sit on it for a while, knowing I'd probably end up declining but not having the strength to do it just yet. Speaking of the plans I so desperately wanted to make happen, I realized I couldn't put off telling my parents about Blake any longer. Endless questions and judgments be damned, it was now or never.

I got dressed and went into the now vacated bathroom once more to blow dry and style my hair, and throw on some quick makeup. As I made my way down the stairs, I got another text in the group chat—this time from Hailee.

• **Hailee:** I'm so down! & I know the perfect place. Meet me on Willow St at 6

I sent a thumbs-up and tucked my phone in my back pocket, knowing the upcoming conversation would require all of my concentration. Downstairs, I found my dad in the same position I left him, this time with my mother by his side. He was still avidly

watching TV while she crocheted what appeared to be a table runner. Or maybe a really big scarf.

“Well, look who’s finally up!” she exclaimed, eyes never leaving her project.

*Urghh.*

“Actually, I’ve been up since six—” I started, until I realized it really wouldn’t make a difference. “Never mind. Can I, uh, talk to you guys about something?”

“Sure, sweetie.” my dad mumbled without so much a glance.

“Actually, it’s kind of serious.”

Slightly annoyed by the disruption to his morning ritual, he hit mute on the remote while my mom huffed and put down her crafts. I was regretting this decision already.

“Go ahead, we’re listening.”

## Six

### Leo



“Don’t sweat it man, I’m sure it’s nothing.” Simon said from the bench while I spotted him.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Except I *was* sweating it—both figuratively and literally since we were nearing the end of our gym session. I had just told Simon about the concerning text I got from my boss last night, which I had been obsessing over for the past fourteen hours.

Dom was more of a hands-off type of boss, rarely coming into the restaurant unless he had to. Willow’s was just one of the many businesses he owned, and truthfully, it seemed to be the one he cared the least about. If he wanted to talk to me, it had to be serious.

That was one of the reasons I wanted to buy the place off of him in the first place—he was basically incompetent. You can’t expect a business to thrive if you don’t even bother to show up. When I’d be the owner, I’d make sure to oversee all the day-to-day operations and avoid hiring dumbass kids like Zack.

“I’m not feeling very *spotted* over here.” Simon grunted from under the bar as I stared off into space.

“My bad.”

He chuckled before setting it back on the rack and getting up from the bench. “It’s fine, I’m done anyways.”

Simon and I tried to meet up at the gym whenever it was quiet at the garage and he was able to take a long lunch. We didn’t see each other much ever since I started on the night shifts, which was unusual for us after having spent nearly every day together since we were kids. So we were making the effort to hang out whenever possible—even if that meant short lunch hours spent sweating in a smelly gym.

“I gotta get going, my hour’s almost up. Nick’s gonna kill me if I’m late again.” he said, checking his watch.

“Maybe if you actually tried being on time for once, he wouldn’t hate you so much.”

“Hey, what I lack in punctuality I make up for in pure charisma.” he grinned.

He wasn’t wrong there. Somehow in all our years of pranks, bonehead moves, and goofing off, Simon never seemed to get in trouble. He would flash a smile and pull some bogus excuse out of his ass, and people would just eat it up. We balanced each other out that way; he was a laid-back risk taker with charm to spare, while I was an uptight worrier who had to do everything by the book.

We hit the showers and packed up, heading down the stairs and out to the parking lot. Since it wasn't one of Clara's scheduled work days, I didn't have to make awkward pleasantries with her on my way out—or listen to Simon's many quips about my non-existent love life. Despite the several times I had explained to him why it didn't work out with Clara or why I had basically given up on dating, he still insisted I give it another go every time we ran into her.

“See you tomorrow!” he called out before throwing his gym bag in the back of his car and climbing in.

We drove off and went our separate ways, him going back to his job and me going home to avoid thinking about mine. Not that I really had much to distract myself with. I pretty much spent the rest of the day trying to keep busy, running errands for my mom and watching some game highlights online.

I decided to make my way to the restaurant around four o'clock, figuring an hour would be more than enough time for whatever terrible fate awaited me. Dom had already arrived when I got there seeing as his obnoxious red sports car currently taking up two spots in the lot. That right there tells you everything you need to know about him.

I walked into the bustling restaurant and made a bee-line for the back where his office was, calling out quick hellos to my coworkers on the way. I stood outside his half-open door for a second, mustering up all my confidence to knock in a firm-but-nonchalant kind of way, as if to say *You don't scare me, Dom*.

“Leo, come on in and take a seat.” he said as he looked up.

Ever the charmer, he set down a half-eaten club sandwich he had no doubt snatched from the kitchen, then wiped his hand on his pants before extending it out to me. “How’s your mom doing these days?”

In a small town like Woodberry where everyone knew each other’s business, word had spread pretty fast about my parents’ situation. I wasn’t too crazy about him knowing the sordid details of my personal life, but figured he was just asking to be polite. Besides, he didn’t really know the truth about what happened. Almost no one did—the only person I had confided in was Simon.

“She’s doing well, thanks for asking.”

“Great, that’s good...” he mumbled, clearing his throat and shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “Listen, I wanted to talk to you about Zack.”

*You finally realized he’s an idiot?*

“He tells me you’re not giving him any of the good shifts. Can you tell me why that is?”

*What. The. F—*

“Now I know he’s young, but I gave him this opportunity so that he could start saving up for college.” he continued. “You know education doesn’t come cheap around here, and he can’t make decent tips if you only give him the lunch shifts.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Did he really call me in here to ask me to give Zack *more* responsibility? How the hell did I tell my boss that his nephew was an irresponsible asshole who

called in sick every other day and managed to piss off all the other staff even when he did bother to show up?

“I just didn’t think he was ready for that kind of responsibility. But now that you mention it—”

“Oh he’s ready, alright. I know he comes off shy but he’s real resourceful and the kid’s got a good head on his shoulders. I think the restaurant would benefit from your utilization of his skills.” he added with a stern look that made me feel like a kid sitting in the principal’s office. “Do you get what I’m saying?”

His “skills”? The idea of Zack having any kind of skill beyond covering up the smell of weed on his clothes had me choking down a laugh that crept up at the back of my throat.

I was at a crossroads, which was not a place I ever wanted to find myself at work. I could either rat out Zack’s lack of work ethic to his uncle and risk getting fired for not playing along with the favoritism game, or worse, risk becoming known as the office narc.

In an effort to keep my job and my semi-good standing with the owner, which might come in handy down the road, I chose to swallow my pride for the time being and play along.

“I’ll be sure to do that, Dom. Thanks for bringing this to my attention.”

He gave me a satisfied grin in return and nodded toward the door, which was my signal to get lost. I shook his hand before exiting his office, feeling a little deflated and wondering where the hell my self-respect went.

\* \* \*

The evening got slightly better after my scolding from The Man, seeing as he left shortly afterwards and I got to rant about him to my coworkers. The good news was that nobody else seemed to like him either, or Zack for that matter. Everyone pretty much shared the same opinion that I had, which was that Dom was a careless idiot who was going to drive this place into the ground with his neglect, and Zack was his little shithead mini-me.

I, on the other hand, had been working here for years and really felt like I had earned the respect of my coworkers. If I did ever get the chance to buy this place out from Dom, I knew I would have their full support.

One of the hostesses treated me to a beer with the remaining half hour before my shift started, making it the one and only time I broke my *no drinking on the job* rule. Though I imagined it would happen much more frequently once I started working alongside Zack every night.

Things had started to pick up as the evening went on, and my slight beer buzz was working its magic to numb my bitterness. I dropped off a flight of microbrews to a table of guys who were definitely feeling no pain, and a couple of our new Peppermintinis to a rowdy table of middle-aged women. Fridays were ladies' night, so we often got groups of divorcées looking for a good time and ambitious young men looking to seize that opportunity.

"Leo, table 9." the hostess shouted in my direction over all the noise and chatter of the room.



I dropped off some wings and napkins to table 5 on my way, making sure to flirt a little with the tipsy women to hustle a generous tip out of them. I knew it was wrong to use my powers of seduction for evil, but I rationalized it by telling myself that consumerism makes villains of us all in the end.

I pulled out my notepad and pen as I approached the new table, stopping dead in my tracks when I recognized who was sitting there.

*You've got to be kidding me.*

Sitting there in my section was Anabelle, Aaliyah, and my ex-girlfriend Hailee.

## Seven

### Anabelle



**T**hank you!" I said to the cashier as he handed me the bag.

*One down, two to go.*

My afternoon gift shopping mission had been wholly unsuccessful up until this point. I couldn't seem to find anything my family would like in the dozens of stores I had visited, and began to wonder if I just didn't know them as well as I used to. That is, until I found a barbecue apron that said '*Santa's little helper*' at the novelty store. It was the perfect goofy gift for my dad, and now all I had to do was find something for Simon. And for my mother.

It would be nearly impossible to find anything that she wouldn't scrutinize, given her tendency to question everything I did. Even this morning when I told her about Blake, she basically gave me the third degree while my dad just sat there observing.

*"What does he do for a living?" "How old is he?" "When did you two start seeing each other?" "Why didn't you tell us about him before?"*

In all fairness, that was pretty much the reaction I had expected from her. No answer was ever good enough, and somehow she always managed to find a way to guilt trip me.

“Hold on a minute, young lady. You were going to have your new boyfriend, a perfect *stranger*, come into our home and stay with us? Without any notice at all?” she scolded once I had answered all of her questions.

“Um, he’s only arriving next week so it’s not technically *no notice...*” I started, spotting a vein popping out of her forehead. “But no, he wouldn’t be staying here. He’s going to get a hotel room for us up the road.”

*There, beat that logic.*

“Oh, so you were just going to abandon your parents once your boyfriend came to town? After all we’ve done to accommodate you in our home?”

*Should have seen that one coming.*

“Well I think this Blake fellow sounds wonderful, and I can’t wait to meet him.” my dad interjected before I could strangle myself. Or my mom. Or both.

The thought of finding the perfect gift for my mother was starting to give me a headache, so I decided to take a break from the shopping madness with a little afternoon snack. I stepped out of the novelty store and immediately set my sights on a tea shop I spotted up the street, walking in to the warm smell of herbs, fruits, and spices.

I got in line in front of the counter and surveyed the menu, wishing there were more mom-and-pop shops like this near my apartment in the city. While a chai latte was delicious, my bank account was struggling to support my heavy Starbucks addiction.

“What can I get you?” asked a familiar face behind the counter once it was my turn to order.

*Oh. My. God.*

The handsome man standing in front of me was none other than Jason Hayes, the former captain of the swim team and a total babe back in high school. Virtually every girl in our school was crushing on him hard, and he knew he was in high demand. Unfortunately for most of us though, if you weren't hot and popular back then, he didn't know you were alive.

“A London Fog, please.”

“Gotcha.” he said, shooting me a not-so-subtle once over while he grabbed a cup and wrote down my order. “Name?”

Well, he obviously didn't recognize me. He probably never even knew who I was to begin with, now that I thought about it. I was surprised to find that I didn't mind much though, and wasn't craving his validation like I used to.

“Annie.”

He scribbled my name on the cup with his marker and frowned as if the word puzzled him.

“Anabelle Spencer?” he asked after a beat.

“Guilty as charged.”

“Holy shit, I thought you looked familiar. Wow, you look so... different.”

Ah, *different*. That was the word people used when they really wanted to say you looked hotter than you used to. I’d heard it many times over the years and it never failed to both boost my ego and offend me at the same time.

“Thanks,” I feigned just as his eyes glazed over me again and lingered on my breasts for a moment. “You haven’t changed one bit.”

His proud smile told me he didn’t know that wasn’t meant as a compliment.

“I’ll have that drink ready for you in just a minute.” he said with a wink.

I sat at one of the bistro tables off to the side and whipped out my phone from my back pocket. I did a quick Google search for *What to get your extremely picky and stubborn mother for Christmas*, and wasn’t surprised when I came up with diddly squat. I reformulated to *Gifts for your mom*, this time finding dozens of helpful articles online.

I scrolled through hundreds of suggestions, from slippers, to Le Creuset cast iron pans, to throw blankets—nothing felt quite right. I needed something personal, something sentimental, and most importantly, something with a gift receipt.

“Here you go.” Jason said from the behind counter, holding out my London Fog. “See you around, Anabelle.”

I smiled politely in return and grabbed my cup, noticing he had written his number on the side. My sixteen-year-old self would have *flipped out* if she could see me now. I felt a little sense of pride as I turned toward the door, knowing there was no chance I'd be calling him on account of already having a boyfriend and not really being interested in someone who just found out I existed.

I walked back out into the chilly afternoon air, checking my watch to make sure I wouldn't be late for my dinner with the girls.

*Crap.*

How was it already a quarter to six? I guess I'd been shopping for longer than I thought. I started speed walking toward Willow Street, chugging my tea on the way (which, if you ask me, kind of defeats its purpose). Fortunately, it was right around the corner seeing as I was already in the town center.

I arrived in record time, spotting Hailee and Aaliyah waiting for me down the road.

"*Annie!*" they screamed in unison when I ran toward them, pulling them into a warm embrace.

We squealed and hugged on the corner of the street, no doubt annoying the passersby who wiggled their way around us, but I didn't care. These girls were the one good thing about coming back to my hometown; the only part of this place that still made me smile. Seeing them again made all the bad memories and difficult mothers worth it.

In the spirit of getting out of the frosty air that nipped at our cheeks, Hailee huddled us inside the restaurant she had brought us to. I wasn't sure what I was expecting when she said she knew the "perfect place" for dinner, but it definitely wasn't this loud, bustling restaurant filled to the brim with tipsy patrons.

"Woah, this place is packed!" I remarked while the hostess led us to our table through the busy Friday night crowd.

"Fridays are ladies' night here," Hailee started, tossing a lock of blonde hair over her shoulder as she looked back at me. "I figured we could all use some half-priced drinks."

"Uh-huh." I heard Aaliyah mumble, and I could've sworn she shot her a side-eye.

The hostess led us to a clearing at the back of the room and handed us four menus as we sat down in a sticky corner booth.

"Are we expecting a fourth, Aaliyah?" I teased, setting down the last one in front of the empty spot next to her.

Her face flushed as she grinned widely, the type of smile that overtook her whole face. "Yes, any minute now. Devin just had to close up the shop, I took the afternoon off to finish up my Christmas shopping."

"Oh my God, the shop! Tell me all about it, I want to hear everything."

Aaliyah and Devin had recently opened up a bath and body boutique where they sold organic, locally-made haircare and skincare products. It was a bold move considering they had only been together for a year, but I knew this had been a longtime

dream of hers and she was serious about its success. She always knew what she wanted to do with her life, and I admired her for that. Where I stumbled through life making it up as I go, Aaliyah would have a thirty-step plan written out and color-coded.

“We’re *loving* it, it’s so liberating to be your own boss and get to call all the shots. I was kind of worried it would be relationship suicide to run the store together, but it’s actually been really fun.” she replied, smiling ear to ear. “I mean, did we dump all of our savings into it and are now pretty much broke? Yes. But we knew from the start that it can take years to turn a profit on a new venture.”

“Well I’d love to come by and do my part to support a small business! When do I get to see it?”

“Actually, we’re throwing a little Christmas party at the store tomorrow night—just to bring in some new customers and hopefully sell the rest of our holiday stock. We invited all the other businesses on the block, you should totally come!”

“I’d love to!”

“Amazing, I’ll text you the deets. We’re—”

“Ladies.” a voice next to us suddenly interrupted.

To my dismay, I looked up to find Leo of all people smiling down at us, pen and paper in hand and a smug look on his face.

*Ughh.*

Of course he had to look hunky even at work, he couldn’t give me a single day off from his ruggedness. His fitted black shirt accented his immaculate build, and his perfectly messy and



slightly-curly hair was calling out to me to run my fingers through it. I put on my best sour face so as to not give him the satisfaction of confirming that I still thought he was completely swoon-worthy.

I glanced over at Hailee whose face immediately turned a bright shade of red, her poker face being nowhere near as good as mine, and I suddenly understood why she suggested this place for dinner.

## Eight

*Leo*



**A**s if today wasn't shitty enough already, now I had to wait on my high school ex and her best friend who rejected me?

Seeing Anabelle and Hailee together stirred up a lot of emotions for me, none of them being pleasant. Suddenly I was getting flashbacks to senior year, getting shot down by the girl of my dreams and hooking up with anyone with a pulse to forget about her. In the span of one day, she had gone from the girl next door to the girl I hated most.

*Not today, Anabelle.*

I wasn't going to let her get to me this time, especially not after the way I wussed out with Dom earlier. I had a point to prove and a pride to protect. I tousled my hair and put on my most charming smile before walking right up to their table, ready to make her regret ever stepping foot in my restaurant.

"Ladies."

I smiled internally when Anabelle looked up at me and instantly frowned, satisfied that my mere presence was enough to agitate her.

“Oh my God Leo, I didn’t know you’d be working tonight!” Hailee cooed from the seat next to hers.

*Here we go.*

I had kind of guessed over the years that Hailee still had a thing for me since she frequently came into the restaurant and somehow managed to sit in my section every time. I didn’t exactly know why she was still into me after the way we left things, but decided to take advantage of the opportunity to further provoke Anabelle.

“Must be my lucky day if I have you in my booth.” I coaxed as I rested my arm on the back of Hailee’s seat.

She let out a small giggle and batted her eyelashes at me, making my job way too easy.

“Can we request a different waiter? I’d rather not have spit in my food.” Anabelle hissed from her corner with a smirk.

“No can do, it’s a full house tonight. You’re stuck with me, princess.”

She rolled her eyes and turned her attention toward the menu, furiously surveying the list of appetizers and doing a pretty poor job of pretending I didn’t exist.

“You know what you ladies need?” I continued. “Some spiced apple shooters. I’ll bring over a round on the house, just for my favorite girls.”

Hailee blushed as I winked at her, and I knew I had her hooked.

Was it wrong to flirt with my ex just to bother Anabelle? Probably. Was I going to do it anyway because it was so fun? Definitely.

“Thanks, but no thanks.” Anabelle snipped, her eyes still glued to the menu.

“Oh come on, it’ll be fun!” Hailee pleaded. “We rarely get to see you Annie, let’s get crazy.”

“Yeah, come on *Annie*. Don’t be a buzzkill.” I mocked, which immediately granted me a death stare in return.

Why did driving her crazy give me such a thrill?

“The shooters will be fine, thanks Leo.” Aaliyah interjected, not-so-subtly kicking Hailee under the table.

I nodded and flashed them another prize-winning smile before making my way toward the bar.

“Ow! What was that for?” Hailee groaned as I walked away.

I couldn’t blame her friends for looking out for her and trying to pull her back into reality. It had been the better part of a decade since I dumped her right before Christmas—why she was still interested in me, I’d never know. Then again, who was I to question why women found me so irresistible?

In my defense, I thought breaking up with Hailee right before the holidays was the best option at the time. The whole thing started back in high school when I was a senior and she was a fresh-faced junior on the pep squad.

I was the running back on the football team, so we'd see each other around at practice and hang out with the rest of the athletic club after games. We started talking and to my surprise, we really clicked. She was adventurous, fun, and incredibly easy on the eyes. She was the type of bombshell who could blink and have any guy she wanted at the tip of her fingers, and she knew it.

One night, at a particularly rowdy post-game party, we impulsively hooked up in the bathroom and were unfortunately caught by my friends. I would've thought she'd be embarrassed by the misfortune of it all, but she actually seemed to relish in it; like being caught with me was some kind of achievement. Word spread quickly about our entanglement, and from that day on, we were officially branded an item to the entirety of the school.

We dated for a couple of months and it was nice for a while. I'd walk her home after practice, we'd go to the mall on the weekends, and hang out with her friends after school. By virtue of her being one of Anabelle's best friends, this meant I was spending even more time with my neighbor than I already was. Sure, it didn't feel as natural to talk with Hailee as it did with Anabelle, but I told myself that was normal. Your girlfriend wasn't supposed to be like your best friend, right..?

But the more we all spent time together, the more I started to notice differences between the two of them. Where Hailee loved to be seen with me, loved the popularity that came with being my girlfriend just like all my exes had, Anabelle was happy just to spend time alone with me. To talk about a new band she's been loving that she thinks I'll like too, to bake goodies with me and

my mom on a lazy Sunday afternoon, or to play Grand Theft Auto with me and Simon even though she hated running the pedestrians over and evading the cops.

It was just different with Anabelle—she saw me for who I was, not for what people wanted to see.

Looking back, I'm still not sure what happened. One minute I'm with Hailee and everything is fine, and the next I'm getting more excited to see my neighbor than my own girlfriend. I started noticing little things about her when we were together, like how her nose scrunched up when she laughed, how she tucked her hair behind her ear when she was nervous, or how the smell of her perfume would drive me crazy when she sat next to me on the couch.

I caught myself thinking about her during class, counting down the minutes until the next time I'd see her, and my heart would race whenever she was near. I couldn't understand what was happening, we had known each other since we were kids. Why now? What changed?

I tried to shake it off and give the whole denial thing a whirl, but to no avail. The more I tried to fight it, the more it became clear to me: I was falling for Anabelle. And I was completely screwed.

I knew I had to call it off with Hailee and figure out what these feelings meant, but the holidays were approaching fast. I either had to dump her before Christmas and risk her hating me for it, or I could fake it for a couple more weeks and risk hating myself. I took a gamble and elected just to be honest and let her

down easy. After all, how hard could it possibly be to break up with someone?

As it turned out, pretty damn difficult.

“Why? Did I do something wrong?” Hailee pleaded as we sat in my bedroom, tears forming in her eyes.

“No it’s nothing you did, I swear. It’s just... It’s me.”

“Oh, it’s not you it’s me, right?” she scoffed.

*Fair point.*

“I don’t understand, is there someone else?” she pushed.

My slight hesitation betrayed me as a look of realization appeared on her face.

“Oh my God, you’re kidding me... Who?!”

I stammered while I racked my brain for the right answer, knowing that saying her best friend’s name couldn’t possibly be it.

“If you’re dumping me for someone else, I think that I at least deserve to know who it is.” she demanded.

“You’re really not gonna like it...”

She gave me an expectant look that said ‘So?’, apparently not budging on her request.

“Okay, fine. I just want to preface this by saying that I didn’t know how I felt about her until recently. I swear I’m not the kind of guy who goes after his ex’s best friend. I would never—”

“Wait a minute, you’re not talking about *Anabelle*, are you?”

Once again, my inability to form a cohesive thought betrayed me as I struggled to find the magic words that would save me from having this conversation.

“Seriously?” she snarled. “Anabelle? *Why?*”

*Christ, do all breakups come with an interrogation?*

“I don’t really know why. I mean, we’ve known each other forever, I guess—”

“So, what? Now I’m just supposed to go over there and hang out with her as if she didn’t steal my boyfriend?” she scoffed.

*Crap.*

“You’re—you’re seeing her today?”

She nodded as she wiped away a stray tear on her cheek, and I immediately went into full panic mode.

“But you’re not going to say anything to her about this, right?”

The cold glare I got in return told me that wasn’t the smartest choice of words.

“Are you seriously asking me for a favor right now?”

“No! I mean, yes... This just isn’t the way I wanted her to find out.”

*Crap crap crap. Why didn’t I just wait until after Christmas?*

Her unyielding silence didn’t do much to reassure me, or my growing panic. “Please Hailee, she doesn’t know anything yet, who knows if she’ll even feel the same way.”



“Yeah, right.” she snorted in disdain, hastily grabbing her bag off the floor and slinging it over her shoulder.

“Look, I know you must hate me right now and honestly, I don’t blame you. But please, just promise me you won’t tell Anabelle how I feel about her... I need to tell her myself.”

Her eyes shot back over to me, seeming to analyze my sincerity and weigh her options, before wiping at them one last time and turning toward the door.

“Fine, whatever. Goodbye, Leo.”

“I’m really sorry—” I started just as she slammed it in my face.

## Nine

### Anabelle



**I** fucking knew it.” Aaliyah declared a touch too loudly.

“What?” Hailee faltered, her cheeks still crimson red.

“Hails, gimme a break. You knew he’d be working today, didn’t you? I thought you were done with this?”

Aaliyah could sound a little harsh sometimes, but it was needed in times like these. Hailee still couldn’t seem to shake her feelings for Leo, even after their messy breakup all those years ago. We couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t move on, I mean it was just Leo after all. We had tried several times over the years to snap her out of it, each time ending with her assuring us that she was “done with him for real this time”.

“I thought we talked about this.” I added, seriously starting to question her critical thinking abilities. “You can do so much better than him, why do you keep doing this to yourself?”

“Oh come on, guys! It’s so not a big deal. I just thought it’d be fun, like we’re back in high school!”

*Oh yeah, because that was always such a blast.*

“Okay, you have got to stop.” Aaliyah urged, gently placing a hand over hers. “As much as it pains me to say this, you’re stuck in the past and you need to let him go. I’m sorry hun, but the truth is you’re just gonna get yourself hurt again.”

“She’s right, he’s so not worth it. He’s a douchebag Hails, and douchebags never change.” I added.

The booth fell silent as Aaliyah cleared her throat and Hailee looked down at the ground, giving me the sudden feeling that they knew something I didn’t.

“Well... I don’t know if I’d say he’s a *douchebag*, per se.” Aaliyah muttered.

“Ummm, hello? Are we forgetting why they broke up? What he did to me?”

“Annie, there’s something you should know.” she said after a beat. “I heard his parents just got separated, and apparently it was pretty messy... I think his dad moved out. I know he hurt you, and I’m not trying to diminish that. I just think he’s been going through a tough time lately, so maybe we should go easy on him?”

*Oh.*

Okay, well I guess that did change *some* things. My heart went out to him for having to navigate family issues so close to the holidays, especially ones that are so unexpected. I had thought we were passed the age of being stuck in the middle of your parents’ messy divorce... I didn’t really think that was something you had to worry about as an adult.

My heart went out even more to his mom, who had been so kind to me over the years and deserved nothing but the best. It hurt me to think that she would be all alone in that big house, so I made a mental note to stop by while I was here to show my support to Mrs. Rojas.

“Oh, I—I didn’t know... I’ll ease up.” I offered. “But I still don’t like him for the way he betrayed me.”

“Okay, I feel like *betray* is a little dramatic, don’t ya think?” Hailee sneered.

“Um, ouch?”

Maybe it was dramatic to her, but to me it felt pretty damn spot on. I had always known deep down that my friends didn’t fully understand just how hurtful what Leo did was to me. I mean, to be fair, how could they? They didn’t have the same relationship with him that I had, they hadn’t grown up with him and considered him almost a part of the family. They also didn’t have the same deep-rooted insecurities that I did.

Sure, when I talked about it now it seemed kind of silly, but at the time it felt like my whole world was shattering around me.

It was junior year of high school and the first day of winter break. Aaliyah and Hailee were coming over to my place for a Christmas movie marathon and hot cocoa binge, as was our yearly ritual. I had everything ready to go—a dozen DVDs stacked up, copious amounts of blankets to snuggle up in, and I had even splurged on the extra big marshmallows this time around. It was all set to be the perfect lazy day.

I heard the doorbell ring early, and opened it to find a red-nosed and puffy-eyed Hailee on my doorstep.

“Oh my God, what’s wrong? Are you okay?” I asked, frantically bringing her inside.

“I was just over at Leo’s...”

My mind immediately started racing. Did something happen to him? Were his parents okay? Should I go over there to check on them right now?

“Hailee, what happened?” I urged, steadying her with one hand and wiping a tear from her cheek with the other.

“We... We broke up.”

