

# Owen Bailey

## NEEDS

# ADVICE



A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

# JEN ATKINSON

**OWEN BAILEY NEEDS  
ADVICE**

**BOOK 2**

**JEN ATKINSON**



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*For Becky*

*Owen is a ray of sunshine.*

*He is light in a dark space.*

*He finds the good wherever he goes.*

*So of course he reminded me of you.*

*I'm so thankful you're my sister!*

*Love you!*



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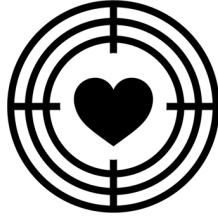
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## O W E N



Who in their right mind dreams about jackhammers? Me—that’s who. The tapping in my skull is on repeat. *Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap.*

I do not like this dream. *Time to wake up, Owen, or time to shut down the imaginary power tools.* I’ve been spending too much time renovating my house—it’s now invading my subconscious.

“Owen.” This time a dreamy woman’s voice accompanies the *tap-tap*. “*Owen.*” Very dreamy... she sounds exactly like Annie. *Tap-tap.* “OWEN!”

My eyes open like reckless window blinds off the hinges. My dream is yelling at me.

Only—very real eyes stare down at me. I jerk back and bang my head against my wooden headboard. “Annie?” The singing woman in my dream is *Annie?*

“Come on, sleepy head. I broke up with James and I need breakfast. Let’s go.”

“James?” Not a dream. *Real* tapping. *Real* Annie. I cram my eyes closed and repeat her words in my head. “It’s already been two months?”

“Hey,” she groans.

I hadn’t actually meant to say that out loud. But Annie doesn’t exactly have a great track record when it comes to

guys. Two months is the max—which I don't mind. In fact, I wish she'd get rid of them after two days.

She must forgive me quickly enough because her voice returns to normal and she's back to business. "Yeah. You know, *Mr. Buttman*. The guy your sister set me up with!" A straight, auburn lock falls into her eyes. She blows out a puff, floating the hair into the air for a second before it falls back to her freckled cheek.

I blink, taking in her fully dressed body—ACDC T-shirt, blue business jacket, skinny jeans that go all the way down to her red heels. Her hair's been straightened, and her makeup is on. Maybe I'm still dreaming. "Ah—what time is it?"

"Six." She gives an apologetic smile, then stands straight, no longer leaning over me. She places one hand on her hip and with the other, scratches at the back of her head, mussing her hair in the process. Her full red lips part into a half grin—man, I love that grin.

And while I wouldn't mind waking up to it every day, it isn't normally the first thing I see at six in the morning. "How did you get in here?"

"Key." She holds up the spare key I gave her for emergencies. The one that isn't in her cupboard at home—like it should be—but on her keychain, along with her own apartment key.

I rub my eyes and sit up, leaning against the headboard that assaulted my scalp as if I were a wack-o-mole not one minute ago.

"Whoa. Hold the phone, Rocky. I don't need a peep show."

I blink, still half asleep. Still trying to make sense of this visit, though I won't complain. It's Annie.

But peep show?

Oh. I don't have a shirt on. But then I never sleep with a shirt on. "