*Oh. Shit.*

I honestly hadn’t seen that coming. They seemed so happy together, why would they break up?

Any residual jealousy that I had buried deep down instantly turned to guilt and regret. I felt like a horrible friend for ever having been unsupportive of their relationship.

Of course I had my reservations about them at first, I mean she was my best friend and he was the boy I’d been secretly in love with for years. I had wished that I was the one dating Leo, and selfishly thought I understood him better than she did.

But that phase was very short-lived—I had gotten over myself after a few grumpy days and soon became genuinely happy for my friends. I knew Leo was a great guy, and I was glad that Hailee was finally being treated the way she deserved.

“I can’t believe it, I’m so sorry Hails...” I said, bringing her in for a hug. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I squeezed her in my arms as I felt her snuffle on my shoulder, wanting desperately to know what happened between them but knowing she probably wouldn’t be ready to talk about it for a while.

“No it’s fine—I’m fine.”

She pulled away after a moment to set down her bag and regain her composure, pulling out a crumpled tissue from her pocket to dab at the smeared mascara under her eyes. I sprang into problem-solving mode, knowing there’d be plenty of time for explanations and tears later on once she was ready to talk.

“C’mon, let’s go drown our feelings in hot cocoa. Extra marshmallows for you!” I said encouragingly, heading for the kitchen to fix her up a miracle heartbreak cure.

“Wait, Annie? I have to tell you something.” she called out, still frozen in the entry. “Leo said something. About you.”

About *me*? Why would he have said something about me? My pulse quickened and my mind was going a mile a minute, running through all the possible scenarios of how my name could have come up during their breakup.

Did it get too weird for her to date my neighbor? Had I said something that offended him? Was he getting sick of seeing me every day? A small part of me started to wonder if maybe, just *maybe*, he had feelings for me too. I mean, we’d laugh for hours when we were together, and he always smiled so wide when he

saw me, and... And it felt like something had shifted between us recently.

I forced myself to banish the thought instantly, knowing deep down that I would never be the kind of girl he'd like. And besides, even if he did, I had no right to have feelings for my best friend's boyfriend.

"He called you fat."

He said *what?*

"I'm so sorry, I didn't want to tell you but it felt wrong to keep it from you. He was kind of laughing at you, calling you names and stuff... Like, I thought he was your friend?" she continued. "He asked me not to say anything, but I respect you too much to lie to you."

My heart stopped. I felt like I was frozen in time, watching a bad dream happen with no way of waking myself up.

Fat.

*Fat.*

F-A-T.

I told myself it was just a word, just three little letters that I'd heard before, and would probably hear for years to come. No big deal, right? I had gotten used to people calling me names and had developed a pretty thick skin over the years after hearing much worse than that.

But this time... This time it came from him. This time it cut me deeper than any of the boys who teased me in the hallway, the

girls who snickered and pointed in the locker room, and all the criticisms from my mother combined.

Leo, the boy who I was madly in love with, the boy who I thought knew me and understood me in a way no one else did, was laughing at me behind my back. And I felt like an idiot.

All this time I'd been pining after him, singing his praises to my friends, and secretly fantasizing that he might one day feel the same way about me. And the whole time, he was making fun of me. The whole time I was just a joke to him.

"I—I can't believe it."

"I couldn't believe it either, that's why I ended things with him. I can't be with someone who says stuff like that about my friends, you know?" Hailee said, walking over to hug me this time. "You're more important to me than any guy, Annie."

All those years, every laugh and smile and stolen glance was a lie. He never cared about me, it was all in my head. I was *mortified*, and wanted nothing more than to bury myself deep into the ground and never, ever come out.

\* \* \*

"Oh, there she is!" Aaliyah announced, pulling me back into the present.

"Hey gang!" Devin hollered as she made her way over through the crowd of people and took the empty seat next to her girlfriend.

She pulled off her snowy earmuffs, revealing her shiny black hair slicked into two super cute space buns, and gave Aaliyah a



quick peck. “So, what’s everyone getting?”

She smiled at us while Hailee and I awkwardly perused the menu in silence, hoping she couldn’t sense the tension in the air.

“Okay, super weird vibe at this table...” she laughed, cocking her eyebrow at us. “What did I miss?”

## Ten

*Leo*



I woke up to the rumbling sound of the snowplow outside and the sunlight peering in through my curtains. I let out a big yawn and opened my eyes, letting them focus on the snow falling outside my window for a moment. It was the perfect quiet morning, and a Saturday to boot. No work for me today, I could stay in bed as long as I wanted.

*Wait a minute...*

Something felt off. How come I was lying peacefully in my bed instead of being abruptly woken up by my mom? Was it possible that I had actually woken up before her for once?

I grabbed my phone from the bedside table and checked the time, 11:52 a.m. No way she was still asleep. Something was definitely wrong.

I leaped out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweats that were bundled up on the floor, rushing out of my room and toward the staircase.

“Mamá?”

I headed for the kitchen first, only to find it empty. There was no sign of her anywhere, which was highly unusual in this house. “Mamá?”

“In here.” she mumbled from the next room.

I walked into the living room and was relieved to find her lying on the couch, a Christmas card in hand and a cup of coffee on the side table next to her.

“What, no wake-up call this morning?” I teased, taking a sip of her coffee which had already gone cold.

She didn’t answer, her eyes still fixated on the card in her hand.

“You okay?”

She handed me the envelope, a red and gold glittery mess filled with clichéd holiday wishes, with the words “To Carmen & Edgar” written on the front.

“It’s from your cousins out West,” she muttered. “I guess they haven’t heard.”

There it was, my father’s name written in big cursive letters. It seemed to mock us, like an uninvited guest in our home. I suddenly felt like all my efforts to keep my mom from thinking about him these past few weeks had all gone to shit. All the progress I had made to keep her laughing and smiling, swiftly uprooted by five little letters.

I definitely wasn’t ready to deal with this first thing in the morning. To be honest, I didn’t think I’d ever be ready to deal with it. It had only been a few months since he walked out on us

out of the blue—no warning, no apology, my mom just came home one day to find a half-assed letter on the table and his stuff cleared out.

She was completely devastated, and I was completely confused. I mean, I knew growing up that my parents didn't have the perfect marriage (and that he wasn't always the perfect father), but you never imagine something like this will happen to your family. This was the type of thing you heard other people talk about, and secretly thought to yourself *How could a person ever do something like that?*

Sure, my parents had been arguing more frequently in the months leading up to his desertion, but I didn't know the situation had gotten that bad... I thought they still loved each other, or at the very least still respected each other. Then again, maybe I only saw what they wanted me to see.

After we found the note he had left behind, my mom tried everything possible to get a hold of him. She called his phone, sent him emails, talked to his friends, and reached out to his extended family. Nobody seemed to know anything—or if they did, they weren't letting it on. Even when she stopped by his office to ask around there, she found out he had transferred over to another division out of state.

The day she finally got through to him (coincidentally, the day before he changed his number), he picked up the phone and said only one thing: "Don't call me here again."

I wondered if maybe he had met someone else, if he had cheated on my mom, if he had left us for another family. Or

maybe he had a terrible gambling problem, or a terminal illness that he wanted to spare us from. None of the possible explanations I came up with made me feel the slightest bit better, and the truth was, I'd probably never know why he left.

Even though the whole town now knew my parents were no longer together, few people knew what really went down. The two of us, my grandparents, and Simon were the only ones who knew that my dad had abandoned us—and we wanted to keep it that way by any means possible.

“Screw that.” I said, tearing the card right in half. “And screw him.”

“Language, Leonardo.” she replied, the corner of her mouth turning up into a small grin.

“There’s that smile! We don’t need him, eh mamá? We’re doing all right on our own, the dream team.”

Her face softened, and I nudged her until I heard a chuckle. At least it was something.

“Now how about I go get you your usual?” I said as I stood, ready to make my daily trip to Bean & Co. in a last-ditch effort to take her mind off my dad. Besides, I was already behind schedule and if I didn’t hurry, I’d be stuck waiting with the lunch crowd.

“No need. Today I just want to have a nice home-cooked breakfast with my son. Feel like some pancakes?”

“I *always* feel like pancakes.”

She chuckled warmly and started to get up, but I motioned for her to lie back down.

“Please, let me make them.”

I pulled a throw blanket over her and kissed her forehead, grabbing the torn pieces of card on my way. I ripped them up once more for good measure before dropping them into the garbage and slamming it shut.

*Good riddance.*

\* \* \*

HON-NK H-HONK-K!

The car horn blared from outside as I did up the last of my dress shirt’s buttons, rushing me for time.

“You better get going, sounds like Simon is getting impatient.” my mom snickered.

We were already an hour behind as it was, given Simon’s proclivity for showing up fashionably late. I grabbed my best dress shoes from the closet (okay, my only dress shoes) and shoved my phone, keys and wallet into my pockets.

“I don’t have to go tonight if you’d rather I stay.” I hesitated when I reached the door.

Mostly I didn’t want to leave my mom alone after the events of this morning, but a small part of me just didn’t have any interest in mingling with a bunch of strangers for three hours. I was more of a homebody who would much rather be spending the evening alone. More than that, I didn’t want to risk having to run into Hailee again—or worse, Anabelle.

“Don’t be silly, you go have fun. I’m a grown woman, I *can* take care of myself you know.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! Now quit using me as an excuse to be a hermit. Go, be young.”

*It’s like she can read my mind.*

I pulled on my coat right before she shooed me out, heading for Simon’s car through the snowy walkway. If my shoes weren’t completely ruined before, they were now.

“That’s what you’re wearing?” Simon smirked when I climbed in.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Dude, it’s a party, not a date.” he sneered as he pulled out of the driveway.

To be fair, I was wearing my go-to date outfit. Dress shoes, black chinos and a blue button-up, with the first two buttons undone to show a little chest hair.

“I don’t think it’s that kind of party.” I snorted, inspecting his Chad-reminiscent outfit consisting of a t-shirt and ripped jeans.

We were on our way to Aaliyah’s holiday-slash-shop-opening party, where the whole block had been invited. Sort of a *small businesses supporting small businesses* thing.

“What? This outfit tells the ladies that I’m laid back, fun, and looking for something casual.”

“I didn’t know clothes could say all that.” I smirked.

“Make fun all you want my man, I never get turned down. I had three dates last week, how many did you get?”

I scoffed as I looked out the window, knowing Simon already knew the answer and was just busting my balls. I simply knew what I wanted, and unfortunately none of the women in Woodberry were it.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Remind me why I let you drag me out to this thing?” I huffed.

“Okay one, we haven’t gone to a party in forever. We’re twenty-six Leo, not sixty. It’s time to get crazy!”

“Again, I really don’t think it’s that kind of party.”

“Whatever. And B), I’m hooking you up tonight. If you don’t meet a woman soon, I’m dropping you off at a monastery.”

He did have a point, a person could only be celibate for so long. The truth was that I hadn’t gone on a date in an embarrassingly long amount of time, and he knew it.

I hadn’t exactly done it on purpose, it’s just that every time I tried and took out a perfectly nice girl (such as Clara), I found myself nitpicking every little thing. It’s like I had this arbitrary list of qualities I was looking for, and no one could ever live up to them. Or even if someone came close, I never felt any sparks, and eventually it just felt pointless to keep trying.

Of course I knew deep down who I was holding out for, though I would never admit it out loud. Because unfortunately



for me, the only woman I've ever really wanted would rather poke her eye out with a fork than go out with me.

"Do you know if your sister's going to be there tonight?" I asked, immediately realizing it was a mistake to bring her up in the middle of a conversation about sex.

I had never told Simon about my feelings for his sister, because *duh*. I sometimes got the feeling that he sensed I was crushing on her, but he never really said anything about it either. We had basically made a nonverbal agreement to never *ever* talk about it in an effort to spare our friendship. Ever.

"Uhh, not sure. She doesn't exactly share her schedule with me." he said, glancing over at me while I stared out the window, pretending not to notice. "Probably though, it is Aaliyah's party."

Was that dread or excitement I felt in the pit of my stomach?

He pulled into a spot on the side of the street and we climbed out into the chilly air of the town center. The music from the shop echoed further up the street as we headed toward it, the glimmering lights guiding our way through the haze of snow.

We walked into the bustling atmosphere of the store which was much busier than I had expected, just as a woman in a flashy green pantsuit who I assumed co-owned the store with Aaliyah greeted us.

"Welcome! Thanks so much for coming. Can I offer you a candy cane mojito?" she asked, holding out a tray of festive red and white cocktails.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Simon grinned, grabbing a glass for himself and handing one to me.

“Remember, find a woman or it’s priesthood for you.” he added under his breath before ditching me for a group of women laughing in the corner.

Typical. He drags me out and then abandons me at the first sight of the other sex.

*Okay, game face. Find a woman, find a woman...*

I started making my rounds, nodding to a few familiar faces while I weaved through the crowd. Some of them I knew from the restaurant or the coffee shop, others I had gone to school with years ago. And none of them I felt like chatting with.

I took a swig of my mojito, hoping the evening would become marginally more tolerable once the alcohol set in. I knew I was in for a long night of making pleasantries with people whose names I didn’t care about and would surely not remember the next day.

The fact was, I didn’t like small talk and I didn’t like flirting with strangers. It was one thing to do it with the customers at the restaurant so they’d give me a bigger tip, but I had zero interest in using my powers of seduction for a real date. I had tried and failed at the whole dating game too many times, and knew Simon’s orders were pointless.

But then, I saw her. A curvy figure with soft red hair draped over her shoulders, in strappy high heels and a little black dress that nearly made my heart stop. I watched her ruby red lips part

as she took a sip of her drink, and curl into a smile when she laughed at something Aaliyah said. My eyes were in a trance, glossing over every inch of her body before landing on her plump backside.

*Any woman but her.*

## Eleven

### Anabelle



“**W**here do you want this?” I asked Devin, inspecting a neatly wrapped and fairly heavy present.

“Oh! That’s the raffle gift, you can just put it under the tree.”

“Jesus, what are you giving them? A lump of coal?” I quipped before plopping it down under the mini-sized Christmas tree we had set up earlier.

“It’s an espresso machine,” she laughed. “Do you want to put your name in?”

“Is that even a question?”

As you might have guessed, it wasn’t cheap to live in the city—especially on a struggling model’s salary. I was currently using what I could only imagine was a drip coffee machine from the middle ages to get my morning fix.

I whipped out a ten-dollar bill from my purse and dropped it into the raffle jar in exchange for my ticket, praying this would be my lucky day.

“Done!” Aaliyah chimed breathlessly as she hurried through the door, having just finished setting up the decorations outside.

“Good luck getting those lights down later, babe.”

She brushed off the remaining snow from her coat before taking it off to reveal a crimson-colored sweater dress that perfectly complimented her dark skin tone. She and Devin had expertly coordinated their outfits to reflect classic Christmas colors, with Aaliyah covering red and her girlfriend sporting a very chic emerald pantsuit.

“It’s really coming down out there, do you think people are still gonna show up..?” Aaliyah asked with a worried look on her face.

“Of course they will! It’s going to be great hun, don’t stress.”

“And the place looks amazing, anyone who doesn’t show up is totally missing out.” I added.

It truly did look amazing, given the fact we had spent the last couple of hours decking this place out to the nines. They had rented standing bar tables that we scattered across the room for people to mingle at, complete with DIY centerpieces they had made from slabs of wood, electric candles and greenery. String lights lined the ceiling, garland draped the walls, and a speaker in the middle of the room was playing jazzy Christmas music, creating the perfect cozy atmosphere for a holiday party.

The giant pyramid of gift baskets marked 25% off called out to me, conveniently reminding me that I still had some Christmas shopping to finish.

“Thanks so much for coming early to help out Annie, you’re a godsend.”

“No sweat, I was happy to do it! This way I get first pick at the goods.” I replied, perusing the available gift baskets while trying not to knock the whole thing over. “It’s a shame Hailee couldn’t make it though.”

Aaliyah raised an eyebrow at me in doubt, apparently not buying my mostly genuine sorrow that our other bestie wasn’t coming tonight.

“Uh-huh.”

“No, seriously!” I laughed unconvincingly. “I don’t get to see you guys often, it sucks that she had a family dinner tonight.”

“So the fact that she basically said you were blowing the whole Leo thing out of proportion last night didn’t hurt your feelings at all?”

Yeah, that happened.

Our dinner had a rocky start, to say the least. Hailee had spent half the evening gawking over Leo (where I had the decency to at least pretend not to notice his stupidly handsome face), and the other half telling me to “move on” and “get over” The Incident. Which was ironic because *hellooo*, I wasn’t the one still obsessed with my ex!

Though it made me feel completely invalidated and somewhat akin to Bruce Banner about to Hulk out in the moment, I was so over it now. Hailee and I never saw eye-to-eye on the topic of Leo, so I was used to it at this point. There was no sense in holding a grudge when I was only here for another week and a half.

“Nope.” I answered with my most persuasive blasé smile.

I turned my attention back toward the pyramid, picking out a sizeable men’s care basket containing various everyday essentials, from beard oil to shower gel and hair pomade. I figured it would be the perfect gift for Simon since it showed him that I cared enough to get him a nice gift while also subtly telling him to take better care of his hygiene.

“Alrighty then, I’ll ring you up.” Aaliyah said dubiously. “FYI, I’m totally on your side. You’re allowed to feel hurt by what Leo said.”

Now that made me smile. I knew I could always count on Aaliyah to be in my corner when it mattered most.

A small basket at the top of the pyramid caught my eye as I pulled out my wallet to pay. It looked to be more of a luxury basket, containing a whipped body lotion, lip scrub, bath salts and under-eye cream. I instantly thought of Mrs. Rojas and how I used to buy her a birthday gift every year back when I lived in town.

She and I had developed a special bond over the years, particularly when the guys would quarantine themselves in the basement gaming all night. We’d sit and talk at the table for hours, exchange our favorite books, and she even taught me how to make her family’s super secret arepa recipe. I felt bad for having dropped the ball on the last six birthday gifts since I moved away, and hoped this might make up for it.

“You know what, I’ll take this one too.”

I paid for my goods and shoved them behind the counter where I had stashed my coat and purse earlier, grateful to be friends with the owners so I didn't have to lug my stuff around with me all night.

"Dev, would you mind getting those drinks ready for the guests?" Aaliyah suddenly asked with an oddly over-eager tone. "I already laid out all the ingredients on the cart."

"Sure." she replied absentmindedly, not seeming to notice the strangeness of the request as she walked off toward the bar cart at the front of the store.

"Okay super quick," Aaliyah whispered once her girlfriend was out of earshot. "I have to show you something."

She reached into her purse and pulled out a small velvet box, grinning from ear to ear when she handed it to me.

"Oh my God, is this what I think it is?" I practically shrieked.

"Shhh, she's gonna hear you!"

I pulled open the box, nearly bursting with excitement, to find the most gorgeous marquise-cut diamond ring in an antique-inspired setting. The (impressively large) stone sat on a gold band with smaller diamonds running down either side, beautifully reflecting in the light. I had to bite my tongue to keep from squealing at the sight of it. It was delicate, ornate, perfectly original, and right up Devin's alley.

"You think she'll like it..?"

"She'd be crazy not to! Oh my God, Aaliyah this is amazing! Are you doing it tonight?"



I had visions of her getting down on one knee after delivering a swoon-worthy speech, à la Nicholas Sparks movie, and Devin squealing an enthusiastic “YES!” in response.

“Oh hell no, in front of a bunch of people? She’d kill me.” she laughed. “I’m thinking Christmas morning.”

“That’s soooo romantic!”

I reluctantly closed the box and handed it back to her, where she slipped it back into her purse just before Devin made her way back toward us.

“What’s so romantic?” she asked, completely unaware I was currently planning their wedding shower in my head.

“Umm, it’s... About Annie’s new boyfriend!” Aaliyah blurted.

She was such a terrible liar.

“Ohh right, tell us about your sexy new doctor-man!”

*You mean my sexy absentee doctor-man?*

I hadn’t really heard much from Blake since I got to Woodberry. Apart from that text on the first day, he hadn’t answered any of my subsequent messages. I mean, I was used to one-worded replies and him taking hours to respond (he *was* a real-life doctor, after all), but this was a whole new level of neglect.

“Oh look, your first guests!” I said as two customers walked through the door, grateful for the opportunity to evade Devin’s question.

She excitedly hurried back toward the front of the shop to greet the newcomers with her tray of yummy-looking cocktails while Aaliyah and I shared a sigh of relief. I guess we both needed to work on our subtle question-dodging abilities. Luckily, we had an entire evening of party hosting to distract ourselves with.

I spent the first part of the evening bouncing between helping Aaliyah bag items at the cash, mixing more candy cane mojitos for Devin at the bar cart, and knocking back a couple of them in the process.

People continued to trickle in as the night went on, and I was impressed with the great turnout they had garnered. By an hour into the event, the room was filled with happy tipsy faces and the gift basket pyramid had been pretty much cleared out.

At some point during the night, I stood off to the side at one of the empty tables to check my texts, only to be disappointed by the lack of notifications from Blake. I did have a follow-up email from my agent, Hazel, though. I still hadn't replied to her regarding the New York Fashion Week casting call... I knew I was running out of time to make a decision, but still wasn't sure which was the right one.

"Long time no see." I suddenly heard a voice drawl next to me.

I looked up to find Jason Hayes, of phone-number-on-my-tea-cup fame, leaning against my table with hunger in his eyes.

"That explains all those gray hairs."

He frowned and raised his hand up to his head with a quizzical look on his face, as if he could feel for the grays.

“Kidding.” I clarified, not entirely sure if that was his usual brain capacity or if he’d many had one too many mojitos. “How are you enjoying the party?”

“Oh it’sss great, yeah... I’m having a really good time.”

He leaned in closer when he spoke, the smell of rum and peppermint filling my nose.

*There’s my answer.*

“I think I’m just about ready to head back to my—to my place though.” he continued.

“Aww, so soon? Well it was great to see you again.”

*Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.*

“It’sss not too far from here, just around the corner.”

“That’s nice.” I feigned.

“Yeah, I live right above Little Leaves. My—my parents own it, the shop. So they bought me the apartment on top for me.”

Well that explained a lot. I had kind of wondered why a guy like Jason would be working part-time at a tea shop in his mid-twenties. I guess he truly did peak in high school.

I felt his eyes linger on me while I racked my brain for a reply to his strange list of facts about his apartment, his hand slowly creeping its way up to settle on my arm.

“So whaddaya say?”

Huh?

*Oh my God, is he asking me to go home with him?*

“Listen, Jason. I’m flattered, truly I am.” I said carefully, trying to pull my arm away from under his rapidly tightening grip as subtly as possible. “But you should know, I have a boyfriend.”

“So? He doesn’t let you have friendssss?”

*Okay, ew.* I needed to get away from here FAST.

Just then I felt a strong but familiar arm wrap itself around my shoulders, gentling pulling me away from the drunken mess that was Jason.

My head darted in the direction of my knight in shining armor to find Leo staring Jason down with a look I’d never seen on him before. His jaw twitched as he moved his eyes down to me, his expression changing to a soft smile I hadn’t been on the receiving end of in years. He pulled me in, his warm and woodsy scent instantly reassuring me while at the same time making me lose all feeling in my toes.

“There you are babe, I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

## Twelve

*Leo*



“Oh, hey m—man. I didn’t realize you two were together.”  
Jason slurred, eyes wide as he stumbled backward.

*Yeah that’s right, you better run.*

I half expected Anabelle to object to the suggestion that she and I were a couple, but she remained silent under my arm while my cold stare continued to threaten his life.

I knew he was afraid of me on account of me having knocked him around in our senior year for perving on the girls’ changing room. Though I wasn’t proud of it at the time—I generally didn’t like thinking of myself as a bully and tried not to make a habit out of beating people up.

Except for right now. In this moment, I wanted to write *Anabelle’s Security* on my shirt and kick the living daylights out of him.

I did my best to remain calm, refocusing my attention on the wound-up girl in my arms.

“Is this guy bothering you?” I asked, studying her sage green eyes.

“I... I—”

“Bro chill out, I was just leaving.” Jason huffed before staggering away.

Part of me wanted to yank him back by the collar to teach him a lesson in chivalry, but the more rational part of my brain told me that I would be of more use to Anabelle here rather than kicked out of the shop.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” she mumbled softly, seeming to relax a little once Jason was out of sight. “Thanks, Leo. I didn’t realize what a creep he was...”

I unfortunately already had the displeasure of knowing what a low-life Jason Hayes was. I hated guys like that, thinking they could have whoever they wanted and only backing off once the boyfriend stepped in. As if women didn’t deserve basic respect unless they were already “claimed” by someone else?

As soon as I saw him talking to her from across the room, I was on red alert. I had made my way closer to hover near them in case he stepped a toe out of line (which he always inevitably did). When I saw him put his hand on her, something inside of me just snapped.

I knew it wasn’t my place to come to her rescue, she was more than capable of taking care of herself. Frankly, I was kind of surprised she wasn’t already giving me the “I don’t need saving” speech.

Besides, I was pretty sure I heard her tell Jason that she had a boyfriend. A pretty shitty one if you ask me, but a boyfriend nonetheless. I mean, where was he tonight? How come I was the one shooin' pervy guys away from her?

Not that I was complaining though, if anything I was grateful for an excuse to be near her, and to put my arm around her. Speaking of which, I quickly realized it was still placed around her shoulders, holding her close to me. I hesitated for a moment as the temptation to leave it there came over me, and wondered why she hadn't already moved away.

I felt her body melt into mine as she exhaled, and couldn't help but notice how right it felt to hold her. She fit in the nook of my chest like a puzzle piece, causing my head to flood with memories and feelings I thought I had buried deep down. My mind started going to a place that I hadn't allowed it to in years.

*Could there be something there?*

I immediately shut that train of thought down, remembering how much pain it had led to in the past. She must have sensed my sudden shift in composure because she promptly stiffened and wiggled out from under my arm.

"I should probably get going." I blurted before she could say anything.

I wanted to avoid whatever gentle rejection she was about to give me since I had only come to her rescue as a friend, nothing more. Besides, I'd had enough excitement for one evening, and I was ready to call it a night. I turned on my heel and swiftly

walked away, needing to get out of there before I lost all sense of reason.

I heard her say something behind me but continued pushing my way through the crowd, looking for my ride home. I found Simon in the corner of the room chatting up a girl (no surprise there) who was definitely eating up every line. I pulled him aside against his best wishes, hoping the desperation in my eyes would be enough to convince him to leave early.

“No way man, I’m this close to getting her number!” Simon said, holding his thumb and index finger a quarter inch apart. “It’s not that far, I bet you could walk home.”

*This guy.*

I shot a glance toward the window to inspect the weather conditions, which hadn’t improved at all since we got here.

“You owe me one.” I grumbled before releasing him back into the wild.

He went back toward his lady friend who continued to giggle at his jokes and press her hand up against his chest.

*How does he do that?*

I looked for Aaliyah and green-pantsuit-lady next, to be a polite guest and thank my hosts like my mother taught me.

“But we’re right about to draw for the raffle winner!” green-pantsuit-lady, who I had just learned was named Devin, objected.

“I never win anything anyways, really it’s fine.” I insisted. “I had a great time, I’m glad I was finally able to check this place



out.”

They thanked me for coming and released me after one last objection from Devin, sending me out on my way into the cold December night.

I did up the zipper on my jacket and I pushed open the door, the chilly wind sending a shiver down my spine. Snow was coming down even harder than before, the icy flakes nipping me in the face as I trudged along the blanketed sidewalk. On a regular day, it was only a twenty-five-minute walk from the town center to my house. On this occasion, however, I feared I wouldn't make it longer than ten minutes before my ears fell off.

I clenched my hands into fists and shoved them into my pockets to avoid losing any fingers, growing more and more concerned for my soaking-wet feet. I added 'buy me new shoes' to the long list of things Simon would be doing to repay me.

*That's it, no more parties for me.*

Just when I was about ready to give in to hypothermia, I noticed a car pull up beside me through the blur of snowfall. I squinted over and prayed whoever it was would be willing to take in a flash-frozen hitchhiker.

“Nice evening for a stroll!” Anabelle called out after rolling down her window.

I'd never been so happy to see her in my life. If she looked like an angel before, she just became one for real now.

“You following me Spencer?”

She rolled her eyes as she leaned over from the driver's seat to push open the passenger door. "Just get in."

Even though I had left the party to escape a conversation with her, my current options were to sit through an awkward five-minute car ride or lose a toe to the cold. I scurried over to her car and climbed in, immediately shoving my nearly blue hands toward the hot air vents.

*Oh sweet sweet warmth, how I've missed you.*

"I'm guessing Si ditched you back there?" she asked, turning her signal off and continuing down the road.

I nodded. "A stampede couldn't tear that guy away from a potential date."

She let out a small chuckle, and I hated the way it made me swell with joy.

I had to stay focused, to keep the situation under control. It didn't matter that she looked gorgeous as all hell tonight, or that the smell of her perfume was permanently imprinted on my brain. We were still Anabelle and Leo, ex-friends turned bitter acquaintances, and that wasn't going to change just because of a couple chance run-ins.

I resisted the urge to think about how it had felt to hold her a mere fifteen minutes ago, or how my knees had gone weak when she looked up at me with those big doe eyes. The defensive part of my brain told me to keep the conversation light; keep my barriers up to protect myself from getting hurt again. But my

overeager friend in my lower extremity told me to risk it all and make a move. Both were competing for the gold medal.

“So why’d you call it a night?” I asked coolly, staring out the passenger side window.

Point: brain.

“Umm, I don’t know. I was there early to help set up, so I did what I came to do.” she shrugged. “I think the party just lost its appeal after...”

*After the menace that is Jason Hayes.*

“Thanks, by the way—for what you did.” she faltered as we came to a stop at a red light.

“You already thanked me.”

“No, really.” She turned to look at me with sobering sincerity in her eyes. “That was sweet of you. I know I haven’t exactly been the nicest person in the world to you since I got back, so I’m not sure I deserved it.”

*Damnit.*

I wasn’t ready for this yet, for the facade of hatred to come down. Because that’s really all it was to me: an act. After our falling out all those years ago, she seemed to hate me with every fiber of her being. She wouldn’t talk to me, let alone look me in the eye. It was basically like I didn’t exist in her world anymore, and I didn’t know how to process that. I’d never lost a friend before, never had to deal with someone I cared so much about despising me.

So I fought fire with fire. I convinced myself that I hated her too, for cutting me out and abandoning me the way she did. It was the only way to make it stop hurting, to shift the focus from pain to anger. But I knew deep down that I didn't mean it, that it was just a coping mechanism. I thought if I just focused on playing the game, on matching her tone and one-upping her insults, I wouldn't have time to think about how much it hurt.

But now she was being nice to me. The veil of hatred was coming down, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to put it back up.

"I haven't necessarily been the picture of neighborly kindness either, so we'll call it even." I shrugged.

The corner of her mouth turned up into a smile as she placed her hand on mine, her fingers softly brushing against my knuckles.

"Deal."

It was an act of friendship, and nothing more; just a simple gesture to symbolize us burying the hatchet. And yet, that one move seemed to veer us dangerously far away from the cool indifference I was trying to maintain. It tore down any remaining walls between us and brought me right back to how it used to be.

Suddenly I'm back in her basement, trying to contain my laughter as I help her beat Simon in poker by signaling his cards to her. Suddenly we're walking home from school and she's jumping in a puddle just to splash me, or racing me home even though she knows she'll never win. Suddenly it's like we're teenagers again, and we never left each other's lives.

My gaze drifted from the flecks of olive green in her big doe eyes to the curve of her cherry-red lips. Big mistake. I wondered what it would be like to taste them, and my overeager friend was now taking the lead against my brain.

“The light’s green.” I blurted, pulling my hand away before I did something stupid.

She seemed taken aback for a moment, frowning ever so slightly before continuing through the intersection as we sat in uncomfortable silence.

*Crap, I ruined it.*

“So uhh, tell me about your boyfriend.” I added after a beat, trying to salvage the moment while low-key fishing for details on the man who was mysteriously MIA this evening.

“Oh, Blake?”

*Blake.* Sounds like a dirtbag. I immediately regretted asking about him.

“There’s really not much to say.” she continued, seeming to contemplate her answer. “He’s a doctor back in New York, we’ve only been together a few months.”

“A doctor, huh? What, did you fall off your bike again and get rushed to the ER, Miss Two-Left-Feet?”

“Shut up!” she laughed, nudging me with her elbow as her cheeks turned a bright shade of pink. “For your information, that’s not how it happened.”

“Then how did you two meet?”

*And why do I care so much?*

“On a dating app, like all normal twenty-somethings.”

“Ohhh, so it’s *that* kind of relationship.” I sneered, raising an eyebrow at her.

I was no stranger to the Tinder booty call, though I didn’t seem to have as much of a taste for it as Simon did.

“Is not!” she proudly declared. “Unlike *some* people, I’m capable of having a deep, meaningful relationship. I’ll have you know he’s coming to spend New Year’s with my family, thank you very much.”

“He is?”

“Mhm. Day after Christmas.” she nodded.

They were already on the meeting-the-parents stage? I hadn’t realized they were that serious... My chest tightened at the thought of another man spending the holidays with her family; shaking hands with her dad, saving her from her mom’s quippy comments, and getting to kiss her at midnight on New Year’s.

I was suddenly grateful I hadn’t let myself think there might be something between us, since I was obviously way out of left field. She was in a serious relationship with someone who fit into her new lavish lifestyle, not a guy she had left in the dust years ago.

I officially declared my brain the winner against my overeager friend since I now had concrete evidence that there was no chance anything would ever be happening between us.

“That’s great, I’m happy for you.” I feigned, knowing I was anything but happy for them.

“What about you? Tricked some poor woman into being your girlfriend yet?”

I managed a small chuckle, realizing just how little she clearly still thought of me.

“Tons, actually. Got a whole sister-wives situation going on.”

“Ahh, I should have known. Well please, do give them my regards.”

Her lips curled into a smile as she pulled into my driveway, her eyes resting on me for a moment. I felt like I should have said something there, but instead opted to unbuckle my seatbelt and hop out of the car.

I refused to make eye contact as I thanked her for the ride, hurrying up the walkway before I could embarrass myself further.

“Wait, Leo?”

My heart skipped a beat at the sound of my name rolling off her tongue. I turned around to find her leaning toward the lowered window, a wide smile pasted across those tantalizing lips.

“Yeah?”

“I forgot to tell you, you won the raffle! The espresso machine’s in the trunk.”

*Lucky me.*

## Thirteen

### Anabelle



“Miss me?” I chimed on my neighbor’s front porch as Mrs. Rojas (or Carmen, as she insisted I call her) answered the door.

“Anabelle!”

The lines of her eyes crinkled as she smiled wide, pulling me in for a warm embrace—one that I didn’t know how much I had needed until now.

Today was going to be a good day, I just knew it. I had woken up bright and early after a full eight hours of sleep with a smile on my face and a steely determination in my heart. It was time to stop procrastinating and finally get around to all the things I had been putting off. After my morning run, I would pop over next door to see Mrs. Rojas, then I would finish up the last of my Christmas shopping, and finally, I would reply to my agent to inform her I couldn’t make it to the casting call on the 27<sup>th</sup>.

I was already ahead of schedule since I had spent hours coming up with the perfect gift for my mother after the party last night. Okay, so I was really brainstorming ideas while watching *Love Actually* in my bedroom, but the thought was still there.



As it turned out, the best Christmas movie ever made was the secret key to my success. When Alan Rickman gifted that gold heart necklace to his nasty man-stealing assistant, it hit me—the perfect gift, right in front of my eyes.

My mother used to have a heart-shaped necklace just like that one when I was growing up, and she loved it. It was her special occasion necklace which she only wore for date nights, weddings, and graduations. Being the little rascal that I was, I snuck into her closet one morning and borrowed it for my seventh grade picture day. I, of course, immediately lost it at school because I am the worst human being in the entire world. Looking back, that's probably the reason why she despised me so much.

If I could find a similar necklace in time, not only would it be the most perfect present EVER but it would also be my ticket back into her good graces.

“Is this a bad time?”

“Not at all, please come in!” Carmen chimed, ushering me into the foyer and out of the cold. “Leonardo went out to get us some coffees but he should be back any minute.”

I pulled off my coat and hung it up in the closet like I'd done a hundred times before, then followed her into the living room where we sat down on the couch.

“Actually, I came to see you.”

“Oh!” Her eyes widened in delight at my response, before promptly downturned in sorrow at the presumed reason for my

visit. "I assume you heard about Edgar then."

"A little bit..."

I couldn't imagine having my personal business gossiped about all over town like that. On top of everything else she was going through, she also had to worry about what her friends and neighbors were saying about her separation behind closed doors.

"I'm so sorry," I added, gently taking her hand in mine. "I know you'll refuse any offer I make to help out, but I'm going to say it either way. If you need anything, *anything* at all, I'm here for you. And for Leo."

She gave me a misty-eyed smile and pulled me in for another hug, which I was always happy to receive.

It made me sad to think of how long I had been blissfully unaware of what was going on in their lives. I wished I had been there for her sooner, been there for Leo sooner. Rather than being a recluse in the city who didn't bother to check up on anyone...

It suddenly occurred to me that withdrawing myself to the city was a selfish move and that I hadn't thought about the implications for those around me. I was so focused on getting away from my own problems that I didn't stop to think about how my absence would affect others.

"Would you like to stay for breakfast? I can whip up some eggs and bacon." my neighbor proposed, switching the subject before we both started blubbering.

“Thanks so much for offering Mrs. Ro—*Carmen*. But I actually can’t stay for long, I still have some last-minute Christmas shopping to finish up.” I replied, tugging open the purse on my arm. “Speaking of which,”

I pulled out the small gift basket I had purchased last night from my Burberry tote (yes, I brought several different purses with me for a two-week trip, and yes, I was still paying off this ridiculously overpriced bag in installments) and handed it to her.

Her eyes lit up as she looked between me and the basket. “Anabelle, you shouldn’t have!”

“Consider it the first of many repayments on my birthday gift backlog.”

She chuckled and squeezed my hand before undoing the bow at the top and unwrapping the basket, revealing the assortment of fancy products. I almost wished I had picked one up for myself when I had the chance, but I knew if anyone deserved to pamper herself with fancy soaps and creams, it was Carmen.

After nearly twenty minutes of testing face creams and catching up, I reluctantly said my goodbyes and made my way back to the foyer to get my coat. I had a long list of jewelry stores to hit up today in search of the coveted gold necklace, so I had to get a move on. I slipped on my boots and gave Carmen one last hug before heading back out the door, already feeling lighter after our short but sweet visit.

Except right as I was walking down the front steps, Leo’s car pulled into the driveway and the strangest occurrence happened

—I *wasn't* completely displeased to see him. It's almost as if I was... happy?

I needed to get out of this town fast. I had barely been here four days and already my soft spot for him was starting to defrost. It probably didn't help that he had heroically swooped in and saved me from Jason at the party last night... Damn his charming nature.

"Hey, you!" I called out when he stepped out of his car and nodded in my direction, coffees in hand.

*'Hey, you'? Way to be weird, Annie.*

"You sure you're not following me, Spencer? The evidence seems to speak for itself."

He flashed me his pearly whites and I swear I felt a butterfly materialize in my stomach.

"You caught me. I've been sitting on this step for hours, just waiting to get a glimpse of you."

"Creepy." he smirked, causing that butterfly to duplicate on the spot. "I wish you had told me you were coming over, if I'd known I would've picked you up a mocha."

I didn't know which was more yummy—the thought of a mocha, or the fact that Leo remembered my go-to coffee order after all these years.

"Good memory."

"Are you staying? I don't mind sharing mine with you, as long as you promise not to get your germs all over it."

Alarm bells went off in my head, blaring on full blast. What was this unprecedented act of kindness, and why was it happening? Were we *friends* now? Had our conversation in the car last night completely erased nearly a decade's worth of loathing?

I wasn't ready for this, to open myself back up to him again. To let myself get sucked in by his kindness, his infuriating ability to make you feel like the most special person in the world. Though I had to admit the offer was pretty tempting, even with the grade-school level insult.

"I was actually on my way out, I just stopped by to catch up with your mom." I sputtered as I continued past him down the driveway, determined not to get drawn in by his deep gorgeous eyes. "Thanks for the offer though!"

"Oh—okay, no sweat."

Did I detect a hint of disappointment in his voice? No way, I must have been projecting.

"Enjoy your germ-free coffee!" I hollered as I booked it down the sidewalk, not looking back at the risk of abandoning all my plans to spend the day with Carmen and Leo.

*Must stay focused.*

I made a bee-line for my car down the street, being semi-careful not to slip and fall on the ice that had formed on the ground. The last thing I needed was to break my leg and be stuck here for a second longer than required.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket while I hustled, and beamed when I pulled it out to find Blake's name on the caller ID.

*Finally!*

I decided to make an exception in my strict agenda for my boyfriend, given his busy schedule. Who knows when he'd be able to call me again? I hit the green *Accept* button as I unlocked my car door and slipped inside, grinning ear to ear.

"So you *are* alive! I was getting ready to file a missing persons report, mister."

"Hey, baby." he mewled, completely missing my charming opening joke. "Listen, we need to talk."

*Oh, he did NOT just say 'we need to talk'.*

"I know I've been kind of absent lately—"

"Yes you have, and I've been a super gracious and understanding girlfriend who's willing to overlook it." I cut him off, reminding him of my many great qualities since it seemed he may have forgotten.

He cleared his throat and paused a moment, apparently not finding me as cute and lovable as I thought I was.

"I've been thinking a lot about this whole 'meeting the parents' thing, and I'm just not sure if I can go through with it."

"Excuse me?"

"Well it got me thinking, if I meet your parents, then you'll eventually have to come meet mine, right?"

Already, I was not liking where this conversation was headed. “Correct, that’s usually how it goes down.”

“The thing is, my parents are... How do I put this? They have high standards.”

I didn’t give him the privilege of replying to that last statement, forcing him to elaborate before I drove over there to squeeze an explanation out of him.

“See, everyone in my family is either a doctor, a lawyer, or some self-made millionaire entrepreneur.”

“Uh-huh.”

*Still not seeing the point.*

“Well you see,” he huffed. “I realized I can’t bring home anyone who falls short of their expectations. Like if I were to bring home a model, they would laugh in my face.”

*Ouch?*

It’s not like I was a rabid bear off the street. I was still a person with a job—a job that many would consider to be highly desirable, might I add. And why did he assume his parents wouldn’t like me? Parents *loved* me! At least, Carmen did.

“It just wouldn’t be fair of me to put you through that, you know? I’m basically doing you a favor by sparing you from them.” he added in his most sincere tone.

A “favor”? What, did he expect me to thank him now or something?

I remained silent, trying to wrap my head around the whiplash I was currently experiencing. Why would he choose today, a mere four days before Christmas, to tell me about his parents? After all the planning that went into this trip and all the convincing I had to do with my mother?

Was I being punk'd? Someone tell me I was about to meet Ashton Kutcher.

“Look, I just don’t think it’s going to work out between us. I’m sorry, okay?” he snapped.

*What?*

“What the fuck? How did we go from not meeting the parents to full-on breaking up?”

“C’mon Anabelle, don’t act so surprised. We were never really going to do the whole ‘meet the parents’ thing—we both knew what this was.”

“And that is?”

He let out a big sigh, and I could practically feel him rolling his eyes through the phone. “A fling.”

My stubbornness and surprise forbade me from validating his words with a response. I was baffled. Befuddled. Bewildered. I hadn’t thought this was a fling... I mean, I knew we didn’t have much in common and that we had never really talked about the big stuff, like whether or not we wanted marriage or kids... But I hadn’t thought that meant anything. It was still a new relationship, it was normal not to talk about that kind of stuff, wasn’t it?



“Are you still there?” he huffed.

I grunted in confirmation. Suddenly there didn't seem to be enough air in the car, and the world around me was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. I hated this feeling, like you were watching a train wreck about to happen and couldn't do anything to stop it.

This just couldn't be happening. *Could. Not.*

“I need you to acknowledge that you heard what I said and you know it's over.”

Yup, this was happening. I was being dumped over the phone, sitting alone in my parked car, freezing my ass off. And why? Because I was a *model*?

I racked my brain for a snide response I could give him, the perfect cutthroat phrase to send him off to hell with. I was full of sarcastic comments and biting remarks around Leo, I was sure I could come up with something good to stick it to this asshole. I wanted to make him hurt, make him suffer, make him bleed.

“You. Suck.”

*'You suck'?! THAT'S ALL YOU GOT?!*

I heard the phone line go dead as he hung up on me, and wanted for the second time in my life to bury myself deep into the ground and never, ever come out.

## Fourteen

*Leo*



**B**lake Townsend.

God, even his name sounded douchey. He was probably the type of guy that came from old money, went to one of those snobby Ivy League schools like Princeton or Dartmouth, and played squash at the country club on the weekends.

I scrolled through his profile on Instagram, having tracked him down after a few minutes of subtle snooping while waiting for my coffees. As it turned out, he hadn't been too hard to find. All I had to do was log in to the app (which proved to be more time-consuming than I thought, since I generally wasn't very active on social media and nearly forgot my password), search up Anabelle's profile since I already followed her, and scroll through all of her posts until I found one that he was tagged in.

...Okay, so maybe I did have to go through a *little* trouble to find him. It didn't mean I actually cared about who she was dating. I was just curious, that's all.

I held back the urge to gag as I scanned his page, which was filled with pictures of him posing in front of expensive cars,

drinking at exclusive clubs with his trust-fund-looking friends, and mirror selfies of him flexing in a white lab coat and scrubs.

My chest tightened when I landed on a picture of Anabelle sitting on his lap at a restaurant, a glass of champagne in hand and a smile spread across her face. She looked drop-dead gorgeous as usual, wearing the same tiny black satin dress she had on at the party last night. He, on the other hand, looked slimy as ever with a ten thousand dollar watch hanging off of his wrist and his hand firmly planted on her ass.

What did she even see in this guy? And what could they possibly have in common? I bet all he talked about was summering at his beach house in the Hamptons and how investing in cryptocurrency was the way of the future.

“Sir?”

I looked up to find the barista holding out my coffees and realized I had been actively scowling at my phone for the last five minutes. I apologized and grabbed the tray from the young man, wondering when exactly I became a “sir”.

I made my way out of the coffee house and back to my car, trying to focus on anything other than Anabelle Spencer. Why was she all I could think about from the moment I bumped into her at this very spot? She had only been here a few days and already I was falling back into old habits that I thought I had shaken.

Being distracted was the absolute last thing I needed right now. I already had enough on my plate, from focusing on my new promotion at work to ensuring a smooth and cheery

holiday season for me and my mom. I couldn't risk pulling focus from either one of those things, at least not for a woman who had zero interest in me.

I pulled into my driveway and put the car in park, grabbing the tray of coffees in one hand and my keys in the other. Except right when I opened the door to get out, I spotted Anabelle exiting my house as if I had manifested her presence from sheer thought. My heart skipped a beat when I saw her look over at me and smile, once again letting my mind wander to the dangerous hopeful place.

*Keep it together, don't get sucked in.*

I stepped out of the car and nodded over to her casually, trying my best to establish the same cool indifference from the ride home last night.

"Hey, you!" she beamed.

*Welp, there goes that.*

\* \* \*

"I'm back!" I called out to my mom as I stepped inside the house and kicked off my boots.

I started making my way toward the kitchen before I noticed her sitting in the living room, hurriedly shifting around from her position where she had directly faced the window.

"What are you up to?" I prodded as she tapped away aimlessly on her tablet, smiling to herself while refusing to make eye contact.

“Nothing.”

“Uh-huh.” I doubted, sitting down beside her and handing over her cup. “So you weren’t just spying on me and Anabelle outside?”

Her cheeks turned bright red and the smile on her face became a full-fledged grin.

“I would never!”

“I’m sure.”

She couldn’t be more obvious about her feelings toward the two of us. If we were in the business of arranged marriages, Anabelle would be halfway down the aisle in a big white dress by now. I knew my mom was secretly waiting for one of us to confess our undying love for the other and run off into the sunset together. But unfortunately for me, it looked like Anabelle would be doing all of her sunset running with Blake Townsend from now on.

I decided not to tell her about Anabelle’s rich new doctor boyfriend, partly because I was in denial and partly because I didn’t want to shatter her illusion. At least one of us could dream about me and Anabelle ending up together.

I couldn’t blame my mom though, it was incredibly thoughtful of Anabelle to take the time to stop by—even if it meant she had likely only done it after hearing about my dad. I felt a pit form in my stomach as I realized the news about my parents was still circulating around town, and probably wouldn’t be dying down any time soon.

“It’s just nice to see the two of you being friends again, that’s all.” my mom chimed. “You may not want to admit it, but I know it was hard for you when she moved away.”

*Friends.*

Is that what we were now? Just two people who lived side by side and were chummy whenever we crossed paths? It seemed unlikely after the cold start our reunion had. Had we somehow gone from sworn enemies to casual buddies in the short time since last Thursday?

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say *friends*, exactly.”

The fact was, Anabelle had made it abundantly clear all those years ago that she and I would never be friends again. Maybe she no longer remembered her sworn oath to despise me forever, but I sure as hell did.

In the following weeks after my split with Hailee, Anabelle and I hadn’t really talked much. She had basically avoided me all throughout the break, not answering any of my texts or calls. I figured she was just trying to put some distance between us out of solidarity for her best friend, and that things would go back to normal as soon as school started back up again. Boy was I wrong.

Whenever I tried to talk to her at her locker in between classes, she would bolt in the other direction. When I tried to catch up with her at lunch, she and her friends switched tables as soon as they saw me coming. Even when it came to walking home from school with me and Simon like she did every day, suddenly she had “after-school curriculars” to take care of.

I couldn't understand why she was avoiding me. I mean, I had expected this kind of treatment from Hailee, but why Anabelle? It's not like I did anything to her... You'd think after all the years we'd known each other, I'd at least be owed the benefit of the doubt. I wanted to explain myself, to let Anabelle know that I wasn't a bad guy. Once she knew the reason I broke up with Hailee, I was sure she'd see things differently and possibly even feel the same way about me.

In a last-ditch attempt to get some answers, I snuck out of the house one late night and made my way over to the Spencers' backyard where I could throw rocks at Anabelle's bedroom window. After all, it seemed like the only way to get her attention at that point, and it worked well for everyone in the movies.

After a couple of surprisingly accurate first throws, I saw the light of her room turn on followed by her head poking out of the window. She was wearing fuzzy flannel pajamas and her wild red hair was even wilder and cuter than usual. I suspected I had just woken her up by the state of her bedhead, and felt I was already off to a rough start with this whole romantic gesture thing.

"Leo? What are you doing here?" she croaked from above, rubbing her eyes in the most adorable way.

"Come down!" I whispered-shouted, trying my hardest to be loud enough for her to hear me but not enough to wake her parents—or Simon, for that matter. He would kill me if he knew why I was there.

"Why..?"

"Just get your butt down here, Annie!"

She grumbled and shut the window, stepping away as the light in her room turned off. My heart was thumping in my ears while I waited for her to come downstairs, my pulse quickening when she approached the sliding glass door at the back of the house.

This was it, the moment I would finally tell her how I felt. The moment I'd pour my heart out and take her in my arms, where she'd tell me she felt the same way and we'd live happily every after. No more hiding our feelings from each other, from her friends, or from Simon.

She slid open the door a couple inches and paused expectantly, apparently not liking being woken up and dragged downstairs in the middle of the night. "What do you want, Leo?"

*Harsh.* I guess she wasn't a morning person.

"I've been texting you." I said, searching her face for a warm smile, a look of familiar tenderness in her eyes, or even just an acknowledgment of what I'd said. Instead I was met with an icy glare and standoffish body language that I had never seen on her before. "I've been trying to talk to you about something for weeks, but it kind of seems like you've been avoiding me."

"I already know about you and Hailee, so there's nothing to talk about."

*Fair.*

I knew Hailee would tell her about the breakup right away, so I had expected a little hesitation from her right off the bat.



“Actually, it’s about something else. Well, it’s kind of related to that, sort of the reason we broke up.”

A smile crept up on my face while I internally rehearsed my lines, bracing myself for the proverbial moment of truth. She stared at the ground and picked at her nails, seeming not to notice the buzz of excitement and nerves going on in my head.

“Don’t bother, Hailee told me what you said about me.”

*Oh. Crap.*

“She—she did? She promised me she wouldn’t say anything.”

*Crap crap crap crap crap.* That wasn’t the way I wanted her to find out. She was supposed to hear it from me, hear the speech I had planned out and rehearsed; not be blindsided by my ex-girlfriend.

Suddenly her avoidance over the past few weeks made perfect sense. She was totally freaked out. One minute I’m just her neighbor who’s dating her best friend, and the next I’m madly in love with her? No wonder she was overwhelmed.

“Well, she did.” her groggy voice uttered, eyes still glued to the ground.

We stood in silence for what felt like an eternity while I tried to regroup and come up with a new game plan. So she’d known about my feelings for her for weeks and had been actively avoiding me. That wasn’t a bad sign, right? I could still salvage the moment... Right?

“Can you please go now?” she mewled, starting to slide the door shut between us.

“Hold on,” I stuck my hand in the door frame before it could close all the way. “What’s going on here? Are you mad at me or something?”

“Am I *mad* at you?” she barked as she looked up at me, tears starting to form in her seething eyes. “Of course I’m mad!”

*What the hell?*

Was dumping her best friend for her really that bad? Okay, I guess when I put it like that it didn’t sound super endearing, but still... I had thought it was kind of romantic.

“Jesus, if I had known it was that big of a deal, I wouldn’t have said anything... Let’s just forget about it then, okay?”

My mood instantly shifted from hopeful optimism to cold apathy as I realized I had been rejected. She clearly didn’t feel the same way about me, and now I felt embarrassed for having been so sure this would end well for us. Here I was, standing out in the cold, putting myself out there, throwing freaking rocks at her window, and she felt absolutely nothing for me.

“I can’t do that.” she hissed. “Don’t you see that everything is different between us now?”

“I—”

“What? Did you think we would stay friends after that?”

*Well not exactly...*

I had kind of hoped we’d be more than friends—up until thirty seconds ago. Something about her tone wasn’t sitting right with me. Why was *she* mad at *me*? She was the one who rejected

me, who had been blowing me off for the last three weeks, and who just tried to slam the door in my face. But somehow I was the bad guy in all this?

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying...” she started, her teary eyes falling back to the ground. “I’m saying I don’t ever want to talk to you again. Just stay out of my life, Leo.”

And with that she shut the door in my face and walked off, leaving me alone in the cold darkness of her backyard, completely and utterly confused.

## Fifteen

### Anabelle



**M**y eyes opened and adjusted to the darkness of my bedroom, my head pounding as I sat up and wiped at the hair glued to my cheek.

*What's happening? Is it morning already?*

I felt around for my phone under my pillow and turned it on to check the time, the brightness of my screen nearly blinding me in the process. It was just past 11 p.m., and confusion set in as I scrambled to read the multiple missed texts I had from my mother.

• **5:37 p.m.:** Are you coming down for dinner?

• **5:49 p.m.:** Hello?? What's going on? Are you asleep?

• **7:12 p.m.:** We saved a plate for you in the fridge.

*Riiight.*

The flashbacks of getting brutally dumped over the phone earlier that day started coming back to me. After Blake hung up on me, I went through an array of varying emotions. First I stared at my phone in shocked silence, then I cried like a little baby for an embarrassing amount of time, then I pulled myself

together and started the car so I could carry on with my day like the badass woman that I was. After all, who needs a boyfriend to make them feel validated? Not me. Who cares if Blake thought being a model wasn't a "good enough" career for his family? It was good enough for me, and that's all that mattered.

...Then I turned the car back off and cried some more.

I weighed my available options: I could either A) drive over to his place and run him over with my car, then change my name and move to France, spending the rest of my days eating croissants and cheese in solitude; or B) have a self-pity day and pick myself back up tomorrow.

I chose the latter.

After a solid half hour of wallowing in the freezing cold of my car, it was clear I was in no mood to go shopping, so I trudged my way back toward my parents' house to wallow in the warmth. I went straight up to my bedroom and locked the door, isolating myself so I could cry into my pillow in peace.

I must have fallen asleep because last I remembered, it was still light out... I guess taking a nine-hour nap in the middle of the afternoon probably wasn't the best sign that I was handling the breakup well.

I pulled off the covers and stood up, rubbing my temples as I attempted to pull myself together.

*Breathe. Deep breaths, in and out.*

I felt my diaphragm expand when I took a big inhale through my nose, and contract when I exhaled through my mouth. I

counted to five at the top of my breath like I'd learned to do when I was feeling overwhelmed, releasing it and starting over again a few more times.

*Okay, great. Breathing, check. What's next? I should probably eat something.*

I shuffled toward the door and opened it slowly, trying not to make it creak. I knew my mother was a light sleeper, but I was starving and definitely couldn't wait until morning to eat. Plus, I was kind of done with being cooped up in my room for the time being.

I slowly made my way down the stairs, using the glow from the Christmas tree to guide me. Once in the kitchen and a safe distance from the upstairs, I turned on the light and found a note taped to the fridge door.

*Saved you some chicken and green beans, xoxo -Mom*

Maybe I was being too hard on her before. In the old days, she would have come bursting into my room to wake me up and drag me downstairs for dinner. But this time she had opted to give me my space and let me be alone, which was definitely a huge step for her. Was she finally seeing me as an adult and respecting my boundaries? Now I felt bad that I hadn't gotten around to getting her gift today—tomorrow I would get it, for sure.

I whipped open the fridge and inspected my sad little plate of bland chicken and soggy green beans, not really feeling like eating it. On any other day, I would never have passed it up since

I hated to waste and it would be rude not to eat what my mother had prepared for me.

But I made an exception for myself today, on account of having my heart (and pride) ripped to shreds. I knew what I felt like eating, and it definitely wasn't protein and vegetables. No, there was only one cure for my aching heart: double fudge brownies. If my therapist was here, she'd tell me I was "emotionally eating" and that it wasn't a healthy coping mechanism. But since she wasn't here and I was sad, alone and hungry, she could shove that advice where the sun don't shine.

I pulled out my mom's recipe book from the cupboard and turned to the page titled "The Best Double Fudge Brownies", the tattered chocolate-stained paper bringing me right back to my childhood. These were my favorite treat growing up, but we unfortunately weren't allowed to have them unless we were celebrating something big.

I started pulling out ingredients: flour, sugar, eggs, butter, cocoa powder, vanilla, salt, and chocolate chips, setting each one down on the counter with delicate precision so as to not make too much noise. I preheated the oven to 450°F, resenting the loud beeping sounds that threatened to rat me out.

I gently mixed together the ingredients in a bowl, starting with the dry then adding in the wet. It took me twice as long to make the mixture given how slowly I was whisking, but I found it to be kind of therapeutic. Once the batter was ready, I poured it into an 8 x 8-inch pan, evening out the top with my wooden spoon before licking the remainder off as a pre-snack treat. I

popped it into the oven and set the timer on my phone (to avoid the evil oven beeping), heading into the living room to chill while they baked.

I absently scrolled through my socials, actively trying not to think about you-know-who and the you-know-what from earlier today. I had wasted enough time crying over Blake, and I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of getting under my skin.

And then, as if the universe had heard my plans and laughed, I stumbled across a new post he had made an hour ago. In the picture, he was at his favorite bar around the corner from his apartment with his friends (who had all conveniently just unfollowed me). And, was that..? Yup. He had his arm around another woman's waist.

*Well that was fast.*

I guess the breakup wasn't affecting him quite as much as me. Shocker.

I zoomed in on his stupid face, wishing I could flick it through the phone. His dumb, stupid face that had led me into a false sense of security. I didn't get it, why wasn't I enough for him?

In high school, I was never "pretty" enough for anyone to like me, so I worked on my self-esteem for years until I became the confident, beautiful woman I was today. Men started throwing themselves at me, not because my size had changed, but because my attitude did. And for the first time in my life, I felt... *Sexy*.



But just when my appearance stopped being an issue, suddenly I'm still not worthy because of my job? What kind of sick joke was that? There was no winning for me, I was destined to be sad and alone forever.

And then, against my best wishes, my eyes started to water. Again.

*Great. Juuust great.*

I felt pathetic, crying my eyes out in the middle of the night on my parents' couch. How had I come to this? Just yesterday I had it all—a wealthy boyfriend, an apartment in the city (a big accomplishment for anyone from Woodberry), and even an opportunity to audition for New York Fashion Week.

*Oh my God, the casting!*

I had planned on telling Hazel today that I wouldn't be able to make it to the NYFW casting on the 27<sup>th</sup> since I was supposed to be spending that time with Blake... Well, not anymore. I opened up my email and wrote out a rushed typo-filled reply to my agent, letting her know I would absolutely be there. I smashed the send button and then in a moment of rage against Blake, against myself for ever having dated a jerk like him, and against Instagram for showing me that awful picture, I shut down my phone and threw it across the room. Luckily it landed on the carpet instead of shattering on the floor, but it still felt good to throw it.

I sat in a sad, weeping ball for a minute, pitifully trying to practice my breathing technique once more. Just then, I heard

footsteps coming down the stairs and frantically tried to wipe away any signs of crying from my face.

“What’s going on down here?!” my mother whispered angrily as she rounded the corner.

“Sorry Mom, didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Mhmm...” she muttered, inspecting the room around us. “What are you still doing up? And what’s with all the banging? I thought I heard something fall.”

“It’s nothing, I just dropped my phone.”

*Pleaseee go away so I can cry in peace.*

“You should really be more careful with that thing, phones don’t come cheap these days.”

*Yeah I would know, I bought it.*

A small part of me knew she had a point, I probably shouldn’t have been going around throwing my phone at the floor for no good reason. But seeing as I wasn’t in the best state of mind right now, there was exactly a zero percent chance I’d be telling her she was right.

“Look, I had a pretty rough day today. Can you just spare me the lecture until tomorrow?” I barked.

“Excuse me?”

*Uh oh.*

“Young lady, I am your mother and you will speak to me with respect.” she added, her scolding face apparent even through the dim light of the tree.

I grunted as I tried to string together a sentence that wouldn't piss her off further, knowing I was currently walking a very fine line. I debated whether or not to tell her about the breakup, wondering if it would grant me some sympathy points or make things even worse after all the drama our first conversation about Blake had led to.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"And how exactly *did* you mean it?"

*Urghhhh.*

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I just need to be alone right now, please."

"Well, this is my house. If I want to stand in my own living room, I will." she said matter-of-factly, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

*So much for boundaries.* I'm not sure if it was the breakup talking or if I'd just finally had enough of my mother being unreasonable, but something inside of me snapped.

"Jesus Mom, do you have to be so childish? Can't you leave me alone for like five fucking minutes?"

In the two milliseconds it took for her to process what I'd said, her face turned from angry, to shocked, to absolutely livid. The vein in her forehead started popping out as her brows furrowed, her eyes squinting at me in a look that would most certainly incinerate me if looks could kill.

*Yup, I've done it now.*

I internally face-palmed myself as I realized I'd made a critical mistake. There was no turning back once that vein came out to play.

"Anabelle Spencer, you march yourself upstairs NOW."

God, you'd swear I was still ten years old.

I jerked myself up from the couch and stormed upstairs, hating every second of this miserable day. I got to my room and slammed the door, hearing my mother's slam shortly afterward. I hated how similar we were.

Since I was pretty sure I wouldn't be able to fall asleep after my nine-hour nap earlier, I popped a couple of my sleeping pills, burrowed myself into bed and pulled the comforter up over my head. If my mother thought she was getting a Christmas present from me now, she was delusional.

Now that I basically had no more reason to stay in this stupid town since my boyfriend broke up with me and my mother didn't care if I lived or died, I decided I'd leave for the city first thing in the morning.

And tomorrow couldn't possibly come fast enough.

## Sixteen

*Leo*



*... 197... 198... 199... 200.*

*Ugh.*

Whoever said counting sheep was a surefire way to fall asleep was lying. I had been trying every trick in the book for the last hour, none of them making me the least bit tired. If anything, I actually felt more awake now.

My work schedule had messed up my internal clock so badly that even on my days off, I couldn't bring myself to fall asleep before two in the morning. As much as I loved staying up late every night in my teens, the appeal sort of wore off when you were an aging adult with responsibilities in the morning.

I knew there was only one more thing left to try: warm milk. My mom used to make it for me all the time when I was little, so there must have been some merit to it. Sure, it was a last resort option, but at this point I was desperate to get some z's.

I strolled downstairs and into the kitchen, pulling open the fridge to take out the 2% carton. Two minutes later I was sitting at the table drinking lukewarm milk out of a mug that said

“World’s Best Mom” (we were out of clean mugs). I sipped in silence, not sure if the bland beverage was actually doing anything other than making me wish I hadn’t thought of it. It really wasn’t as comforting when you made it for yourself, and I could’ve sworn this tasted more appetizing when I was a kid. Maybe it was because I forgot to add the honey.

Suddenly, I saw something flicker out of the corner of my eye. I ignored it at first, thinking I must have been seeing things—after all, sleep deprivation can do that to a person. But when I saw it happen again, I turned my head toward the window behind me, which coincidentally faced the Spencers’ house. What was going on over there?

I got up from the table and walked over to inspect it more closely, squinting my eyes since you could just barely see into the neighbor’s kitchen from our house. At first I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me, because I couldn’t possibly be seeing what I thought I was. Were those... flames?

It took a few seconds for my brain to click as I watched flashes of red and orange emerge from their oven, fire quickly spreading through their kitchen by the second.

*HOLY F—*

I ran to my front door, barely taking the time to pull on my jacket and boots before booking it outside. I raced through the small mounds of snow that separated our lawn from the neighbors, hearing the shrill sound of their smoke detector grow louder as I got closer. Snow crept its way into my boots and the icy air pinched my face as I ran, but in that moment I couldn’t

feel anything except the adrenaline and panic coursing through my veins. I nearly slid on some ice as I sprang forward, catching myself just in time and pushing on to their porch.

I lunged toward their front door, banging on it and screaming “FIRE” at the top of my lungs. I pounded so hard I thought I might break the door down right there and then, while one singular word echoed through my mind.

*Anabelle.*

*Anabelle.*

*ANABELLE.*

After what felt like an eternity, the door gave way and flung open at my feet, the faint smell of smoke filling my lungs. Simon tumbled out first, his mom’s arm wrapped around his shoulders as he helped her out of the house. His dad followed shortly behind, seeming out of breath as terror set in on his face. My panicked eyes scanned the scene before me, searching for the last of the Spencer family—the only one still missing, the only one I was suddenly terrified to lose.

“Where’s Anabelle?!” I growled, grabbing Simon by the shoulders and shaking him to get his attention.

“She—her door was locked... I tried to get her but it was locked. I had to get my parents out, but I’m going back inside—”

“SHE’S STILL IN THERE?!”

I didn’t wait for his reply, my body moving faster than my brain could keep up with. I lost all sense of reason, my mind going blank with only adrenaline pushing me forward. My feet

were moving on their own, suddenly lunging me back toward the front door. Without thought or hesitation, I bolted inside the blazing house as if my life depended on it—because at this very moment, my whole world was trapped in her bedroom inside a burning house.



## Seventeen

### Anabelle



A piercing noise rang off in the distance, stirring me half-awake from my sleeping pill-induced slumber. I grunted at the racket, my body refusing to open my eyes through the wave of lingering drowsiness. My hand instinctively reached out to turn off what I thought must be an alarm clock ringing, but came up empty. Where was that sound coming from?

Bangs, thumps and crashes soon followed, the noises seeming to get closer and closer by the second. I groggily pulled the blankets over my head, praying for the commotion to end so that I could get back to my beauty sleep. No such luck though since rapid pounding on my door ensued not a moment later. What the hell was going on? Was I still dreaming?

A figure came crashing in, the shrill sound from downstairs now filling my room. I heard footsteps approach me and a voice calling my name, but I felt stuck in the limbo between sleep and alert. I tried to shake off my grogginess and focus on the noise that sounded so familiar; it wasn't an alarm clock, a phone ringing, or bells. No, it sounded more like... a smoke detector?

“ANNIE! WE GOTTA GO. NOW.” the figure in front of me boomed.

My eyes shot open and I tried to focus my gaze on the stranger, the blurry outline of Leo coming into view. Why in the world was he in my bedroom? Suddenly he yanked the blankets off me and proceeded to position one arm under my back, the other under my legs, lifting me up into his strong chest.

*Okay, I'm totally dreaming. Leo is here to take me away from this awful existence where men dump me for no good reason, and we'll live happily ever after together in a castle far, far away.*

He cradled me close to him as he booked it out of my room and down the stairs, his grip on my body tightening with every step. The high-pitched ringing grew louder in my ears as we approached the landing, the combination of it along with the darkness surrounding us giving me a queasy feeling in my stomach.

I jerked my head toward the source of the sound when we rounded the corner to the front door, catching a glimpse of rapidly rising flames coming from the kitchen. My residual haziness quickly turned to full-fledged panic as the situation became all too real.

*Not a dream! I repeat: NOT. A. DREAM!*

With one last leap over the doorframe, we sprung outside, the frosty air hitting me like a truck. My flimsy pajamas did little to keep me warm, with only Leo's beefy arms wrapped tightly around my body to shield me from the cold.

He darted toward the giant oak tree on our front lawn where minimal snow had gathered underneath, and gently set me down with my back against the trunk. My silk-clad bottom was instantly soaked thanks to the wet ground, but I didn't really seem to notice. I was more focused on the feeling of emptiness I felt when my body left the warmth of his chest.

"Are you okay? Annie, are you hurt?!" he asked furiously, his rough hands delicately cupping my face.

"Yes, I'm—I'm fine, I think..."

"Are you SURE?" he practically yelled, his eyes searching me for signs of damage.

"Yes, Leo I'm okay!" I croaked, tears starting to fill my eyes. "Look, no burns! I'm fine."

I couldn't believe how panicked he was, how worried he seemed to be about my safety. When exactly did he start caring so much about me? More than that, when did he start caring enough to literally run into a burning building to save me? I wondered if maybe there was more between us than he had been letting on; if maybe there were feelings there that he was hiding... That *we* were hiding. Then again, maybe the smoke inhalation was just starting to make me hallucinate.

"Jesus, Annie..." he said as he exhaled a sigh of relief and leaned his forehead up against mine. "You scared me to death."

My mind raced a million miles a second while I tried to straighten out all the rapid-fire questions that popped into my head. Was my childhood home really on *fire*? How bad was it?

Was anyone hurt? How did the fire start? And who on earth was this person losing his mind over my safety, with his worried face now pressed up against mine? This person who held me so close and didn't seem to want to let go any time soon. It certainly wasn't Leo—or at least, not the Leo I knew.

“I'm... I'm sorry.” I offered, not knowing what else to say to this man I had known all my life, who still somehow remained a huge mystery to me.

I felt his breathing slow as he closed his eyes, his thumb softly stroking my cheek with our foreheads still pressed up against each other. I didn't know what events had led us to this point or if any of this was even real—all I knew in that moment was that I never ever wanted him to leave my side.

“You're shivering.” he whispered after a beat, letting go of our embrace to pull off his jacket and wrap it over my shoulders.

My breath caught when its heavenly warmth and delicious scent of cedar wood and fresh linen engulfed me, our eyes locking for what felt like a lifetime. I melted into their deep chocolatey gooeyness, savoring how safe and familiar they felt.

“Thanks.” I breathed.

I never wanted to leave this moment. This perfect, intimate, aching moment where I felt whole and torn apart all at once. Every impulse in my body wanted to surrender to this feeling, to pull him closer, to feel his lips on mine. The feelings I had pushed down for years were bubbling up inside me, breaking my heart all over again while simultaneously taping it back together at the slightest feel of his touch. It was torture and ecstasy all at the

same time, and I would give anything to live in this feeling forever.

“Anabelle!”

Our electrifying moment was abruptly interrupted by the sound of my mother’s voice calling out to me from across the yard. My head shot over in her direction, feeling surprisingly relieved to see her rushing toward us with her arms extended. I looked back over at Leo who promptly cleared his throat and rose to his feet, pulling on both of my hands to help me up. Our eyes met for one last brief moment before he dropped my hands, just as my mother pulled me in for a warm embrace.

The familiar smell of her perfume surrounded me when we hugged, the sound of her voice repeating the words “I’m so sorry” and “I love you” making my eyes sting. I buried my face into her and squeezed her tight, reassuring her that I was okay through her sobs. All of my anger from earlier that evening instantly melted away, leaving me with nothing but gratitude and relief that my family was safe and sound.

My dad and Simon joined us just as the blaring sirens and bright flashing lights of fire trucks charged around the corner of our street, pulling up next to us on the curb. Men in yellow hard hats carrying a giant hose rushed out from the trucks and into our house while we all watched from the sidelines, praying our home wasn’t totally and completely destroyed.

After ten long minutes of anxious nail biting and scattered tear shedding, the flames in the window died down and the

sirens turned off, the firemen slowly starting to exit our house one by one.

Our voices fell to a hushed silence when a burly man with silver hair and a weathered face, who I assumed must be the fire chief, made his way toward us.

“Alright folks, I’ve got good news and bad news.” he declared, hat in hand as he wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead. “The good news is we were able to contain the fire to the kitchen, and there seems to be no damage beyond that point. Bad news, you’ve got a few scorched cabinets and you’ll definitely be needing a new oven and hood vent. All in all, I’d say you got pretty lucky as far as house fires go.”

*Lucky... Is that how we're supposed to feel?*

“We were also able to identify the source of the fire. Seems something was left unattended in the oven—we found a burnt-up pan in there.” he added, holding out the charred pan I had used earlier that evening for my late-night brownies.

*Oh no.*

*No no no.*

*No no no no no NO.*

My breath caught in my throat and my heart sank into my feet as I realized it had all been my fault. I left the brownies in the oven and went to bed after my fight with my mother, leaving them to burn up and catch fire while I freaking slept upstairs. It was me who started the fire, I was the reason our house nearly

got burnt down to the ground. Scratch that, I was the reason my entire family nearly got SCORCHED to death!

I felt a wave of nausea come on and squeezed my eyes shut to stop myself from bursting into tears. I didn't dare look over at my parents at the risk of being on the receiving end of their furious scowls, since I was pretty sure they were writing me off as their child right about now.

"Now, even though we put out the fire and most of the house seems to be in good shape, we still need to test the air quality and make sure everything is structurally sound." the fire chief continued. "Unfortunately we can't get the engineer and the insurance company out here 'til tomorrow or maybe even the day after, and I can't allow you folks to go back inside until that's done. Do you have somewhere else you can stay for the next day or two?"

*Oh great. So on top of almost killing them, now I'm forcing my family out of their home just three days before Christmas Eve? Could this day get any worse?*

"We have some extra rooms at our house next door." Leo declared, stepping forward from our group. "They can stay with us."

## Eighteen

*Leo*



“Up and at ‘em boys!” my mom’s chipper voice called out from outside my bedroom door, accompanied by some loud knocks. “Breakfast is ready!”

Simon groaned in response from the futon on the floor, and I took it upon myself to throw a pillow at his head to wake him up—and to piss him off.

“Why do you hate me?” he mumbled from under a pile of blankets and pillows.

“Because you snore like a freight train. Did you know that?”

Simon had bunked with me last night following the fire at the Spencers’ house and their subsequent eviction. After I volunteered our place up as a solution (without even consulting my mom, now that I thought about it), we headed inside to sort out the temporary sleeping arrangements. It was still the middle of the night after all, and some of us (me) hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep yet.

Many solutions were put forward, such as the Spencers offering to stay in a hotel so they wouldn’t burden my mom and



I, to which my mom vehemently refused like the kind and caring neighbor she was. “There’s no sense in wasting money on a hotel when we have plenty of space here.” she insisted.

Next up, I offered to stay at my apartment for the night to make some extra room, which was also met with a fervent “no” from my mother. I knew she wanted to keep a close eye on me after I quite literally ran into a burning building just minutes prior, but she also reasoned that I should be here to support and comfort my best friend after the events of the evening.

After lots of back and forth and polite arguing, we landed on Simon staying with me in my room, Mr. and Mrs. Spencer sleeping in the guest bedroom, and Anabelle on the pullout couch in the basement. Part of me wished that she was the one sharing a room with me instead of her older brother who kept me up all night with his snoring, but logic told me that was never going to happen.

“I do not!” Simon objected. “Besides, it’s a miracle I was even able to fall asleep at all. Hate to break it to you man, but this thing has seen better days.”

He poked at the futon with a scowl on his face, as if it had personally caused him harm.

“Hey, I said you could take the bed. You chose your fate.”

“Yeah, right. Like I’m gonna sleep in there.” he jeered. “That bed’s probably nastier than the futon.”

“Ha. Ha.”

I got up and threw another pillow at him for that last comment, ducking just in time when he returned the favor. After one last protest from him, he finally rose to his feet and we made our way downstairs, the delicious smell of pancakes and bacon calling our names.

We sat down at the kitchen table while his parents served up mounds of food on our plates, Mrs. Spencer needing to shoo my mom away every time she got up to help.

“We’re doing this to thank you for taking us in! Now sit down and let us serve you.” she said playfully, looking ready to tie my mom to her chair if she had to. “Of course, we’ll be reimbursing you for all this food and paying for your groceries for a month on top of that.”

“Now hold on, that’s too much. I appreciate the thought, but it’s really not necessary.”

“Nonsense! You always take such good care of everyone else Carmen, let us take care of you for once.”

My mom looked ready to object again, but Mrs. Spencer cut her off just in the nick of time.

“Where on earth is Anabelle? We can’t start without her.”

“I’m here.” she suddenly announced as she appeared around the corner, rubbing her tired eyes.

My breath caught at the sound of her voice and I whipped my head around to look at her. She shifted her gaze away as soon as our eyes met, making her way toward the table and sitting on the complete opposite end from me. I tried to make eye contact

with her to assess where we stood after our intense moment under the oak tree last night, but she refused to look in my direction as she poured herself a glass of orange juice.

“Alrighty, let’s dig in!” Mr. Spencer announced.

Simon, Anabelle and I proceeded to eat in silence while the adults chatted and reminisced about the monthly dinners our families used to have when we were still little kids. But while Simon was quiet because of all the food he was cramming into his mouth, I was silently trying to get a read on Anabelle’s withdrawn demeanor.

I wondered what was going on inside her head; if last night had changed things for her. I thought I felt something between us when our faces were inches apart, the anticipation rising with every passing second. I wanted to pull her into my arms, to tell her how I felt, to hold her close and never let go.

But I had to stop and remind myself that she had a boyfriend who she seemed perfectly happy with, and sadly, that man was not me. Had I freaked her out last night by making her feel like I was still pining after her? I mean, I *was* still pining after her, but I didn’t want her to know that. We had just started to get close again, to become somewhat friendly... I hated to think that I may have ruined what little friendship we had salvaged.

I knew I had to talk to her to figure out where we stood, but it looked like it would have to wait until later. She clearly wasn’t in a talking mood this morning so I’d have to find a way to pull her aside after breakfast.

Unfortunately for me, Simon suggested we head to the gym the second we were done eating. And even though I felt like crap after getting virtually no sleep, I couldn't say no to a guy who had gotten booted out of his home. He had understandably taken the day off work after last night's events, so I knew it was my job to be there for him today.

Needless to say, it wasn't our best ever gym session. Both of our heads were elsewhere so we definitely weren't breaking any personal records. It was nice to work out together in silence though and I felt grateful to have a friend that I could just *be* with, without feeling the need to say anything to each other. Sometimes all you needed was someone to keep you company so that you didn't have to go through hard times alone—like Simon had done for me after my dad left. Which is why I was more than happy to return the favor now.

After we finished up at the gym and stopped for a quick lunch, we headed back to my mom's house only to find I had less than twenty minutes to get ready for work. Regrettably, it seemed that conversation with Anabelle just wasn't in the cards today.

I showered off and put on my work clothes, making my way to Willow's with a scant five minutes to spare. I prayed for my shift to go by quickly as I walked into the restaurant and greeted my coworkers, since I was running off of three hours of sleep and a head full of nerves. To my dismay, I was immediately greeted by Zack's smug face as soon as I walked through the swinging doors to the employee area.

“Dude, you look like shit.” he snorted as he looked up from his phone, his feet propped up on the lunch table.

*Do. Not. Engage.*

I knew I was running on low patience today, and tried my best to pretend like I hadn't heard that comment to avoid losing my shit on him. The last thing I needed was to get in even more trouble with Dom. I opened up my locker and shoved my stuff inside, not giving him the satisfaction of getting on my nerves like he usually did.

“Rough night? Or has your face always looked like that?” he continued.

“I'm really not in the mood today, Zack.” I warned, shutting my locker with a little too much force.

“Damn, take it easy. I just thought we should get to know each other better now that we'll be working together every night.”

Ah, yes. *That.* After my chat with Dom a few days ago, I had to completely redo the schedule in order to accommodate his request to give Zack all the good shifts. Problem was, those shifts just so happened to all coincide perfectly with mine.

“Oh, *goody.*”

“You know, I would be nicer to me if I were you. It would probably be in your best interest.”

“And why's that?” I asked, already resisting the urge to roll my eyes.

“Because I own you here. I’m the boss’s *nephew*, or have you forgotten?”

“Trust me, you made that pretty clear to everyone.” I snarled, knowing he took every chance he got to remind us all of that fact.

“I’m serious, I could get your ass fired if I wanted to.”

*Gimme a break.*

As if this kid had any kind of authority here. I was used to his weak threats at this point, and knew he didn’t have anything to back them up with. After all, I ran this place—I knew the ins and outs of everyone’s schedules, who could work together and who to keep apart, how our regulars liked their meals cooked, and I always stayed late to clean up after everyone else’s messes. Without me, Willow’s wouldn’t last more than a week.

“I’d like to see you try.” I smirked mindlessly before walking away.

I was so done with this conversation and eager to get my shift over with. I walked out toward the bar as I heard him call out one last empty threat, just within earshot.

“Watch me.”

\* \* \*

“Thanks, have a good one.” I chimed to our last customers of the night as they left the restaurant.

All in all, my shift had gone pretty smoothly following the face-off with Zack in the break room. Monday nights were

always fairly quiet, so I actually got to enjoy my dinner break for once rather than being called back out every five minutes. There was, of course, still the slight nuisance of Zack giving me the stink eye every time we crossed paths, but that didn't bother me much. He was going to have to do a lot better than that to rile me up.

I carried on with my closing responsibilities, pulling out the cash box from the register and bringing it to the safe in Dom's office where it was kept every night. We all had our end-of-shift tasks, and none of us liked to stay late to get them done.

The cooks had to clean up the kitchen and take note of which ingredients they were running low on, the servers had to wipe down the tables and bring all the dishes to the dish washer in the back, and I had to ensure that everyone else had done their jobs before they went home, on top of taking care of the money and locking up.

I closed the safe and exited Dom's office, heading to the employee area to get my stuff and head home for the night. I shut off all the lights and made my way to the front, noticing Zack of all people loitering outside near the door.

"What are you still doing here? I sent you home twenty minutes ago."

He gave me a smug smile, throwing his backpack over his shoulder. "I just wanted to say good night, and it's been nice working with you."

*Christ, not this again.*

“Uh-huh.” I rolled my eyes, stepping out into the cold next to him and locking the front door with my manager’s key. “See you tomorrow, Zack.”

“We’ll see about that.”



## Nineteen

### Anabelle



**T***wo more days.*

I stared at the ceiling as I lay on the Rojas' pull-out couch, willing myself to fall asleep so it could be tomorrow already. This trip had gone from bad to worse at light speed, and I was ready to get the hell out of there. I just wanted to hide in a hole for the next three days until I could finally drive back to the city and forget this whole experience ever happened.

I felt absolutely mortified after the events of last night. I barely showed my face today, hiding myself away in the basement after breakfast. I couldn't bear to see the look of disappointment on my parents' faces after finding out I was the one who started the fire... How could I have been so stupid? I felt humiliated, not only for costing them thousands of dollars in repairs to the kitchen, but also for putting myself, my parents, Simon, and even Leo at risk.

*Leo.*

As if things weren't complicated enough already. Something had changed last night; a shift in our dynamic that I definitely wasn't expecting. I felt a pull toward him that I hadn't felt in

years, a twisty feeling in my stomach that I never wanted to stop. It felt exciting, familiar, comfortable... But I knew I couldn't trust it.

Whatever chemistry was there last night could just as easily have been a figment of my imagination. I thought all those years ago that there was a spark between us, and that couldn't have been further from the truth. What I had convinced myself were stolen glances and sneaky flirting was really him humoring me and laughing behind my back. I knew my gut instincts around Leo weren't safe, and that liking him was a dangerous game.

Besides, even if he did miraculously have feelings for me, I'm sure they were squashed as soon as he realized what a reckless idiot I was for basically setting my house on fire. I was a mess, winging everything I did without a real plan in mind, not ever thinking about the consequences of my actions. It was no wonder Blake dumped me...

I tossed and turned in my misery, wishing my insomnia would let up so that I could get some sleep. After last night, there was no way in hell I'd be taking my sleep medication again, so I was pretty much doomed to lie awake all night going over the same cycle of negative thoughts.

*Screw it.*

I got up from the lumpy pull-out and made my way toward the stairs, needing to clear my head and a change of scenery after staring at the ceiling all day. The stairs creaked as I moved in darkness, making me feel like a little kid trying to sneak a cookie after bedtime. I heard a noise off in the distance when I reached

the top, and paused to see if I was imagining things. I felt weirdly nervous sneaking around in my neighbor's house late at night, like I was doing something I shouldn't.

When I was met with silence, I carried on and opened the basement door, stepping out into the hallway that led to the kitchen. Just then, I heard footsteps coming in my direction and my heart suddenly sprang into my throat.

"Annie?" I heard Leo utter as I practically jumped out of my skin.

"Jesus, Leo! You scared the shit out of me." I squeaked, laughing faintly as I held my hand over my chest to calm my racing heartbeat.

I couldn't see the outline of his frame through the darkness, but I could tell that he was coming toward me by the sound of his footsteps.

"My bad." he whispered softly, his husky voice making my stomach do that twisty thing again. "What are you still doing up?"

"I could ask you the same question."

My tone was meant to come off as coy and flirty, but instead came out a little accusatory.

"Just finished my shift at the restaurant. Your turn."

"...Couldn't sleep."

*Words, Annie. WORDS.*

The faded smell of his cologne filled the air between us when he took his last steps toward me, his body now dangerously close to mine. He leaned forward and rested his arm on the wall behind me, sending a tingling sensation shooting down my spine.

“I can help with that.”

*Oh. My. GOD.*

My shallow breathing quickened at the sound of those words as I tried to shoo away the naughty thoughts that raced through my mind. But before I could say anything more, he shifted the arm above my head and flicked on the light switch, revealing his dark curly hair and sleepy eyes in front of me. I instinctively hugged my chest, suddenly feeling very exposed in my cami and pj shorts.

“Warm milk?” he whispered, motioning toward the kitchen.

*He’s doing this on purpose. Leo, you cruel, cruel man.*

I followed behind him into the kitchen and sat at the table, letting him prepare the drinks for us through the dim light of the fridge. I watched him with hawk-like attention, my eyes glued to his every move in a trance-like state. There was no doubt in my mind now that I was hooked on the drug that was Leo Rojas, and there was no turning back. Apparently feelings didn’t just magically go away when you pushed them down for eight years.

“So, are we going to talk about yesterday?” he asked as he set a cup down in front of me and took the seat next to mine, our legs just barely grazing under the table.

I assumed he was talking about how he heroically ran into a burning house to literally carry me to safety. But seeing as I hadn't yet figured out what that meant to him, or what it meant for our non-existent friendship, I wasn't particularly ready to talk about it.

“Do we have to?”

“Afraid so.”

I felt his eyes linger on me expectantly and racked my brain for an exit route from this conversation.

“First you swoop in and save me from Jason at the party, and now this? I guess you can't resist a damsel in distress.” I laughed faintly, hoping my deflecting efforts would be satisfactory.

I looked up and saw his brows furrow ever so slightly, immediately realizing that that was the wrong answer.

“Just one damsel in particular.”

*Gulp.*

I took a sip of my milk and urged myself to pull it together, to not get sucked into the fantasy world of hopes and dreams. He was just a great guy who did a great thing. It didn't mean he had feelings for me, it simply meant he didn't want to see his neighbor get barbecued.

“In all seriousness though,” I started. “Thank you, Leo. I can't even begin to describe how much—just, thank you. I basically owe you my life now.”

As if there was any combination of words out there that could encapsulate how eternally grateful I was to him, how much respect and admiration I had for him, how much I was indebted to him.

He leaned in closer and gently touched the back of my hand with his, sending instant flutters through my chest.

“Anytime, Spencer.”

I was suddenly made very aware of our current points of contact: 1) Hands on table; 2) Knees under table. Both soft and light, both about to burst into flames with anticipation.

*Focus, Annie.*

“You’re probably wondering what was going on there, how that whole situation happened, right?” I blurted.

I desperately needed to explain to him my side of the story, how it was an honest mistake that I nearly burned my house to the ground. I didn’t want him to think I was that stupid, that irresponsible, that reckless.

“You really don’t have to explain yourself to me.” he hesitated.

“No, it’s fine. I want to.” I gulped down the rest of my milk as if it was liquid courage, hoping it would help me get through this pitiful explanation. “You see, I was having a really bad day. Like, a truly terrible, horrible day. First I got dumped by my boyfriend—over the phone of all things—because apparently being a model isn’t an ‘impressive enough career’ or whatever. He basically said our relationship couldn’t go anywhere since I would be the laughingstock of his family. So that was hurtful. Then I got home

and took a nine-hour nap, which, looking back probably wasn't the smartest idea."

Pause for breath.

"But then I woke up and I was *starving*, obviously. You would be too if you hadn't eaten all day. So I go downstairs to make myself some double fudge brownies because hello, yum. But silly me, I set the timer on my phone instead of the oven because it was the middle of the night and the oven makes that super loud beeping noise. So I go to the living room to scroll through my phone while I wait for the brownies to bake, and then I see a picture of my ex with another woman at a bar. On the SAME day that he dumped me! How rude is that! So naturally, I throw my phone across the room in a fit of rage."

Break for breath number 2.

"Then my mom comes down and proceeds to be the usual difficult way that she is, you know how she can be. Anyways so she's being herself and I'm getting frustrated and I end up saying something I probably shouldn't, which grants me a one-way ticket to a timeout in my room. As if I'm five years old, like gimme a break! So I'm all upset about the fight with my mom and since I took a nine-hour nap earlier, I need my sleeping pills or else there's absolutely no way I'm falling asleep. Oh, by the way, I have insomnia and I've been taking sleep medication. So I take two pills, completely forgetting that I have brownies in the oven, and immediately plunge into a deep, deep slumber that would eventually lead to me sleeping right through the smoke detector going off."

I paused after that last sentence, sensing that Leo didn't quite get that my rant was done.

"So really, you see how it was an honest mistake and I'm not a pyromaniac." I added with a forced smile, hoping it would help him look past my craziness.

He took a moment to digest my tangent, making me grow more and more worried that I had actually made the whole thing worse by saying all of that.

"Blake dumped you?" he asked after a beat.

"Errr, not what I thought you were going to take from that, but yes."

A silent moment that I'm sure only lasted a few seconds but felt more like an eternity ensued.

"I know, it's so embarrassing... But I mean, I get it. I'm kind of a mess." I blurted.

What was with my word vomit tonight? Things just seemed to pour out of my mouth when Leo was around, whether I wanted them to or not. Something about talking with him felt so... natural.

Leo put down his cup and turned to face me straight on, grasping both my hands in his.

"Annie, he's a doctor of *feet*. If anyone should be embarrassed, it's him. Not you."

I audibly laughed as the image of Blake looking at bunions all day ran through my mind. Funnily enough, it did bring me a



little comfort.

“Wait,” I added. “I never told you what kind of doctor he was?”

His eyes widened and he cleared his throat, giving me the feeling I had just called him out. Had he done some online snooping?

“I uh, *may* have done a quick recon on him. Just out of curiosity.”

There went those flutters again.

“Curiosity, huh?”

“What can I say, I’m an inquisitive guy. Don’t go getting a big head about it.”

I must have been smiling like an idiot because Leo promptly shifted his gaze away and let go of my hands, causing my heart to sink about fifty floors.

He cleared his throat and added, “We should probably get some sleep.”

*Oh, how I wish he meant in the same bed.*

Part of me wanted to object to this proposal, to sit here at the table with him and talk all night. But deep down, I knew he had the right idea to keep things platonic between us. We had too much history, too many ties to each other. It would just make everything messy if something happened. I was glad one of us was making smart decisions here because at the moment, I was like putty in his hands.

I begrudgingly followed in his footsteps as we got up and placed our cups in the sink, our fingers briefly grazing in the process. I urged my heart to contain itself as we headed back toward the hallway in darkness to part ways for the night.

“Night, Annie.” he whispered when we reached the staircase, his gruff voice washing over me in the most delicious way.

“Goodnight, Leo.”

I moved toward the door to the basement in the quietness of the sleepy house, dreading going back downstairs to the pull-out couch of eternal restlessness. I reached out for the doorknob, but was instead met with a hand grasping the back of my arm.

Suddenly I was being pulled back around, with Leo’s brawny arms bringing me into his body, our faces halted a breath apart. My head swirled as I begged for this to be real, for my deepest darkest desires to be coming true in this quiet hallway.

We stood in silence, my heart beating in my ears with only the sound of our shallow breathing letting me know that this was really happening. I could no longer feel my toes, and the rest of my body was on fire from the combination of the feel of his skin, his intoxicating scent, and my current proximity to his mouth. He dipped his head down toward mine, his hands traveling up my body to cup my face.

God, I loved it when he cupped my face.

I breathed him in, my heart feeling like it was going to explode if he kept me waiting any longer.

And then, it happened.

His lips parted and met mine, softly grazing over them like the touch of a feather. So delicate, so sweet and safe. I was in heaven, in a state of magical bliss, and I never wanted to leave. My lips melted into his as if they belonged there, like they had been practicing for this my whole life. And then, as if to reward me for my excellent patience, he deepened the kiss. His tempo changed as he tasted me, his soft lips exploring further into the ecstasy. We moved backward toward the wall and I felt myself being pushed up against it. I wanted everything he was doing and more.

Blood hammered through my veins while the world spun around us, this moment feeling so right yet so sinful at the same time. I bit his lip to test the waters and was elated to hear a groan of approval in return. It made my heart race even faster, daring me to push the boundaries one step further.

His hands moved down to wrap themselves around my waist, while mine trailed their way up around his shoulders. I relished in the contrast between the smoothness of his skin against my fingers and the roughness of his stubbled chin grazing against mine.

We were melting into one and I wanted to live right here up against this wall, as a permanent resident of his lips. The world around me no longer existed—it was just me and Leo together in this quiet little hallway, with no sounds save for our racing heartbeats and the buzz of electricity between us.

And then all at once, it was over. He pulled his mouth away from mine, and I swear I almost whimpered. His hands lingered

on me for a moment and I wanted to glue them to my body before he could pull them away. But against my best wishes, they abandoned me a second later, leaving me feeling empty.

My lips were still tingling as my pulse slowed down, the sound of his footsteps receding up the stairs leaving me in shock. I stood there, frozen in place, trying to wrap my head around what had just happened.

The only thing I knew for sure? I was getting absolutely no sleep tonight.

## Twenty

*Leo*



**T***hat was stupid.*

*Really, really stupid.*

I internally smacked myself in the head as flashes of last night's kiss played through my mind. What was I thinking? Both of our families were in the house, anyone could easily have walked in on us. Far worse than that, her *brother*, who would absolutely murder me if he knew what was happening, was sleeping right upstairs. In my room. Where I had to go back and pretend like I didn't just fondle his sister.

I was so screwed. I messed with a perfectly good thing and probably ruined whatever budding friendship Anabelle and I had rekindled forever. And why? All because she said she was single. As soon as she uttered those words, it was all I could think about. She wasn't with Blake anymore, so that spark between us under the oak tree might not have been in my head—it might have been as real as they come. Flirting with her instantly became fair game, and she seemed to reciprocate the feeling.

I had tried my best to be strong, to cut the chat short before I did something stupid. I had almost made it to the stairs before

my impulses took over, pulling her back into me in one swift motion. Sure, it was probably the most passionate kiss of my life, but it was a mistake. She had rejected me before, what was to stop her from doing it again?

Even on the off chance that she did want a relationship with me, it would never work out. She lived in New York now with her fancy upscale life. I would never fit into that world, and I could never bear to leave my mom all alone here. Logistically, it just didn't make any sense. And yet, every fiber of my being wanted it to.

I didn't know how we moved forward from here, and I wasn't necessarily eager to find out—it wouldn't end well for me either way. The way I saw it, we had two options: A) we could have a week of fooling around together before she went back to the city (which don't get me wrong, I wouldn't object to), but it would ultimately end in me being crushed when she left me again, and would jeopardize my friendship with Simon since I was a terrible liar. Or, option B) we decide it's for the best to pretend the kiss never happened and move on with our lives.

Luckily it seemed she had left the house early this morning and hadn't come back yet, which gave me some time to figure out which option I hated the least.

I kept my distance from Simon this morning before he went to work—just in case he could smell the guilt on me—and avoided my mom in the afternoon since her eerily accurate intuition would definitely catch onto my shiftiness. For once I

was dying for five o'clock to roll around so I could escape to work and hide out there.

After what felt like an excruciatingly long day, I finally made it to the evening. On my way out of the house, I checked the mailbox and quickly leafed through the new arrivals.

*Bill, flyer, Christmas card, another bill, and... What's this?*

At the back of the pile, I landed on a plain white envelope with my name written on it. There was no return address, no stamp, no name or anything that would give me an indication as to who it was from. Nothing except the familiar-looking handwriting on the front, which gave me a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. I stared at the card for a second, tempted to open it on the spot but hesitant since something didn't feel quite right about it.

And then, it registered who the scraggly handwriting belonged to: my dad.

I stood in shock as a million questions raced through my mind, half of my brain screaming at me to open it already to find out what it said, and the other half telling me to rip it up and burn it in a fire. I felt insulted, angry, and regrettably curious.

What the hell was he thinking, sending me a *letter*? And why wasn't there one for my mom? Imagine if she had gotten to it before I did, she would have been devastated. Every time we started to move on and pick up the broken pieces of our lives, we were reminded of him. Why couldn't the universe just cut us a break?

I was seeing red, standing outside my house frozen in place. As if anything he wrote in this flimsy envelope could possibly make any of this better. In that moment, I didn't care what explanations he had to offer. He could tell me that he was in the fucking witness protection program for all I cared, it wouldn't change a damn thing. He was dead to me.

I shoved the letter in my bag after bringing the rest of the mail into the house, knowing that I had to keep this hidden from my mom at all costs. I would figure out what to do and deal with it later on, since I had a job to get to. My dad didn't get to completely uproot my life anymore. He would have to wait like I waited for him to come back home all those months ago.

I made my way to work in a stormy daze, feeling like I was on autopilot. I parked in the lot when I arrived, not really remembering the trip there and barely taking the time to notice Dom's car double parked beside me. I didn't have the energy to question his presence at the restaurant, and instead made my way inside with a cloud hanging over my head.

I headed into the employee area, keeping my head down as I struggled to register the greetings I received from my coworkers. Except right when I was about to reach my locker, I was stopped by the devil incarnate blocking my way—I mean, by Zack.

“Dom wants to see you in his office.” he smirked.

Normally a sentence like that would have sent me into a spiral of worry, but not today. Today I had bigger things on my mind.



I huffed and followed him out to the hall and into Dom's office, the three of us crammed inside as he sat at his desk with his hands folded together.

"Take a seat, Leo."

Zack moved to stand behind his uncle while I sat on the solitary chair in front of them, a huge smile plastered across his mouth. I've never wanted to punch that smug face more.

"The morning openers noticed the cash box was a little light today." Dom said, his eyes fixated on me in a stern look.

I really couldn't be bothered to care about whatever he was saying at the moment. I stared blankly at him in response, unfazed, which I never would have done previously in fear of it being perceived as insubordination. But given the circumstances of my day so far, I gave myself a pass to be apathetic toward him.

He tapped his fingers on his desk, raising his eyebrow at me accusingly. "Seems there's a few hundred dollars missing from the safe."

My mind started to refocus on the conversation once the accusatory look lingered on me for just a little too long.

*Hold up.*

Was he accusing me of skimming off the top of the register? No way. He would never even entertain that idea. I was his star employee, the night manager, the guy he'd known and trusted with this place for years. He wouldn't actually believe I was a thief, would he..?

“That’s... Strange.” I replied. “It seems kind of impossible, I counted the money and locked it up in the safe last night myself.”

“Yes, yes you did.”

There was that raised eyebrow again.

I shot a glance over at Zack who was clearly having the time of his life, and started to worry that this conversation may not be as casual as I had suspected.

“Leo,” Dom continued. “We have video of you with the cash box in my office last night.”

*Well duh, that’s my job.*

“I’m sure you do, since I lock it up at the end of every shift.”

He seemed displeased with that answer and slightly irritated by my candidness.

“The fact is, you were the last person seen with the money, and now we come to find there’s some missing this morning. That doesn’t strike you as a big coincidence?”

Zack stifled a laugh from behind my boss, and somehow I knew this was all his doing.

“Dom, I can tell that you think I have something to do with the missing cash, but I promise you, I don’t. I think I’m being set up.” I urged with a warning look at Zack.

Dom hesitated as his fingers tapped rhythmically on the arm of his chair, seeming to really consider my words. And for a moment, I thought he might actually believe me.

“Then how do you explain the fact that you were the last person to handle the cash box? You yourself locked the front door after you left for the night, and no one other than the two of us and the morning manager has a key, or even knows the combination to the safe. How do you explain that?”

He got me there. I couldn't explain it. I racked my brain for a possible scenario that would make all of this make sense, but came up empty. My mind was already riddled with so many competing issues that it couldn't possibly handle another disaster.

“I'm sorry Leo,” he added after a beat, his face dark and solemn. “But I can't overlook theft. This is a fireable offense... I'm going to have to let you go.”

## Twenty One

### Anabelle



I felt different today.

I was no longer the same Annie I was twenty-four hours ago—no sir, today I was someone who knew what Leo’s lips felt like. Who knew how soft and playful they were, how it felt to have his hands all over my body. Today, I was an Annie that knew what Leo tasted like.

And I would never be the same.

Anything I was worried about yesterday was officially erased from my mind in favor of making room for every last detail about that kiss. I wanted every millisecond imprinted on my brain forever, because I’d never been kissed like that before in my life. I’d never felt like someone *needed* to have me right then and there, like they’d perish if they couldn’t feel my lips on theirs. He had kissed me with such urgency, such hunger and greed. Like he’d been waiting a lifetime and couldn’t bear to wait a second longer. And the funny thing was, I didn’t even know I felt the same way until it was happening.

It was as if a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders; like an unanswered question had finally been resolved. Doubts

and insecurities that I had buried in the deepest parts of my heart were erased, leaving me with only a sense of fulfillment. And a smile. A big, bright, unmovable smile. I was on top of the world, and nothing could bring me down.

Nothing except reality.

I felt around for my phone and unlocked it, typing out a rushed text to Aaliyah.

· *Me*: SOS, need an emergency meeting. I'm coming over asap.

I pulled on the coat Leo had lent me (yes, I still hadn't given it back, and no, I wasn't planning on doing so anytime soon) and rushed to my car, driving over to the shop as the sunrise filled the morning sky with hues of orange and pink.

I knew I needed to talk to someone about this, to figure out what it all meant. More than that, I needed to figure out how much bad karma I was in for after making out with my best friend's ex.

I arrived at Aaliyah's store just as they were opening up, storming through the front door while the bells chimed to signal my arrival. Aaliyah spotted me from behind the cash as I flailed toward her, an amused smirk appearing on her face.

"So I did a bad thing." I said abruptly, throwing my purse down on the counter.

"Was that thing not wishing me a good morning?"

I laughed half-heartedly as I buried my face in my hands and mumbled a greeting, already feeling heavy guilt wash over me.

“Woah, okay—this is serious business. Spill.”

I sighed into my hands before peeking at her through my fingers, worried my confession would forever change the way she looked at me. But I had no choice. I had to tell her, she was the only one I trusted with this. It wasn't like I could tell my mom, Simon, or God forbid Hailee...

Right as I was about to open my mouth, Devin rounded the corner holding a box full of their new lavender body lotions. I instantly clammed back up, unsure if we had known each other long enough to warrant a no-judgment honesty session.

“Annie's just about to confess to some kind of crime.” Aaliyah informed her girlfriend.

“Ooh!”

She dropped the box in her arms onto the counter and turned toward us, staring me down with hawk-like attention.

I eyed the two of them, starting to wonder if it was a bad idea to come here. What I did most definitely broke the girl code, and I didn't think I could handle one more person being disappointed in me at the moment.

“Oh don't worry, your secret's safe with me. I won't tell where you hid the body.” Devin added, sensing my hesitation.

I took a deep breath and squeezed my eyes shut, rubbing my temples to preemptively stave off a headache that would surely follow this admission.

“I.. I kissed Leo last night. Or, he kissed me. To be honest I don't really know how it happened. One minute we're in his

kitchen, having a nice chat and drinking milk, and the next thing I know, I'm being thrown up against a wall and our tongues are down each other's throats."

I peeked one eye open to gauge their reactions, and to make sure I actually said those words out loud. Stunned silence ensued, making me question for a moment if I actually had said it in my head.

"The server from the other night?" Devin asked, a quizzical look on her face.

An unexpected snorting sound came out of my mouth, making me giggle like I was losing my mind. Probably because I was. The thought of Leo just being a server to me was hilarious, seeing as the truth of the situation was far more complicated. I *wished* it was that simple.

"He's the one that dated Hailee like a zillion years ago, remember hun?" Aaliyah added.

"He's also my neighbor."

*As if that matters?*

"OH! Okay, yes. This all sounds very familiar. Please proceed." she beamed, leaning in to rest her face in her palms as if she were watching a seat-gripping soap opera.

"Ummm..."

I struggled to come to terms with their surprisingly calm reactions. I had expected horror, anger, pointed fingers. Not intrigued attentiveness.

“Wait, rewind.” Aaliyah paused. “Why were you in his kitchen? And what does the milk have to do with it? I feel like I’m missing something.”

And that’s when I realized I had left out some pretty important details from this story. They didn’t know about the fire, how he had risked his life for me, and how my whole family was staying with them until further notice. Hell, they didn’t even know about the breakup with Blake.

I proceeded to fill them in on all the sordid details, from the phone breakup to the intimate moment with Leo under the oak tree. I watched as their eyes grew in fear when I told them about what the fire chief had said, and how they leaned in closer when I described the kiss in the hallway. At the end of it all, I was exhausted from reliving it and dying to hear their thoughts on what it all meant.

“Wow. Just, wow.” Devin said first. “That is... incredibly hot.”

A laugh escaped my tired throat at that comment. I mean, she wasn’t wrong. It was not a night I would be forgetting anytime soon.

“So what are you gonna do?” Aaliyah probed.

“*What am I gonna do?* What the hell do you think I came here for? You have to help me!”

“Aww, babe.” she laughed warmly. “We can’t tell you what to do. This is your life, not ours.”

*But how much easier would it be if it wasn’t my life?*



“Ughhhhh.” I groaned. “I guess there’s really only one thing to do... I have to end it.”

“What? Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’? This is Hailee’s *ex-boyfriend* we’re talking about here!” I exclaimed.

This certainly wasn’t the feedback I thought I’d get after telling my best friend that I practically jumped into bed with our other bestie’s ex.

“Yeah, from eight years ago? And they dated for what, a couple months? I wouldn’t necessarily call that the relationship of the year.”

“But... But the girl code!”

“Screw the girl code! You’ve had a crush on Leo since, like, forever—I think that trumps Hailee’s decade-old dibs. And let’s be real, she knew how you felt about him way before they started dating. It’s not like she’s an innocent bystander in all of this.”

*She knew..? And she still went after him?*

“I say go for it.” Devin added. “It’s been long enough, feels like fair game to me.”

Wow. Maybe they did have a point...

“Okay, but even so... That’s not the only thing holding me back.”

I didn’t want to think about it. Nope, I was not going there. It was too painful to think about what he had said about me all

those years ago, and I didn't want past Leo to sully new sexy Leo who threw me up against walls and moaned into my neck.

"I figured that might be an issue." Aaliyah mewled, placing her hand over mine. "It's okay if you're still hurt that he called you fat, that's totally understandable."

The word landed on my ears with a thump. There it was again, the bane of my existence coming to ruin my life once more.

"It's not really that he called me fat. I mean, yeah that's part of it, but I've been called worse things before. I'm not about to crumble at three little letters." *Gulp*. "The world has changed since we were in high school, 'fat' doesn't have to be a bad word anymore. I'm a bigger girl, and I'm proud of it. Or at least, I am now. Maybe back then it felt like a huge insult, but today it just feels like a word."

"So, what's the problem then?" she coaxed.

"It's... It's everything around that. It's the fact that I thought he was my friend. I thought he knew me, respected me... I thought I could trust him. Then all of a sudden, I find out he's been laughing at me behind my back for years. It felt like such a betrayal. I didn't just lose a little piece of my confidence that day—I lost a best friend too."

Aaliyah gave me a playfully hurt look at that last part, so I reassured her that he was, of course, second to her in my best friend rankings.

“That makes sense, babe. But,” she said with a deep breath. “That was also a long time ago. I’m not trying to invalidate those feelings, not at all. I just think he’s grown in the last eight years, and so have you. Neither of you are the same people you were back then, and maybe he deserves a chance at redemption after literally saving your life?”

*Crap.*

“Yeah, I guess so...”

“Especially after the way that asshole Blake dumped you. You deserve to be with someone who loves you fully, who accepts you for who you are.” she squeezed my hand, prompting me to look up at her. “I think you owe it to yourself to see where things go with Leo, to see if he could be that person. At the very least, you owe it to yourself to try.”

Man, did I hate it when she was right.

## Twenty Two

*Leo*



**T***his cannot be happening.*

I trudged up and down the snowy streets of the town center, bitterness and anger taking over as I mumbled to myself in disbelief.

He actually did it. Zack actually got me fired. He had warned me yesterday that he would, but I didn't really think he was serious. After all, I had given that place five *years* of my life—I sort of thought that granted me some kind of immunity.

How the hell could Dom accuse me of theft after everything I'd done for the restaurant? He didn't even have any proof! Sure, there was video of me putting the cash box into the safe after closing, but there was no shot of me taking any money out. The only "evidence" he had to go on was Zack's word, and we both knew that wasn't very reliable.

I brooded all up and down the street, my ears starting to go numb from the cold but not having the attention span to care. I jumped between the urge to storm back in and give Zack a piece of my mind, and the eagerness to wait it out and watch Willow's

be driven into the ground without me there to hold everything together. I hadn't yet decided which option was more tempting.

I was livid, not only because I was now out of a job, but because my entire ten-year Willow's remodel plan had been derailed. All those years, wasted. All that time and dedication was for nothing, my hard work had been erased in the blink of an eye by a dumbass kid and his gullible uncle.

After walking around for a couple of hours trying to figure out how Zack the Idiot managed to pull it off, I finally gave up. I slumped back toward my car and drove off, not really knowing where to go. I couldn't very well go home, it was too early in the evening. My mom would know something was wrong and I absolutely couldn't tell her that I lost my job two days before Christmas. I would just have to keep it a secret for now, or better yet, figure out how Zack set me up and get my job back before she found out.

I made my way to the nearest drive-thru and ordered some comfort food, pulling into a spot in the parking lot to eat in solitude. I wolfed down my burger and fries, stewing in my car and waiting for them to fill the void I was feeling to no avail. Once ten o'clock rolled around, I figured it was safe enough to head back home since my mom would surely be asleep at this time.

The ride home was solemn, to say the least, while I reflected on how exactly my life had gotten to this point. What started out as a simple mission to keep this holiday season conflict-free for me and my mom had quickly turned into a parade of

catastrophes and betrayals. What had I done to deserve this? Had I not suffered enough already?

I swallowed my pride as I walked quietly through my front door, locking it behind me and kicking off my boots. I noticed the light in my room was on as I moved through the house, figuring Simon must still be awake. I'd inevitably have to explain my early return to him, but I knew I could trust him to keep another secret. After all, he hadn't told a single soul about my dad leaving us, even when the whole town was gossiping about their supposed "separation".

I approached the staircase with a cloud hanging over my head, pausing with my foot on the first step. Logic and common sense escaped me as I suddenly backtracked and veered off around the corner, heading toward the basement. I wasn't sure if I had finally lost my mind after the whiplash of unfortunate events I had encountered these past few days, but I found myself being pulled toward Anabelle's presence.

My feet were moving on their own as I cracked open the basement door and drifted down the stairs, desperate to see her face. I didn't care that we still hadn't talked about the kiss or figured out what it meant for our nonexistent friendship; all I knew in that moment was that I needed to see her.

I rounded the corner and quickly realized that I probably should've announced my presence first, since she seemed to jump up at the sight of me.

"Jesus Christ, Leo! We should make you wear a freaking bell or something." she exclaimed as she scrambled to cover up her

bare legs with the sheets we had given her.

I couldn't help but chuckle at the sight in front of me. She was curled up in a ball on the pull-out couch, wrapped in one of my old comforters with her hair plopped up into a big disheveled bun. Mounds of my old photo albums and yearbooks surrounded her, making a smile appear on my face at the thought of her spending her time looking through old pictures of me.

Her cheeks flushed when she noticed me cock my eyebrow in the direction of the mess in front of her.

"I can explain," she started, hurriedly shutting an open album on her lap. "It's incredibly boring living in a basement all day, and they were just sitting over there in a box all alone, calling my name. I mean c'mon, there's only so much lying around a girl can do before she starts snooping."

I smiled faintly and leaned up against the wall, happy to let myself be entertained by her rambling after the day I'd had.

"Why are you home so early anyway?" Her eyebrows scrunched up as she straightened. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

*Damn, could she really read me that easily?*

I sighed as I ran my hand through my hair, trying to find the least pitiful way to describe my current situation.

"I'm just having a miserable existence, no big deal."

"Preaching to the choir," she lilted, patting the seat next to her. "Sit. Tell me everything."

I shuffled over and sat next to her on the corner of the pull-out, feeling her worried eyes land on me. She shimmied out of the comforter she had been wrapped around, laying it out to cover both of our bodies.

Logically, I knew I should feel weird about opening up to someone I had just become reacquainted with a few days ago. But something about talking with Anabelle felt so easy, so natural. Like I could tell her anything and knew she'd understand. So I caved, not having the energy to hide yet another secret from someone.

“I got fired today.”

Her stunned silence told me she was probably expecting something more along the lines of *I got a flat tire* or *I spilled coffee on my pants*.

“Holy shit... What happened?”

“It’s a long story.”

She motioned to her empty wrist and pretended to check an invisible watch. “I’ve got time.”

Though I wasn’t sure why she wanted to hear about it, I was grateful to have someone I could unload on. It was exhausting keeping so many secrets and worries to myself all the time, and with Anabelle, I didn’t feel like I had to put up a front.

I let out a big sigh before muddling through my story, starting with the background of how long I’d been at Willow’s, working my way up to my new promotion as night manager. I explained that Zack had been a douche since day one and how he



always had it in for me, leading up to what I thought had been an empty threat yesterday. I ended with the theft accusation and my subsequent firing, slumping down into the couch while she processed my rant.

“What about the morning openers?” she asked after a pause. “They have access to the office and the safe, they’re the ones who supposedly noticed the missing money. Why couldn’t it have been them?”

“Yeah, I thought of that too... Aside from the fact that they’re my friends and I’m sure they would never try to set me up, it just wouldn’t make any sense. Why would they rat themselves out when they could have stashed the money and let me take the fall later that night?”

“Oh, good point...”

She bit at her nail with her eyes scrunched up in a frown, clearly in deep thought. It was sweet how much my problems were troubling her, but after having spent hours dwelling on it, I was eager to talk about literally anything else.

“Okay, that’s it. Enough about me, I want to hear about you.”

The corner of her mouth turned up as she caught my gaze, the frown disappearing from her face.

“You mean the one person who might just be more pathetic than you?”

“Precisely.”

She chuckled, tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear. “You don’t want to hear about my problems.”

“You know, I really do. Might make me feel better about my train wreck of a life.”

I sat back on the couch and crossed my arms behind my head, making myself comfortable while I awaited her answer. My stretched-out legs brushed up against hers, their smoothness quickening my pulse.

“Fine,” she rolled her eyes with a snicker. “You pretty much already know the cliff notes anyways: Dumped by boyfriend, fought with mother, set house on fire. All that’s left is to tell my parents that I’m bailing on our plans and skipping town the day after Christmas, securing their inevitable lifelong hatred of me.”

“They could never hate you.” I blurted.

I knew that as much as they argued, Anabelle could always count on her parents to be there for her. I saw the way they interacted, the way they looked out for each other, and how worried her mother had been for her after the fire. That wasn’t a parent who would write off her child. That was a parent who cared.

Anabelle didn’t know just how lucky she was to still have two parents who loved her... A piercing thought stung at the back of my mind, reminding me that I now only had one parent who worried about me. One parent who stuck around.

“I don’t know about that, pretty sure my mom’s been on the anti-Annie train since I was thirteen. Regardless, I think I’ve still got you beat for worst day ever.”

I plastered on a smile, not daring to tell her about the unexpected letter I had received from my estranged father earlier that morning. Even though it would most certainly put me in the lead of our little pity contest, I was nowhere near ready to deal with it yet.

“Hmm, I’ll give it to you. But only because you must have really hit rock bottom if you’re looking at my old baby pictures for entertainment.”

“What? They’re so cute!” A wide smile spread across her face as she lifted up an album hanging off the edge of the couch and quickly leafed through it until she found an old picture of me with Cheerios stuck to my face. “Look at this kid, you’re telling me that isn’t the cutest baby you’ve ever seen?”

“Are you calling me cute?”

“Shut up, you know you are.” She nudged my ribs with her elbow and refocused on the album, flipping the page.

“Says the model.”

“PFF!” A weird snorting sound came out of her mouth as if her body was physically rejecting the idea of a compliment.

“That’s different,” she started. “You’ve always been gorgeous. I, on the other hand, just joined the club recently.”

“Oh, now I’ve been upgraded to gorgeous? What’s your grading system here, Spencer?”

She nudged me again, making me want to grab that arm and pull her into me, but I refrained.

“Shush. As I was saying, hotness is a new concept for me. I mean, would you have ever believed that *I* would become a model back in high school?”

She laughed in disbelief as if the idea was preposterous, but my face remained completely serious.

“Yes.”

Her eyes didn’t leave the album, but her cheek twitched. “Liar.”

I reached over and took her chin in my hand, lifting it up toward my face so she couldn’t avoid my eye contact any longer.

“Annie.”

“Leo.” she whispered, slightly amused by my seriousness.

“You have no idea how beautiful you are. How beautiful you’ve always been.”

The words had come pouring out of my mouth without a second thought, and the air between us suddenly felt heavy as she scanned my eyes. For once, I didn’t allow myself to overthink the moment and question whether or not I should have said that. I was done playing games. This feeling between the two of us was real and I didn’t want to run from it anymore.

I brushed my thumb against her bottom lip, remembering how it had felt to taste it last night. How it felt to have her body pressed up against mine. My gaze drifted from the plump redness of her mouth back up to her eyes, sensing a hunger growing in them.

She leaned into me and the smell of her lavender shampoo filled my head, her lips stopping a breath short of my own.

“Oh, Leo...” she whispered.

And that was it. The sound of my name softly rolling off her tongue was enough to send my pulse into a frenzy, and I pulled her face into mine.

My lips met hers, taking in their familiar softness as she melted into me. Except this time, we didn't start out gentle like in the hallway. This time it was like we both needed an escape, needed to feel something good and safe to take us away from the nightmares that were our lives.

Her hands immediately grasped the hairs at the back of my neck, tugging at them as her mouth matched my pace. She rose from her seating position to climb up on top of me, pushing me down into the couch while her legs wrapped themselves around my waist.

I nibbled at her ear and then down her neck, dragging my lips down every inch of her skin. Her moans of appreciation at each swipe of my mouth quickened my heart rate, sending blood pulsating through my veins. On an impulse, I tore the elastic out from her hair and let it cascade down to our faces, brushing up against our cheeks. My hand drifted up her back to grab a fistful of red locks, pulling her body into me. I wanted—no, *needed*—to have her closer, to feel her engulf me.

She trailed her fingers down my chest toward my abdomen, pulling at the hem of my shirt.

“Take it off.” she pleaded in between breaths.

*God. Damn.*

“Happy to.” I grinned, tearing myself away to oblige her request.

I ripped off the shirt like my life depended on it, watching her eyes gloss over my chest with amusement as I leaned back down.

“Wow. I mean seriously, *wow.*”

She delicately traced over my skin for a moment as she bit the corner of her lip.

“Come here.” I ordered, grabbing her legs and tugging her back into me.

My mouth pressed into hers again, her tongue playfully swiping at mine. I dragged my hands up her thighs, her smooth skin driving me wild and I slid them up under her cotton shorts. Fuck, I loved it when she wore those little shorts.

I grasped at handfuls of her full-figured ass, feeling the pressure in my pants grow tighter. My fingers toyed at the hem of some lace against her silky skin and begged for me to rip them off.

“Wait—” she panted breathily between moans.

“Shit, sorry. Am I moving too fast?”

I instinctively pulled my hands out from under her shorts and tore myself away from her mouth.

“*God* no, it’s not that.” She laid another soft kiss on my lips, and I felt like the little bubble of energy around us had just popped. “It’s... Urrrghh I hate myself for even saying this.”

“What is it?” I asked, moving a piece of hair away from her eyes to get a better read on her face.

She leaned back into her side of the couch, running her thumb over her freshly reddened lips.

“I feel like we should talk about this—figure out what this is before it goes any further.”

“Yeah, no you’re right. That would probably be best.”

“Not that I wouldn’t love to keep going, because *trust me*, everything inside of me is screaming at me right now for putting a stop to it.”

I let out a laugh, glad to know I wasn’t the only one disappointed by the sudden halt.

“It’s just...” she continued. “This is complicated, right? Me and you?”

Her worried eyes scanned mine for understanding, and I ran a hand through my hair as I came to the conclusion that she was absolutely right. Us getting together wouldn’t just turn our whole lives around, it would also affect all the people closest to us.

“Extremely.”

“I mean, there’s Simon to think about here. It would totally make things weird between you guys if we... You know. Not to

mention Hailee. God, she would hate me forever.”

I knew she was right, yet I didn’t want to accept it. After all this time, after everything we’d been through recently, why did we have to compromise on our happiness to cater to everyone around us? It didn’t seem fair—hadn’t we waited long enough to be happy?

“They wouldn’t have to find out.” I offered, leaning back toward her so our shoulders were touching.

“What, like keep this a secret?”

I nodded as I inched closer to her, ready to take her lips back into mine.

“I don’t know if I want that.” she muttered, stopping me dead in my tracks. “After everything that happened with Blake, I don’t want to be someone’s secret shame anymore.”

*Secret shame?* That wasn’t at all what she was to me. It couldn’t be further from the truth; if anything, that’s how I thought she saw me.

My brain froze while I tried to think of a way to tell her that she had it the wrong way around, that I’d been desperately in love with her for the past eight years of my life even after she’d rejected me.

“Leo... I know you wouldn’t know what it’s like, but it’s really shitty to feel unwanted all the time. I just don’t know if I can do that with another guy—if I can put myself through that again.”

*Unwanted.*



Huh. Little did she know, I knew exactly what that felt like.

Flashbacks of my dad leaving, picking up the broken pieces of my mom's heart and waiting months for an explanation for his betrayal raced through my mind. I thought of the letter I had received that morning and how it currently sat in my bag, unopened.

I wasn't even sure if I ever wanted to open it, since it could say anything in there. I knew deep down that it didn't matter what it said; if he apologized, if he begged for forgiveness, or if he magically came up with the most understandable explanation ever. I would forever be a son who was abandoned by his father, and that wasn't a feeling I was ever going to forget.

"So you know everything about my life then, is that right?" I shot back, feeling misplaced anger bubbling up inside me.

"No, that's not what I—"

"Just forget it, Annie. You've clearly already made up your mind about me. I'll make things easy for you and see myself out."

I knew deep down that it wasn't her fault. She didn't know the truth about my dad, and how could I expect her to? But in that moment, I wasn't thinking logically. In that moment, I was filled with anger and resentment toward my dad and toward the shitty hand I had been dealt.

All that I could do to stop my stinging eyes from betraying me right then and there was to grab my shirt and storm out of there as fast as humanly possible.

## Twenty Three

### Anabelle



“Anabelle? What are you still doing asleep? It’s nearly ten o’clock!” my mother exclaimed as she loomed over my half-asleep body.

I rolled over and squinted my eyes up at her, taking in the image of her pristine put-togetherness at this early hour. Her hair was styled in a neat updo and her perfectly manicured nails mocked me while she folded her arms in front of her chest.

I grunted in reply, knowing it was too early to deal with her invasion of my privacy.

“No matter.” she added as she started picking things up off the floor and folding them with great care. “Good news, we can go back home today! Pack up your things, we’re leaving in ten.”

She threw the small pile of clothes in her arms onto the pull-out and sauntered back out of the room as quickly as she had entered.

*And a good morning to you too.*

I sat up and took a moment to orientate myself, the memories of last night’s events flooding my mind. I guess I

should consider it a good thing that Leo had stormed out the way he did since my mother clearly still had an aversion to knocking before entering a room. Although, imagining her hypothetical reaction to finding the two of us in bed together did amuse me.

My head pounded as I unwrapped myself from the cocoon of blankets that currently enveloped me. I wasn't sure which was causing the throbbing headache more: my lack of sleep for the past three nights, or my many attempts to decode Leo's rapidly changing feelings for me.

I had tried to follow Aaliyah's advice, to give him a second chance and see where things went between us. But it had been mixed signal after mixed signal with him, from his mutual hatred of me at the start of the trip, to the unexpected (but incredibly hot) late-night make-out sessions. He couldn't seem to decide how he felt about me from one moment to the next, so how the hell was I supposed to keep up?

Not to mention the way he completely freaked out the second I suggested we have any kind of legitimate relationship. Was it too much to ask that I finally find a guy who wanted to show me off, instead of keeping me hidden away as their guilty pleasure?

I stood and started gathering what few items we had been able to take with us from the house after the fire, pulling on a pair of fleece lounge pants and a long sleeve tee. I mistakenly checked my phone hoping to find a text from Leo explaining what exactly went down last night, only to be unsurprisingly disappointed.

Was he just looking for a quick hookup? Was he only interested in me now that I was a model? Or had he felt something for me before then? He *did* say that I had always been beautiful... That had to mean something, right?

I brushed out my hair and threw it into a ponytail, trudging up the stairs with my half-empty backpack. I heard the sound of voices laughing and exchanging goodbyes as I exited the basement, and came across my parents, Simon, Carmen, and Leo all standing in the foyer.

“Carmen, we can’t thank you enough for taking us in. Let’s make plans for New Year’s Eve, I’m thinking we could—Anabelle!” my mother declared as she waved me over. “Well don’t just stand there, aren’t you going to come say thank you to our hosts?”

*Urrghhh.*

My mother had a way of getting under my skin more than anyone else I knew. She must have still been pissed at me for starting the fire since it felt like she was purposely trying to embarrass me in front of everyone.

“Of course.” I started, pasting on a smile while I approached them, actively avoiding eye contact with Leo. “As always, you are too good to us Mrs. Rojas.”

“Happy to help, it was a pleasure getting to spend more time with you all.” she chimed, reaching over to squeeze my hand. “Take care of yourself, sweetie.”

I pulled her in for a grateful hug, holding on tight since I knew it would be the last time I'd see her before going back to the city. As much as I would have liked to stay until New Year's to spend more time with her, I had caused enough of a mess in the short time I'd been here.

"Aren't you going to thank Leo, too?" my mother prodded.

*Crap.*

I was kind of hoping to avoid that part. I shot him a cautious glance, surprised to find him smiling back at me with a pleasant (albeit detached) grin.

What was his game here? How could he stand there and smile at me like nothing had happened between us? Like we hadn't been half naked together last night, two seconds away from crossing a line there was no coming back from? Clearly his feelings for me were nowhere near as real as mine, since I couldn't put on this fake act nearly as easily.

"Thanks, Leo." I mumbled, averting my eyes.

"Don't mention it."

*Oh don't worry, I won't.*

\* \* \*

I spent the rest of the day scrambling to find any open jewelry stores, scouring them for the elusive gold heart necklace. Luckily I was able to find a passable dupe at the last store I tried. It wasn't an exact match of the one I had lost in the seventh grade, but it would just have to be good enough since I was quite literally out of time. I paid for it with the last of the spending money I had set

aside, getting dirty looks from the cashier as she handed me my receipt just one minute before closing.

When I got home, the appliance store techs were on their way out, having finished installing the brand spanking new oven. My mother spent the rest of the afternoon reminding us not to touch the expensive gadget (tossing a warning look over to me a handful of times), especially after they had to pay an extra fee to have it installed on Christmas Eve.

She didn't have to tell me twice though—I had already made a solemn oath never to go near another oven again. It would be ramen and microwave dinners for me until they invented an idiot-proof way to cook.

I proceeded to wrap all of my gifts in my room as discreetly as possible, depositing them amongst the mounds of presents under the tree when no one was looking. I prayed that my family wouldn't notice my last-minute additions, since lord knows they didn't need yet another reason to think I was a train wreck.

We had a nice, quiet dinner that night, accompanied by a nice, quiet chat before we all went to bed. I sat in my room and watched classic holiday movies until I fell asleep halfway through *It's a Wonderful Life*—which felt very ironic seeing as my life was, in fact, currently not so wonderful. I could only dream of waking up to an alternate life where I wasn't a burden to everyone I knew.

## Twenty Four

*Leo*



“Well that was fun, wasn’t it?” my mom said when she shut the door behind the Spencers.

*Oh yeah, a bucket of laughs.*

I exhaled a big sigh of relief as soon as they left our house, knowing I could finally relax and enjoy Christmas Eve with my mom. It’s not that I didn’t like having them here, if anything I was grateful I got to spend more time with Simon. But as much as I was glad we were able to help them out in their time of need, I had to get some distance from Anabelle pronto.

The whole sneaking-around-behind-our-families-backs thing was getting too complicated, with the risk of Simon finding out and hating me forever looming over us. Not to mention the fact that I clearly had some shit to sort out on my end after flipping out the second Annie struck a cord.

I hadn’t expected to get so upset at her. Abandonment was obviously a sore point for me, and I needed to work through those issues before I could even think about getting into any kind of relationship. Unfortunately, that meant I had to deal with the unopened letter from my dad that I had been avoiding since I

received it. Whether I liked it or not, I wouldn't be able to move forward until I faced whatever was in that envelope.

I followed my mom into the living room where she sat down on the couch, all smiles as she sipped her coffee. The restaurant was closed today for Christmas Eve, so I was relieved I didn't have to come up with some excuse as to why I wasn't working. I felt awful keeping all these secrets from her though, and knew it was time I divulged the biggest one.

"Can I talk to you about something?" I asked, taking a seat next to her.

I twiddled with my thumbs, unsure of how to broach the subject. Although part of me dreaded the idea of reliving those emotions all over again, I knew we would never be able to truly put it behind us until we had an honest conversation about my dad.

"Of course," she grinned. "But I think I already know what this is about."

"You do?"

Had she seen the letter in my bag? Did she get one too and hadn't told me about it yet?

"You think I haven't noticed you and Anabelle acting strangely these past couple days?"

*Oh.*

"Something happened between the two of you, didn't it?" she pressed, eager to find out if her not-so-secret wish for us to end up together had finally come true.



“It’s not like that, mamá.” I assured her. “And even if it was, no offense, but my mom would be the last person I’d want to talk about it with.”

She laughed and nudged me, egging me on. “Are you sureee?”

“Positive.”

“Fine, I can live with that.” she boasted with an all-knowing look that said she was sure she’d find out one way or another. “What is it then?”

Gulp.

“Have you gotten anything... weird in the mail lately?”

Her quizzical face told me she had no idea what I was about to tell her. “I can’t say that I have.”

“I got something yesterday, a letter.” I moved over to pick up my backpack, quickly digging through it. “I haven’t opened it yet, I wanted to show you first.”

I pulled out the envelope and threw it down on the coffee table, my mom’s eyes widening as soon as she saw it. She must have recognized the handwriting instantly because her face quickly changed from cheerful to gloomy.

“What did—*why* is—”

“I don’t know.”

She picked it up and looked it over, the air in the room going still.

“I’m sorry, I know this is terrible timing.” I started. “And I know I should be taking care of you instead of stressing you out.

I just couldn't keep it from you anymore. I need us to figure this out together."

I reached over and grabbed her hand, hoping she wouldn't be too upset with me for ruining her day. I needed to get this off my chest, but was that selfish of me? What if she wasn't ready to talk about it yet?

She remained silent for what felt like an eternity, and I was starting to regret ever bringing this up.

"Oh, mijo..." she finally uttered. "I'm the one who should be saying sorry."

"What? Why?"

"Leo," She turned to face me as my breathing tensed up. "I'm your mother. I should be taking care of you, not the other way around. I hadn't even realized how much I was leaning on you for support until now—"

"You haven't been leaning on me that much."

"Yes, I have." She shook her head in self-disappointment. "And that's not okay. I'm supposed to be the parent in this situation, not someone you have to walk on eggshells around. You should be able to come to me with anything."

"I know, and I can. You've just been through a lot lately."

"So have you." She squeezed my hand, prompting my eyes to start stinging for the second time in the last twelve hours.

"You are the best son a mother could ask for." she added. "I appreciate how strong you've been for me, but now it's my turn

to be your rock. Let me be there for you like you've been there for me all this time."

The tension in my body released at the sound of those words, and I let out a huge breath that had felt stuck in my throat since my dad left. For the first time in a long time, I let myself feel all the pain and sadness fully instead of pushing it down and locking it away. It was like the floodgates had opened up, and all those emotions came rushing back to the surface.

We *had* been through a lot. But we survived it. We got through it because we had each other, and I knew that was all I'd ever need. In that moment, I'd never been so grateful to have the mother that I did.

"I love you, mamá." I mewled, pulling her into me and squeezing her tight.

For once, I could let my guard down. Let myself crumble in front of her without getting worried that I'd drag her down with me. Because this time, I knew she was there to glue all the pieces back together—and that felt relieving.

After several sappy hugs and *I love yous*, I pulled away and cleared my throat, pulling myself together. We weren't officially done with this—or him—yet; there still remained one last task to be dealt with.

"Now, what do you want to do with this? Open it? Throw it away? Burn it?" she asked, putting on her bravest smile as she waved the letter around.

That was a good question. I still wasn't sure what the best course of action was, but I knew one thing for certain: I wouldn't be able to move on until I knew what was inside. It had been plaguing me for too long and I couldn't go one more day with it weighing on my mind.

"I want to open it. Maybe once we see what it says I'll want to tear it up, but right now, I need to know what he wrote."

She nodded understandingly and placed the letter in my lap. I was tempted to ask her to open it for me, but I knew deep down this was something I had to do for myself.

I picked it up with shaky hands, taking a deep breath before ripping off the top. I reached inside and pulled out the contents, not sure what to expect.

"What the..?" my mom muttered when she looked down at what I had just taken out.

There, laying on our coffee table, was a cheque from my father. To me. For enough money to finally buy out Willow's.

## Twenty Five

### Anabelle



“**A**ww, honey! I love it.” my dad exclaimed as he leaned over to give my mother a kiss on the cheek, having just opened his present from her.

We were all sitting around the tree in the late morning on Christmas day, taking turns exchanging our gifts. Simon and I sat on the floor distributing presents like we had since we were kids, while my parents curled up on the couch under a throw blanket that was nearly as fluffy as the “Meowy Christmas” sweater my dad currently wore.

Despite the glum end to my evening last night, this morning had started off surprisingly well. We all slept in until ten (which was a drastic change from the days when Simon and I would burst into our parents’ room at six o’clock on Christmas morning), then had a delicious brunch all together. Mounds of eggnog French toast and bacon-cheddar quiche sat happily in my belly as we drank our coffees and sat in the living room, tearing through layers of wrapping paper and tape.

I had been worried that my recent blunders would put a damper on the holidays, but was surprised to find my family

wasn't giving me a hard time about it. I still felt guilty for what happened to the kitchen though since the scorch marks on the cabinets reminded me of my stupidity every time I looked at them. I couldn't just leave the past in the past and enjoy the present moment, which seemed to be a recurring theme for me lately.

"Me next!" I said, getting up from my seated position to scour through the remaining presents.

I wanted to show my mother what I had gotten for her, and hoped it would be enough to turn a new leaf for us. The past week had been eye-opening for me, to say the least. From the breakup to the fire, I had come to realize what my real priorities were. I needed to stop wasting my time on people like Blake, who obviously weren't worth my energy, and start focusing on mending the relationships that had suffered over the years—like my relationship with her.

She was so worried for me after the fire, holding me tight as we both teared up outside on the lawn. It reminded me that the people who loved me the most, who cared about me the most, were right here all along. I didn't want to waste one more minute being distant from my family since I now knew they were the ones who would be there for me when everything fell apart.

I picked up the small tightly wrapped box and placed it in her hands, nervously taking a seat in front of her.

"Ooooh, I wonder what it could be!" she smiled as she started delicately pulling at the ribbon.

I bit at my nail while she took ten million years to unwrap it, my chest feeling tighter by the second.

“Oh, Anabelle...” she said, opening up the box and pulling out the gold necklace. “It’s beautiful!”

“You like it..?”

“I love it!” she breathed. “It’s just like the one my mother gave me, the one I lost all those years ago.”

“You mean, the one *I* lost.” I chuckled faintly.

Her lips curled into a smile as she undid the clasp and put it on, her hand pressed up against the pendant as it dangled from her neck.

“I felt so bad for losing the other one, and I hoped this one would maybe earn me your forgiveness.” I added meekly, fixating on a piece of lint on the carpet.

“My forgiveness?”

She looked down at me with a wounded expression, and my face suddenly felt hot.

“Yeah, for losing your necklace, and... For the fire.”

I flicked my eyes back to her, surprised to find her features softening rather than accusing me in anger. She reached her hand out to tuck a piece of hair behind my ear, resting her hand on my cheek.

“Sweetie, there’s nothing to forgive. Honestly, I forgot that you lost my necklace. Have you thought all this time that I was mad at you?”

“Well... yeah?”

The emotion in the room made it hard for me to explain further, so I just sat there with her hand against my cheek, feeling like a little kid again.

“Why on earth would you think that?”

“I—I don’t know, you’re always so hard on me about everything... Mainly my weight, among other things. I guess I thought you were disappointed in me.”

“Disappointed?” she snickered. “Anabelle, if anything I’m envious of you.”

*Come again?*

I felt completely caught off guard. My mother was jealous of *me*? What universe did I wake up in this morning?

“You are so unapologetically yourself,” she continued. “So confident, and brave. You don’t let anyone tell you how to live your life, and I was nowhere near as sure of myself at your age. If anything, I look at you and see what I wish I had been. Strong, beautiful, a force to be reckoned with.”

“R—really?”

“Of course! Oh, Anabelle...” she started, taking a moment to compose herself before clearing her throat. “I suppose I *can* be overly critical at times, but I never meant to put you down... About your weight, or about anything else. I always thought I was being more helpful than judgemental, but I can see now that I was wrong.”



I tried to squeak out a response but nothing came up, a lump beginning to form in my throat.

“The funny thing is,” she continued. “I used to say the exact same thing about my mother.”

“Really..? Grandma was like that too?”

“Are you kidding? Your grandmother was the most critical woman alive! She would nitpick at every little thing about me day in and day out. I *hated* it, I felt like nothing I ever did was good enough for her.”

*You're telling me, sister.*

“I never realized I had started doing the exact same thing to you...” she added, pausing before coming to a realization. “Oh my God, it finally happened. I've turned into my mother.”

A laugh crept out of me as her eyes bulged wide in shock, and Simon couldn't help but join in too.

“You're much cooler than Grandma, don't worry.” I assured her.

She smiled while my dad rubbed her back, looking quite frankly unsurprised at her realization. I guess he noticed the resemblance between them a long time ago.

“Regardless, I'm so sorry if I ever made you feel like you weren't enough. I'll work on it, I promise.” she offered, causing warmth to spread in my heart. “And as for the fire, you don't have to beat yourself up about it. It was an accident, your father and I know that.”

“I know, I just... Still feel awful. I must have cost you both so much money.”

“Not necessarily, insurance covered most of it. Honestly, the most important thing is that we’re all safe and sound.” she insisted, waving her hand in front of her face as if to dismiss the whole idea. “Besides, I never liked that oven anyways. Took too long to preheat.”

Relief washed over me at the sound of those words. All the guilt I had been carrying around for days was for nothing. I had convinced myself my parents were mad at me when in reality, they had already moved past it. I felt like I was getting whiplash from all the assumptions I had made coming tumbling down.

“In that case, you’re welcome?” I chuckled, trying to laugh away the tears that crowded now my vision.

“Oh, come here.” she said, pulling me up onto the couch with her and wiping a stray tear from my cheek. “I know I don’t always show it well, but... Sweetie, I just miss you. It was hard for me to see you move out the second you graduated high school, and it stung a little that you never wanted to come back and see us... Apparently I haven’t been handling it very well.”

*Wow.*

*Just, wow.*

I would never in a million years have imagined those words coming out of her mouth. To be honest, I hadn’t really given much thought to how my leaving had affected her. I sort of

thought she'd be relieved to get me out of her hair, not miss having me around.

Man, did I ever have things backwards.

"I miss you too." I sniffled, not realizing how much I meant it until now. "I'm sorry I don't visit more often."

I made a solemn oath to myself right there and then that I would make more of an effort to come see my family. No more bad excuses and day trips—it would be whole weekends and big family trips from here on out.

"On that note," my dad interjected, pulling a large green gift bag out from behind the tree and reminding me of his presence. "This is for you Bananie, from the both of us."

I sniffled one last time and pulled myself together, wiping at my cheeks. I stared down at the big present in front of me, having forgotten for a moment what we were doing in the living room.

"Go ahead, open it." my mom gushed.

I beamed as I bent forward, undoing the ribbon and pulling out wads of tissue paper.

"Oh my God!" I chimed once I landed on a beautiful Kate Spade duffel bag in a gorgeous cream color. It was stunning (and enormous), which was a much-needed upgrade from my current tiny suitcase that was tearing at the seams.

"There's more, look inside." my dad smiled.

I undid the zipper and felt around inside, pulling out a leather-bound day planner with a post-it note on the front that read *Open me*.

I did as instructed and carefully leafed through the pages, noticing a trend with the first page of every month. In the margins of the first Saturday of each month was a hand-drawn heart with the words *Come home* written inside.

“This is our way of trying to get you to visit more often, so we can see our little girl.” my mom said, and that did me in. Just when I thought I had pulled myself together, the tears came rearing back.

If someone would have told me last week that I’d be crying over a day planner, I would’ve thought they were losing it. And yet here I was, clutching the planner to my chest, beaming as I thanked my parents.

“There’s one other thing.” my dad added when I got up to hug them. “But it’s not a gift you can take home with you.”

The crypticness of his sentence barely registered through my current sappy state, but I had to admit I was still intrigued.

“Go take a look at the mantel.” he elaborated.

Shrugging, I wiped at my eyes and walked over to the fireplace across the room to investigate. I didn’t notice it at first, but upon closer inspection, I saw it. Placed between baby pictures of me and Simon and family pictures of us at Disney was a new addition: a framed copy of my *Teen Vogue* cover.

“Merry Christmas, Anabelle.” my mom said as I fell apart into a thousand happy pieces.

\* \* \*

I think this was the best Christmas I’d ever had. Even better than the year I got two My Little Ponies.

After all the presents had been opened and the tears had dried up, we proceeded to have family baking time where we made heaps of sugar cookies and gingerbread men as we sang along to Mariah Carey’s holiday hits. Simon and I added graphic elements to our gingerbread men’s doughy bodies when our parents weren’t looking, which sent my dad into a laughing fit for a solid half hour once they came out of the oven. Something about a cookie with boobs was the peak of comedy to him.

We sang and danced and devoured our perverted little treats, and my heart had never felt more full. For the first time since I moved away, I felt like I wasn’t completely alone in this world. I was a Spencer, and the Spencers had each other’s backs.

Even when I reluctantly told my parents that Blake wasn’t coming tomorrow given the fact that he was no longer my boyfriend, they were abundantly supportive. No barrage of questions, no judgmental looks. If anything, they seemed kind of relieved that I wasn’t going to ditch them for a hotel.

Of course I still had to figure out what I was going to do about the casting on the 27<sup>th</sup>, but that could wait until later. Today was all about rest, relaxation, and family.

After all the fun of the afternoon, Simon and I were tasked with cleaning up the mess of wrapping paper and bows in the living room while my parents prepared dinner—and I didn't even huff once when we were assigned the chore.

“Hey, I'm glad you and Mom made up.” Simon chirped as we scrunched up piles of tissue paper into a garbage bag.

“Yeah? Why's that?”

I didn't really think he cared whether or not Mom and I were on good terms, or that he even noticed for that matter. I guess that was just another thing I was wrong about.

“I don't know, not everyone has what we have... I just think family's important, and we got pretty lucky, you know?”

“Awww, look at you getting all sentimental! Are you feeling okay Si?” I teased.

“Shut up, whatever.” he smiled, throwing a ball of wrapping paper at my head. “I mean, think of all the people who only get to spend the holidays with one parent. That must suck.”

“Oh, right... People like Leo.”

In all my excitement today, I hadn't stopped to think about what Leo was doing. It must have been hard for him to spend his first Christmas between divorced parents. I wondered what he was doing right now; was he sharing the holiday with both of them, or did he do Christmas with his mom and New Year's with his dad?

“I can't even imagine how shitty this must be for him, after the way his dad walked out on them.” Simon added, throwing

wads of tape and ribbon into the bag.

“What?”

*‘Walked out on’? There’s no way.*

“Did—did you not know?”

I slowly shook my head ‘no’, my mind not fully capable of understanding what he had just divulged to me. That couldn’t be true, could it..? Maybe I had heard him wrong.

“Shit. I thought Carmen told you.” he mumbled, eyes bulging open in panic.

His subsequent nervous silence told me that it was all too real, and that I definitely wasn’t supposed to know this development.

I opened my mouth to speak, grateful that words were coming out since I needed an explanation stat. “His dad *left* them?”

“Crap—Annie, promise me you won’t say anything. They don’t want people to know, Leo made me swear not to tell anyone. I thought Carmen already told you when you went over the other day!”

I could barely hear the words he was saying because my mind was racing a mile a minute. I couldn’t believe it, how could Edgar do that to his family? *Why* would he do that to them? Carmen and Leo were two of the best people I knew, they didn’t deserve to go through that... To be hurt like that.

And then it dawned on me. The reason Leo had gotten so upset with me last night, the reason he stormed out of there so quickly after I had talked about feeling unwanted. I had made a huge mistake, and felt like the biggest asshole on earth.

All of a sudden, the only thing that mattered to me was finding Leo and making things right between us, ASAP. I needed to see him and apologize, and I needed to do it *now*.



## Twenty Six

*Leo*



“Want another plate?” my mom asked as she headed back to the kitchen, her own empty plate in hand.

“Please, *no*.” I begged, rubbing a hand over my very full stomach. “I don’t think I’ll ever eat again.”

We had been steadily working through leftovers of empanadas, buñuelos, and natilla from last night’s potluck, and I’d finally had enough of the deliciousness.

We’d had a blast yesterday, spending the evening with my mom’s entire extended family at my grandparents’ house. Christmas Eve, or as we called it *Noche Buena*, had always been a bigger event in Colombian culture than Christmas Day, so we went hard.

We drank until all hours of the night, danced to songs from my childhood, and lit candles that we placed in the windowsills and all over the balcony. It was my favorite holiday for a reason; I loved that it brought me closer together with my family, and that it made me feel like I was a part of something bigger than myself.

I had let myself get distracted by Anabelle over the past week and temporarily lost sight of what was really important. Being with my family yesterday reminded me of my roots, of the people who had been there for me since I was a baby. Anabelle had been out of my life for the last eight years and somehow I managed. I didn't need her to come back into it, no matter how much I may have wanted her to.

My mom and I sat in the living room in a food coma, watching the nostalgic Christmas movie of my childhood: *Los Reyes Magos*. I watched her drift peacefully to sleep as she took a nap, and felt content for the first time in weeks. I had done it, I had made this holiday a happy one for my mom. The pressure was off, and I could finally sit back and enjoy myself.

That is, for two whole minutes before I heard a knock at the door. I glanced over at my mom who was thankfully still asleep and trudged my way over to the entryway.

I'm not sure who I was expecting to see on my front porch at seven p.m. on Christmas Day, but it sure as hell wasn't Anabelle.

She looked nervous as she chewed the bottom of her lip, starting to ramble as soon as I opened the door.

"Leo, I'm SO sorry. I swear I didn't know about your dad—"

"Not here." I interjected, grasping her elbow and leading her further back onto the porch before closing the door behind me.

Even though my mom and I had a really great talk about my dad yesterday, I didn't want to wake her up and bring back all those memories yet again.

After discovering the cheque, we'd gone through an array of emotions. Doubt and hysterics at first, thinking it must have been some sort of prank. Shock and outrage once we realized the cheque was real, and finally utter confusion as we debated on what to do with it.

Part of me wanted to cash it and use the funds to buy out Willow's, since it was the least he could offer me after what he did. It was exactly the amount I was missing for my seed money, which was kind of eerie. Sure, I'd had a nice sum already saved up on my own, but it still wasn't quite enough to buy out a place the size of Willow's.

The other part of me, though, wanted to shred the cheque and never look back. I didn't need help from the man who abandoned me. I would find a way to make my dreams come true on my own.

I had decided to sleep on it since it wasn't the time or place to be stressing out about it. We had a Noche Buena to get to, and nothing was going to stand in the way of that.

The sound of Anabelle biting her nails brought me back to reality, and I swiftly turned around to lock the door.

I walked over to my car, nodding toward the passenger side. "Get in."

I couldn't risk talking about this with her outside, where any nosy neighbors could overhear the truth about my dad. My mom and I had suffered through enough embarrassment and gossip lately; fighting with Anabelle out here would just add more unnecessary fuel to the fire.

Surprisingly, she seemed to comply with my demand without question. She pulled open the door and slid into the seat next to mine as I turned the key in the ignition.

“Where are we going?” she asked, not objecting nearly as much as I had assumed she would.

“To my place.”

“To your what now?”

“I don’t still live with my mom, you know.” I gave her a half chuckle, realizing she had probably thought I was just as codependent as her brother this whole time.

“Oh. Good to know.”

The sky was already starting to get dark while we drove, the rest of the five-minute car ride spent in silence as neither of us dared broach the sensitive topic at hand.

Once we arrived at my apartment and went up the stairs, I opened the door and let her in first. Unfortunately, I had forgotten how cold I had left this place in my absence, which did nothing to better my sour mood.

“Okay, talk.” I said, throwing my keys down on the entry table.

She seemed taken aback by my bluntness if only for a moment before steadying herself.

“I had no idea about your dad, I’m so incredibly sorry, Leo. I should have never—”

“It’s fine.”

I knew it was just as much my fault that we fought as it was hers, yet I couldn't get the words out that I was sorry for the way I reacted, too.

"No, seriously." she urged, reaching her hand out toward mine. "I would never have said what I did if I had known, I feel horrible."

I instinctively pulled my hand away, hating the way it made her eyes downturn in sorrow.

"Don't worry about it, I shouldn't have expected you to."

"Do you... Want to talk about it?"

I rubbed my neck, so done with thinking about my dad. I wanted to move on with my life already, not be caught up in the past.

"Not particularly."

She nodded and stared down at the floor, chewing on her lip once more. Every fiber of my being wanted to comfort her, to tell her it was fine and that I wasn't mad. But for some reason, I *did* feel mad. For some reason, it felt shitty to realize we didn't really know each other anymore. We were just two people who used to be friends, who were now complete strangers.

"Okay..." she finally said, picking at her nails. "So, can I ask where we stand then?"

"Look, you were right. This thing between us is too complicated. I think we should call it what is it, and move on."

Her big doe eyes bulged open, and I could tell that probably wasn't the answer she was expecting.

"End it just like that?"

"Yup."

I knew I was pushing her away, but I didn't care. The sad reality was, there was no point in us pursuing a relationship together. We had too much baggage and our communication left something to be desired. Worse than that, she was going back to the city tomorrow, leaving me in the dust once again. No matter what I still felt for her, I respected myself too much to go through that rejection once more.

"So, what? We're just supposed to forget everything that happened between us?"

"Guess so."

"You can't be serious?" she said, eyebrows scrunching as she waited for my absent reply. "Well maybe it's not that simple for me."

*Urrrghhh.*

I just wanted us to be able to end this as quickly and painlessly as possible so we could go back to our separate lives like before. I hated that I was hurting her, but I knew it would be for the best in the end.

"What do you mean?" I managed to ask in my most patient tone.

“I can’t just shove my feelings down like you can. Pretending to feel nothing is not as easy for me as it is for you.”

“*Easy?* You think this is easy for me?”

Now she was starting to piss me off. Did she really think I was that heartless? That having her traipse in and out of my life had absolutely no effect on me?

“Trust me, no part of this has been easy. My life has been a constant nightmare of shitshow after shitshow ever since you came back into it.” I barked.

“Well *sorry*, I didn’t realize I was such an inconvenience to you. Why did you even waste a second of your precious time on me if I’m such a nuisance?”

“Jesus Christ, Annie. You are the most difficult person in the world, do you know that?”

“Thanks for enlightening me, I’ll be sure to add that to my growing list of faults.”

I snorted in disbelief. She was pushing me past my limit now, and I didn’t like how vulnerable I felt.

“No, seriously.” she pressed. “Why did you even bother with me? Why save me from Jason at the party, and from a literal burning building? Why kiss me not once, but TWICE, if I’m such a goddamn burden to you?”

“Why do you think?!”

“For your own personal enjoyment, I presume.”

I dragged my hand across my face, digging deep down for any remaining patience I had left.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Please, feel free to jump in at any time and explain it to me.”

She crossed her arms in front of her chest, pursing her lips as if to mock me. I felt my heart beating in my ears and my blood boiling with every accusatory word she threw at me, wondering why she couldn’t have just left well enough alone.

“Christ, Annie. You’re really going to make me say it?”

“Yes, I would like to know why you insist on messing with my head.”

“Because I care about you, okay?! Because even though you drive me absolutely insane, even though you make me being with you the most difficult task on earth, I’m so pathetically in love with you that I would do anything to spend one fucking second with you!”

*...Shit.*



## Twenty Seven

Anabelle



“**Y**ou—you what?”

I stared back at Leo, dumbfounded, after the confession he had just made.

I must not have heard him right. He couldn't have just told me he *loved* me, right..?

“Forget it. Doesn't matter.”

“No, no.” I stammered, stepping toward him. “You said you were in love with me.”

His jaw flexed as he averted his eyes, the words echoing in my ears.

*He loves me.*

*Leo loves me.*

*Perfect, sexy, sweet Leo is in love with ME.*

“I can't believe this.” I breathed.

He ran his hands through his hair, still completely silent while I internally pinched myself.

*Tell him you love him back. Tell him he's the only guy you've ever really loved. Tell him anything!*

But the words escaped me. I had a nagging feeling at the back of my mind, like the rug could be pulled out from under me at any second. Because it had eight years ago.

I thought I knew where Leo and I stood when we were teenagers, just to find out that I was a joke to him. It made it hard for me to take this moment seriously, to accept how he felt about me.

And as if he could read my mind, he finally said, "Is it really so surprising?"

"I mean... Yeah? After what happened in high school, I didn't think I meant anything to you."

As I said those words, emotion hit me like a truck. I had never confronted Leo about The Incident, about how it had hurt me. I wasn't a very confrontational person, and my body seemed to be having a physical aversion to getting it out into the open.

His eyes scrunched up in a confused frown as he stuttered for a second.

"You're not making any sense, Annie."

"I'm not making any sense? I'm not a mind reader, Leo. You didn't exactly make your feelings about me clear."

He snorted in disbelief once more, throwing his hands up in the air in defeat.

“So me dumping Hailee because I had feelings for you wasn’t clear enough?”

He said it so matter-of-factly, yet none of it sounded true. That wasn’t how it went down? At least, that’s not how Hailee had explained it.

“What the hell are you talking about? *She* dumped *you*. For what you said about me.”

“Look, I don’t know what kind of bullshit story Hailee fed you, but that’s the truth. I broke up with her because I had feelings for you.” His eyes finally met mine, and the sincerity in them made my face feel hot. “I wanted to ask you out, Annie. Why do you think I showed up at your house in the middle of the night throwing freaking rocks at your window?”

*Oh.*

*O h .*

Suddenly the most traumatic romantic experience of my life was a lie, and I was questioning everything I thought I knew about him. Had my best friend really lied to me? Why would she do that? And how had she been able to keep it a secret for all these years?

Though I had to admit, it did make a lot more sense the more I thought about it. I had thought Leo was just trying to come clean that night he snuck over to our patio, to tell me what he had said so he could clear his conscience. I sure as hell didn’t think he was coming over to tell me he had feelings for me.

“Oh my God.” I stumbled backward, trying to wrap my head around the situation.

If Hailee had lied to me, that meant that Leo wasn't a bad guy. That meant he never laughed at me and he wasn't pretending to be my friend for all those years. That meant he actually had feelings for me, that our chemistry was real, and that I was right.

It also meant I had spent the last eight years of my life hating someone who didn't deserve it.

“Wait, what did she say to you?” he asked, closing the space between us.

“It doesn't matter, it's stupid.”

“Tell me.”

I caught his eyes, all dark and stormy when they stared down at me, and suddenly I felt like the biggest idiot in the world. My throat tightened and my face felt hot as I forced the words out of my mouth.

“She... She said that you called me fat. That day that she came over after you two broke up, she said you were laughing at me and calling me names. Which is stupid, I mean I'm not a kid anymore, that shouldn't have even bothered me. At the time—”

He took my chin in his hand, halting my rambling train of thought.

“Annie, I *never* said that.”

His words landed heavy on my heart, causing all of the air to escape my lungs and my vision to go blurry. I fought back tears, feeling a hundred different emotions all at once. But the one that felt sharpest in my chest was knowing that I had gotten it wrong all those years.

I had misjudged him, assuming the worst and tearing him out of my heart, all for a lie. And the whole time, he had no idea. He hadn't done anything wrong and he didn't know why I cut him out. Sweet, kind, protective Leo had always cared for me, and I hurt him.

His hand moved down toward the back of my neck, cradling my head in the warmth of his palm. My heart beat in my ears, feeling full and broken all at the same time. I didn't know how I could possibly make it up to him, tell him I was sorry, make him feel how regretful I was for having wasted all that time.

So I just kissed him.

I kissed him with the emotion and yearning of eight long years, with my eyes watering and the world spinning around me. His hands slid down to grasp my waist, pulling me into his warmth. He held me so tightly and firmly that I thought I might have been dreaming, because this wasn't the same as the other two times we'd kissed. Those were filled with lust and spontaneity; a heat of the moment impulse that just took over.

This one... This was filled with all of our unspoken words. The pain of having been apart for so long, the tenderness of letting someone in. It was longing and burning. Craving and accepting.

He gave me deep, drawn-out kisses that made my stomach swirl and my toes go numb. They felt passionate, tender, intentional. In that moment, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he really saw me for me. That he accepted me with his whole being.

“Leo,” I whispered, my throat feeling tight.

His lips parted from mine ever so slightly, lingering right over my mouth as my unfocused gaze landed on him. I felt a flutter in my chest when he looked back at me with heavy eyes, wanting to say everything I’d never been able to. But the words caught in my throat, silence filling our intimate moment.

He raised his eyebrow and smirked as if he could read my mind, placing his mouth right up against my ear.

“Say it.”

Stampedes of butterflies overtook me as the whispered words buzzed in my ear. I took his face in my hands, feeling the rough stubble of his jaw against my fingers and locked my eyes with his. My heart ached to tell him, to make him feel how much it engulfed me.

“I love you, too. I always have.”

His face erupted into a devilish smile, the kind that crinkled his eyes with warmth and quickened my pulse.

“About time.”

He swept me up into his arms and wrapped my legs around his waist, while his hands grasped my thighs. The energy

between us suddenly shifted from delicate intimacy to hot desire, and our lips met once more.

He walked us down the hall with ease as we kissed, carrying me into his bedroom and setting me down with my back on top of his bed. I didn't even have time to take in the view of his room—*Leo's* bedroom—before he climbed up on top of me and laid another kiss on my lips, pressing his body into mine.

His arms wrapped themselves around my waist and pulled me into him, feeling like we were going to melt into one if we got any closer. My hands on his jaw trailed down his neck and under his shirt, needing to feel every inch of him. Even though the room was unusually cold, the silky warmth of his shoulders radiating toward my fingers was enough to set my body on fire. I tugged at the fabric, aching for him to take it off.

“You first.” he breathed into my mouth.

He tore himself away from me, sitting up as he watched me pull my sweater off over my head, letting my hair cascade down and brush up against my lace bra. A smile crept onto the corner of his lips when I threw it on the ground, his eyes glazing over every inch of my now exposed skin.

“*Fuck*, Annie. You are... breathtaking.”

I thought my body was going to spontaneously combust at that comment, but instead I managed to say through burning cheeks, “Suck up. Your turn.”

## Twenty Eight

*Leo*



I woke up to the sunlight peering in through my curtains, its warmth washing over my face. My eyelids fluttered open to find the best view in the world in front of me: Anabelle in my arms.

A smile crept up on my mouth as I watched her sleep soundly against my chest, hers rising and falling with every breath. I took a moment to take it all in, what I had secretly been wishing for ever since that night outside her house.

Now that I knew the truth about that day, about why she stopped talking to me, I felt relieved. I hadn't understood what I did wrong and why we were so cold to each other before she moved to the city, but it all made sense now. We had felt the same way about each other without knowing it, and let our prides get in the way.

Part of me wished we had figured out the truth long ago so we could have been doing this—doing what we did last night—all along. But the other part of me just felt grateful to have this moment here with her right now, this perfect sleepy morning.



A soft moan escaped her as she stirred, her nose twitching when she shifted. My eyes drifted from the little upturn of her nose to her long eyelashes, to her wild red hair that crowded her face. I lifted a hand and gently tucked a strand away from her eyes, which seemed to wake her from her dream.

“Morning, sunshine.” I whispered into her ear.

She looked up at me with groggy eyes, seeming to take a moment to remember where she was before beaming up at me.

Her face broke out into a glorious smile as she softly breathed, “Hi there.”

“How’d you sleep?”

“Mmmm, best sleep ever.” Her finger delicately traced around my abdomen. “You make the comfiest pillow. Seriously, they should sell this at Bed Bath and Beyond—they’d make millions.”

“Happy to be of service.”

Come to think of it, that was the best sleep I’d had in a while too. After months of late nights and struggling to fall asleep, I seemed to doze off instantly with Anabelle. It’s almost like my body knew I was safe with her; like I could finally unwind.

“Sooo, did that really happen last night?” she asked, her eyes flicking up to mine.

“Twice.”

Her cheeks reddened and her gaze landed on my lips. “I guess any chance we had of being friends is officially squashed then?”

“You telling me you just want to be friends, Spencer?”

“Not a chance.”

I closed the gap between us to take her lips in mine, just as her phone buzzed from the floor. She frowned at the interruption and made a groaning sound like she wanted to throw it out of a window.

“I should probably check that, I didn’t exactly tell my family where I was going last night.”

*Crap.*

Neither had I.

We both begrudgingly turned around to pick up our phones from their scattered spots on the ground and check our messages for the first time since we’d arrived at the apartment.

I, of course, had a couple of missed calls from my mother, causing me to type out a rushed text to let her know I was still alive and apologize for not coming home last night. Luckily she didn’t seem upset at all and promptly reminded me that she was a grown woman who didn’t need babysitting.

My luck didn’t last long though, since I also had a text waiting from Dom letting me know my last paycheck was ready to be picked up at the restaurant.

“Oh my God!” Anabelle shrieked as she shot up from her position beside me, eyes wide in the direction of her screen.

“What? What’s wrong?”

I turned toward her, about to start panicking, just as I noticed a wide smile plastered across her face.

She squealed at her phone before turning it toward me so I could see what all the commotion was about. “Look!”

My eyes landed on a group chat where Aaliyah had sent a picture of her and her now fiancé with a ring on her finger, captioned *Status update on yesterday: SHE SAID YES!!*

“Hey, it’s green-pantsuit-lady!”

“Huh?” Anabelle said with a confused frown across her still giddy face.

“I mean, Devin.” I smiled. “Wow, that’s amazing! I didn’t even know they were together.”

She managed a few more gleeful squeals while she typed out frantic replies, beaming down at her phone. But when it buzzed again in her hand, she seemed to stiffen in place. I glanced down and suddenly understood why, as a new text appeared on the screen.

• **Hailee:** OMG congrats!! We should celebrate soon!

The room instantly got quiet with the unwelcome reminder of the reason we were kept apart, the person responsible for the lies looming over us.

After all the declarations of love and subsequent knocking of boots last night, we had spent hours talking over takeout food we ordered in the late hours. Anabelle told me all about her dream of becoming a runway model, which might soon be coming true thanks to her upcoming New York Fashion Week casting, and I

told her about the big plans I had for taking over and rebranding Willow's before I was unfairly fired. She let me go on about how I was sure I could still make it work if only I could prove to Dom that I wasn't a thief, and she even offered to get me in touch with Aaliyah since she had some experience in the owning-your-own-business field.

Not only did we catch up on every little thing we had missed in each other's lives these past eight years, but we also filled each other in on the missing parts of the Hailee debacle. Though it felt relieving to finally have the whole truth, that now meant Anabelle's friendship with her was fractured.

"I guess I should go talk to her today..." she finally mumbled. "Clear the air."

"Want me to come with you?"

She gazed up at me and pushed a stray curl out of my face, giving me the warmest feeling in my chest.

"You're sweet, but I think it's better if I do this myself. She might feel like we're ganging up on her if we do it together."

"That's fine, looks like I have to go to Willow's anyways."

Her eyes grew with hope as she asked, "Are you going to get your job back?"

"I'm gonna try."

"You'll get it back. I just know it."

"Is that so?" I asked before taking her face in my hands and planting a soft kiss on her lips, relishing in the fact that I could

now do this whenever I wanted.

“Call it intuition,” she grinned after our lips parted. “But I have a feeling everything is going to work out just fine for us.”

\* \* \*

“Of course I had to deduct the couple hundred dollars you stole from the total, I’m sure you understand.” Dom scorned as he handed me the solitary envelope containing my final paycheck from Willow’s.

I grabbed the envelope and shoved it in my pocket, trying my best to contain my irritation when I turned to leave his office. I had thought about the theft the whole car ride over to drop Anabelle off at her parents’ house, and the whole drive over to the restaurant. And yet, I still wasn’t able to come up with any sort of explanation that made sense. At this point, I was just praying my former boss would magically come to his senses and realize what a dumbass he was so I wouldn’t have to beg for my job back.

“Screw it. Dom, I gotta try one last time.” I said, swallowing my pride as I turned back toward him. “I swear I did *not* steal money from the safe. You know me, you know how long I’ve been here and how loyal I am to this place. I would never jeopardize my future here. I’m asking you to take all of that into account and reconsider your decision to let me go.”

I held my breath while he contemplated my words, and I could’ve sworn I saw hesitation cross his face.

“I’m sorry Leo,” he finally replied with a long sigh. “But unless you can come up with an alternate explanation, my hands are tied.”

*Fuck.*

At least I tried.

“Hey, Butch Cassidy! The hell are you doing here? I thought we fired your ass.” Zack jeered as he appeared in the doorway.

I wanted to wring his neck out while he stood there mocking me, swinging his lanyard around between his fingers like the pompous prick he was.

“Just picking up my last paycheck.” I growled.

“Well try your best not to swipe anything on your way out, ‘kay?”

My anger nearly got the best of me as I almost lunged at him, stopping short when his lanyard caught my eye. And then, as if the gods of justice were shining down on me, I had a thought. A possible explanation, a glimmer of hope. Could it really be that simple?

“Dom,” I turned back to face him. “Do you happen to have your key on you right now?”

“Excuse me?”

“Just humor me for a second. Your key to the restaurant—do you have it on you?”

He huffed and rolled his eyes as he pulled out his keys from his jacket, which was hanging off the coat rack. He rifled through

them impatiently for a moment before clamming up and staring back at me.

“It uh, it appears that I do not. I didn’t even realize it was missing this morning since the restaurant was already open when I got here...”

“Interesting.” I quipped and looked over at Zack, who immediately shoved his lanyard back into his pocket. “I wonder if maybe, just *maybe*—”

I launched toward him as he backed up, successfully snatching it from his tight grip despite his many protests.

“—Our friend Zack might be of some assistance in locating it.”

“Hey, that’s mine! You can’t do that!”

“Too late.” I smirked, holding him off while I sifted through the keys. “Bingo.”

Dom’s face went pale when I held up a solitary silver key in my hand—the exact key that unlocked the front door, the one that only Dom, the morning manager, and I had a copy of.

I couldn’t believe it was really that simple. All this time trying to come up with an elegant explanation for the perfect crime, and all Zack had done was swipe his uncle’s key when he wasn’t looking. Worst of all, the idiot kept it with him! I had been giving him far too much credit; he truly was that stupid.

“Let’s pull up that security footage one more time, just for laughs.” I said, starting to get overconfident in my conviction.

Dom quickly shot a deathly glare over at his nephew before typing something on his computer and bringing up the video of the night in question.

We re-watched the clip of me putting the cash box into the safe, though we had already watched it the day he fired me. From the way the camera was angled, you could only see me coming into the office and opening the safe; the door to the safe blocked any view of what was going on behind it.

“Fast forward.” I demanded.

Dom huffed but complied, speeding through the following minutes. The time stamp flashed forward, racing past the rest of the hour, and the next one, and the next. I started to get nervous when nothing happened on the screen for what felt like an eternity, my heart beating in my ears as I wondered if I had made a mistake. But then—jackpot.

Movement ensued on the video, and Dom set it back to regular speed while we watched a shadowy silhouette open his office door. The image got clearer as the perp approached the safe until finally, it was clear as day that the figure was in fact Zack. He had snuck back into the restaurant at four o'clock in the morning using his uncle's key and proceeded to open up the safe with ease.

“But—but how? You don't even know the combination!” Dom sputtered over at his nephew, looking dumbfounded.

“I watched you open it once when you first hired me... I saw you put in the combination.”



*Oh sweet, sweet victory.*

An audible laugh escaped my mouth as I watched Dom disown him with his eyes, not even feeling the least bit sorry for my rudeness. He could suck it for all I cared; I was basking in the glory of watching Zack be his own ultimate downfall.

“Well then, Leo.” Dom cleared his throat, loosening his tie. “It seems a mistake has been made on my part, and I deeply apologize for the misunderstanding.”

*‘Misunderstanding’? Sure, asshole.*

I gave him a single hearty laugh in return, feeling on top of the world.

“Rest assured Zack’s actions won’t go unpunished.” Another stern glare in his direction. “But in light of this discovery, I would like to offer you your job back. With a raise of course, for your troubles. What do you say?”

He held his hand out for me to shake it, but I stopped in place. Is that really what I wanted? Just to waste another five years of my life working for this douchebag? After all, this was the guy who fired me on an assumption. Was that really the type of person I wanted to work for?

“Hard pass.” I blurted, surprising even myself. “I’ve actually got a much better idea. How about I buy you out instead?”

## Twenty Nine

### Anabelle



I took a deep breath and psyched myself up as I walked into Little Leaves, noticing Hailee already ordering at the counter. We had agreed to meet here in the afternoon to “catch up” (the location being her idea, not mine) and I wasn’t exactly looking forward to the conversation.

I had no idea how to act around her now, let alone how to broach the sensitive subject. Would I just come right out and say it, try to trap her in a lie, or make a big scene? What approach did one take when confronting their best friend about an eight-year-old lie? Judy Blume definitely hadn’t prepared me for this.

I locked eyes with Jason when I chose a table and took a seat, who immediately ducked behind the counter at the sight of me.

*Damn right.*

I guess my “boyfriend” Leo had made a lasting impression on him at the party—little did Jason know we only got together for real last night.

“Annie!” Hailee squealed as she bounced over, extending her arms out to me in a hug. “Can you even believe it about Aaliyah

and Devin? I'm so excited! I already started looking up bridesmaids' dresses, just in case."

It seemed rude to leave her hanging like that, so I reluctantly got up and gave her the most half-hearted limp noodle hug ever. She didn't seem to notice my change in demeanor as she took the seat across from mine and sipped her matcha latte.

"I know, right? I'm so happy for them." I answered meekly.

She smiled wide at me, and suddenly it felt dishonest to make small talk with her like this. I got a queasy feeling in my stomach and chewed on my lip, trying to come up with the smoothest way to bring up our reason for meeting. Every second I didn't ask her about The Incident felt like forever, and I needed some answers stat.

"Why did you lie to me about Leo?" I blurted.

*Okay, the direct approach it is then.*

"Wha—what do you mean?" she asked awkwardly, grinning while she fiddled with the lid of her cup.

"Hailee."

Her eyes shot up to mine and I watched them turn from confusion to shame as she understood what was happening. She went dead quiet, her face turning white as a ghost.

"Why did you lie to me?" I repeated, slightly more impatiently this time.

Her eyes went back down to her cup where she was picking at the label on the side. "When did you find out?"

“Not soon enough.”

She let out a big sigh, and suddenly it felt all too real. That sigh was an admission of guilt, proof that my best friend really had stabbed me in the back for her own personal gain. I already knew that she had, but something about having it confirmed made my throat tighten.

“Annie, you gotta believe me—it’s not what you think.” she started. “Well, I *did* lie, but I didn’t mean to.”

I cocked my eyebrow and waited for her explanation, knowing there was nothing she could say that would undo the pain she caused.

“I was going to tell you what he really said, I swear. When I got to your house that day, I was planning on telling you the truth. But...”

She fell silent again, and anger started bubbling up inside me. “But?”

“But once I opened my mouth to say it, the lie just kind of... came out.”

“How exactly does a lie just *come out*, Hailee? A lie is a conscious choice.”

“No, it wasn’t like that! It’s just that I saw you look all hopeful when I mentioned his name, and then I pictured his face and the breakup, I... I got all jealous and territorial. I felt like it wasn’t fair that he chose you over me.”

“Oh, and lying to me is fair? Is that it?”

“No—that’s not what I meant.” she blubbered, a worried expression painting her face. “Look, I’m so sorry Annie. I know I fucked up, but I never meant to hurt you. You have to believe me.”

I tried my best to give her the benefit of the doubt, to see things from her point of view. She had just been dumped after all, so she probably wasn’t in the best frame of mind at the time (on that part, I could relate). Plus, I could see how it would be painful to have your boyfriend leave you for your best friend; that must have felt horrible.

But.

“Hails... You made a mistake, that much I can understand. Nobody’s immune from bad judgment calls, everyone’s told a lie at some point.” I offered, loosening up my clenched jaw a little. “The part that really sucks though, the part that I can’t get over is that you never came clean. You let me believe your lie for *eight years*—why?”

She blinked back tears that now crowded her eyes, nodding slowly like she knew there was no coming back from this.

“I was going to fess up, I really was... But the more time that went by, the harder it felt to do, until eventually I just gave up and hoped you’d forget about it.”

*Damn it.* I was kind of hoping for a better reason than that, like selective amnesia or something.

“But I didn’t forget. That stayed with me every day, the feeling of not being good enough for someone, or feeling like I

couldn't trust Leo anymore. He was my friend, he was important to me and you let me think he was an asshole. You didn't just crush my self-esteem that day, you also destroyed my friendship with him." My voice cracked at that last part, but I pushed on. "It wasn't only dishonest to me; it was dishonest to him, too. He deserved better than that."

I let the words linger in the air around us, their weight sinking into her quietness.

"I know, you're right... God, you must hate me." she finally croaked, her words hitting me like a truck.

*Hate.*

That feeling that had plagued me for years, that kept me from Leo and from the truth. It had turned me bitter and cynical, and I didn't want to feel that emotion anymore. I was ready to move on with my life; to turn a new page filled with love instead of resentment.

"I don't hate you Hails, I'm done hating. I think I just need some time to process all of this, okay?"

She nodded again, remaining silent as she tore up little pieces of the label she had picked off her cup.

After what felt like hours of awkward silence, I got up to leave, grabbing my purse off the back of my chair. I'd said what I needed to say and got the answers I was looking for. Yet somehow, despite the sadness that pricked my chest at the thought of losing one of my best friends, I actually felt lighter.

Though the truth had been bittersweet, it felt good to stick up for myself for once. And by losing a friendship riddled with dishonesty with Hailee, I gained one I never thought I'd be lucky enough to have with Leo.

I walked over to the door, stopping just before I pushed it open and turned around.

“Hailee?”

She looked up at me with big hopeful eyes, wiping her cheek with the back of her hand.

“Yeah?”

“Merry Christmas.”

She smiled weakly and sniffled back, “Merry Christmas, Annie.”

\* \* \*

I knocked at Leo's door, buzzing with anticipation as I stood out in the hallway of his apartment complex. We had agreed to meet back here after checking in with our families and confronting our respective dilemmas, and I only hoped his chat with his boss had been as productive as mine with Hailee.

I raised my hand to knock again just as the door swung open. Leo stood in his doorway, all smiles and confidence while his eyes did a once over of my body. Even though he had pretty much seen all of me last night, having him undress me with his eyes still made my knees go weak.

“Hey, you.” he greeted, flashing me that prize-winning smile.

He was wearing sweatpants and an old t-shirt with a kitchen towel draped over his shoulder, but I swear I'd never seen him look sexier. Was it just the placebo effect of knowing what was underneath those clothes? Or was it knowing that this delicious man in front of me was now mine?

He reached out and pulled me inside when I just stared at him in a daze, shutting the door behind us. The apartment was much warmer today, and smelled of garlic, butter, and heaven. His face bent down toward mine as he placed a soft kiss on my forehead, my nose, and finally my lips.

"Smells amazing in here." I uttered while those familiar hands came to rest against my cheeks.

"Glad you think so, 'cause I'm making dinner for us."

After one last tender smooch, he released me to go check on his pot in the kitchen.

*He's making dinner for me.*

*Leo is making dinner, for ME.*

Even though we still hadn't figured out what the plan was for our relationship moving forward, it felt like we had already fallen into a comfortable rhythm. Being with him felt as natural as breathing, even if I was sure I wouldn't be getting used to this level of happiness anytime soon.

"So how'd it go today?" he asked, hinting at my talk with Hailee as he picked up a wooden spoon from the counter.

"As well as it could've gone, I guess." I said, sitting down on a stool at the island. "She felt really bad about it, and it helped to



hear her side of things... She said she never planned on lying to me, that it just kind of happened and then as time went by, she thought we'd eventually forget about it."

"Huh."

"I mean, she still fucked up, but at least she didn't mean to hurt us. That has to count for something, right..?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I left it by telling her I'd need some time to process everything."

"That's fair." he said, looking at me over his shoulder while he stirred the pot on the stove. "Do you think you guys will ever be friends again?"

"Maybe someday? I'm not sure. All I know is I'm done writing people off—you never know what might happen down the line."

He gave me a wicked grin at that, setting down his spoon once he seemed happy with whatever was brewing in front of him.

"How about you? Did you get your job back?" I asked, hopeful for his vindication.

"I did," he said as I started to gasp in excitement. "But I turned it down."

"What? Why?"

"Let's just say I made him a better offer instead."

"Okay weirdo, could you be more cryptic?"

He laughed as he picked up the pot and started draining pasta over the sink. “I don’t want to jinx it, but Dom should have an answer for me soon. Then I promise, you’ll be the first to know.”

He set it back down, scooping piles of pasta into bowls and covering them with a heavenly-smelling sauce. He slid one over to me then took a seat on the stool next to mine, our legs just barely grazing each other.

“Thank God you cooked, I’m going to need the energy for the drive back to the city.” I swooned, digging my fork into my bowl.

I sensed him tense up beside me as I wolfed down my food, and turned to find him frowning.

“You’re leaving tonight?”

“Well yeah, I have that casting tomorrow. Remember?”

His eyes downturned in disappointment, and suddenly I felt a pang hit my heart.

“Right. About that.”

He turned toward me, setting down his fork and staring at me intently.

*Oh no, here it comes.*

The “is it really that important?” question, the dismissive look that told me I could blow off my job because it was “just modeling, after all”. I got that look all the time from Blake, that condescension that made me feel like shit.

I sensed it coming here with Leo—that he was going to ask me to skip the casting like Blake had a dozen times, and it was

causing a knot to form in my stomach.

“What if you slept here tonight, and I drove you to your casting in the morning?” he asked.

“What?”

*So* not what I was expecting. Then again, Leo had a habit of exceeding all my expectations.

“I’ll drive you tomorrow, bright and early.” he repeated. “Then we can grab some dinner in the city and come back here so you can spend the rest of the week—and New Year’s—with your family.”

There was no way I heard those words correctly. How in the world could Leo continue to get more perfect with every passing second?

“You’d do that for me..?”

He frowned and gave me a chuckle like it was nothing. “Of course.”

“I do have my own car, you know. You don’t have to drive me.”

“I know.” he smiled, tugging my stool toward his so our thighs were pressed right up against each other. “But if you go alone, you won’t have any reason to come back. And I need you to come back.”

His thumb glided back and forth on my thigh and the knot in my stomach turned to butterflies. Every time I braced myself for the worst with him, he pulled through in the most kind and

caring way. I couldn't believe I'd gotten so lucky to have a man like Leo be mine.

"So tell me about this dinner after the casting." I smiled, caving to his idea. "Would this be considered a date?"

"Perhaps."

His thumb made its way up toward my hip bone as he leaned into me, sending a buzz of electricity through the air.

"Does that mean we're officially an *item* then?" I crooned, half joking and half desperate to know the answer.

"What would you say if it did?"

He closed the space between us as his hands grasped my waist, pulling me into him.

"I would say... Dibs on not telling Simon!"

I pressed my index finger to my nose and laughed mockingly, loving the devilish look he gave me in return.

"No fair, cheater." he quipped through a wide smile, brushing my finger away from my face to plant another breathtaking kiss on my lips.

# Epilogue



“Nervous?” Anabelle asked me as we stood before the doors of the new and improved Willow’s Bar and Grill, the air conditioning inside struggling to combat the sticky July heat.

“Nope.”

“Are you lying?” she smiled up at me, placing a hand on my chest to feel my racing heartbeat.

I grinned, knowing there was no hiding myself from Anabelle. “Through my teeth.”

The day had finally come, the grand re-opening of Willow’s. After making Dom an offer that day in his office (somewhat abruptly, I’ll admit), he told me he had to think about it. I had offered him only what I knew I could afford at the time, which was no doubt less than the place was worth.

In the end, I had decided not to cash the cheque my father had sent me. I knew it would’ve given me more than enough capital to produce a tempting offer, but I couldn’t bring myself to use it. It didn’t feel right to accept any of his help—I didn’t want my dream to be tainted with the thought of him every time I looked at it. Maybe one day I’d feel ready to reach out to him and hear him out, but right now, I was perfectly happy where I was.

If anything, the clarity that his letter gave me ended up being more useful than any amount of money he could have offered

me. It gave me the kick in the pants I needed to buck up and make my below-average offer to Dom, because I finally had something worth more than cash to him. I had his debt.

Since he fired me on an assumption of theft, which he never investigated with due diligence until I forced him to, I knew I had the upper hand. I was completely within my rights to hit him with a wrongful termination suit, and that was the absolute last thing he wanted. Not only would it mean more money he'd have to spend on lawyers, it would also completely ruin his reputation as an employer in this town.

He agreed to sell me the place at my discounted rate in return for not pursuing legal repercussions, and I gladly agreed. Sure, I probably could have made far more money in the long run had I chosen to sue him (especially since nepotism was involved), but I didn't want to waste any more of my time or money on him. Even the idea of a settlement was more trouble than Dom was worth, and in the end the only thing I really wanted was the restaurant.

Once the handover was complete in the new year, my first course of action was to fire Zack's ass. It seemed Dom was already planning on letting him go anyways, but I still got a kick out of doing it myself.

Once that was settled, I kept business running as usual while I made my renovation plans. I wanted to expand the bar area so that it wasn't just the cramped space with a dozen stools shoved against the counter, since drinks were the main reason people came to Willow's. Not only did I want to double the size of bar so

we could start offering a larger variety of liqueurs and spirits (instead of the cheap local shit), but I also wanted to extend the surrounding seating area into half of the room. We'd put in high-top tables for casual drinks and mingling, and groupings of leather lounge chairs, cushions and low tables on the outskirts of the room for more intimate options.

Where the bar became a warm and inviting space complete with mood lighting and candles on each table, the dining room became a place for bigger gatherings. On top of regular-sized tables for couples or small groups, I'd added large communal tables that allowed for more parties, topped with solid wood surfaces and brass legs. The matching metallic chairs and rustic hanging light fixtures gave the room an upscale industrial feel, which I'd hope would cater to the after-work dinner groups of business men and women and crowds of college kids finishing up late-night classes.

The renovations had taken longer than expected seeing as I was on a budget, but I'd made it work. I did as many of the renos as I could myself, repainting the walls and lugging in furniture to save on labor costs. Of course there were some items I needed to call professionals in for, and I got help from Simon and some of the staff wherever I could. Even Aaliyah helped out, showing me how to apply for a small business loan and manage the many expenses that came with the territory.

After a couple months of the restaurant being closed for the remodel, it was finally ready. Everything had come together—all my planning, sweat and tears had led to this opening night. And I was nervous as all hell.

“Let’s do this.” I said, tugging open the door to let the warm July sunset pour in.

Anabelle let out a small gasp at the sight before her, and I turned my attention to what she was looking at. There was a line. An actual *line*. Outside my restaurant.

Granted it was mostly comprised of our families and friends who came out to support me, but further down the line I spotted some locals who must have seen the sign for the grand re-opening and decided to give it a shot. I felt on top of the world, taking in the view of my longtime dream come true.

My biggest dream come true, however, was the woman standing next to me. She had been my biggest supporter in this endeavor, volunteering all of her free time to help me with choosing paint samples, finding bargains on decor and suppliers, and giving me pep talks when I felt in over my head. I could have never imagined having a partner as amazing as her, having someone who supported my dreams as unwaveringly as I did hers.

I threw my arm around Anabelle and tucked her into me while I welcomed the guests, ushering them in as we played host for the night. The first in line was of course my mother, accompanied by the large clan that was my extended family. I directed them toward the dining room where we sat them at one of the many communal tables that were now serving their purpose. My mom beamed up at the both of us and kissed our cheeks, squeezing our hands with happy tears forming in her eyes.



I'd never seen her as ecstatic as she had been these past few months, and I wasn't sure which was the cause: seeing her son come into his own and be successful in his ventures, or being able to say "I told you so" every time she saw Anabelle and I together.

Next up were Anabelle's parents who I ushered toward a smaller table in the corner of the dining room, followed by Aaliyah and Devin who were all smiles when we directed them toward one of the intimate lounge areas in the bar. Seeing as their wedding was next month (I'd already bought my suit to match Anabelle's maid of honor dress), they were all googly eyes and hushed giggles whenever they were together.

Their happiness made my heart fill with warmth, knowing exactly the kind of giddy love they were experiencing. I pulled Anabelle into me for a sneaky kiss, finding it hard to keep my hands off her tonight, just as I heard an approaching voice clear their throat.

"Incoming brother alert, please put all tongues away." Simon mocked, holding one hand over his eyes while the other was wrapped around the waist of his most recent fling.

Anabelle huffed and swatted at his arm, turning a bright shade of pink. "Oh relax, Si. No tongues were making an appearance."

Despite her totally unfair dibs calling, Annie had ultimately been the one to tell Simon about our relationship. I wouldn't say he was necessarily pleased to hear about it, but he didn't seem all that surprised, either. I guessed my hunch was right that he knew

about my feelings for her (and hers for me) since he seemed to get on board without much dispute. I knew he really wanted the both of us to be happy, even if he did put in place a *no kissing in front of Simon* rule.

“For you and your lady friend, we have our best table in the lounge reserved.” I said, ushering them toward a cozy area by the window.

“Ooooh, their best table!” his date chimed as she looked up at him with wide, impressed eyes.

He threw me a wink once we seated them, and we walked off to welcome the rest of the guests. Once everyone in the line had been greeted and seated, Anabelle and I took the opportunity to sit at the bar and have a glass of champagne.

The best part about being the restaurant owner? All your drinks were free.

“I’m so proud of you.” she smiled as her fingers delicately traced over my arm.

I shot a glance over the almost full room, feeling pride swell in my chest as another host took over welcoming more incoming guests.

“Not as proud as I am of you.” I beamed, eyes landing back on that glowing face.

It was no surprise that she had landed that New York Fashion Week gig in the end; I would’ve placed money on it despite all of her nail biting and anxious worrying. What we hadn’t expected (but what I knew she deserved) was for her to

blow up on social media afterward. She was being sought out by the most prominent brands and designers ever since that show, and working harder than ever before. The timing actually worked out perfectly because while I was busy with the Willow's renos, she was off to meeting after meeting in the city.

The good news was, she had more control over her schedule now that people were seeking *her* out. She was able to schedule meetings and castings on the same days so that she could spend all her free time in Woodberry, with me. Though it wasn't always easy to find time together when we lived in two different cities, we made it work. Lord knows I made seeing her a priority and dropped whatever I was doing if she was coming over.

The day I told her I loved her was the day I decided never to let her get away again. I had known life with her and I had known it without her—and life without Anabelle was an existence I never wanted to experience again.

“To us.” she announced as she lifted her glass, flashing me a smile that melted my heart. “And to burnt brownies, without which we might have never ended up here.”

“To burnt brownies.” I repeated, grabbing my own glass and interlinking my arm through hers. “May you never be allowed near an oven again.”

*Clink.*

# *Acknowledgments*

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## *About the Author*

Julianne Baclayanto is a hopeless romantic who writes books filled with anticipation, butterflies, and an abundance of fun. After being frequently described as “overly chatty” by friends, family, and teachers alike, she has decided to commit some of those never-ending words to paper and write the kind of stories that make your heart skip a beat. She currently lives in Ontario, Canada with her wonderful husband who is the inspiration behind all of her leading men, and can probably be found rage-quitting Mario Kart whenever she’s not writing.

If you’d like to see updates on her upcoming books and even get the chance to receive an advance copy, sign up for her newsletter at [www.juliannebaclayanto.com](http://www.juliannebaclayanto.com). Or, if you’d like to reach out to her for a chat, send her a message on Instagram at @author.juliannebaclayanto—she would love to hear from you (and promises to message back)!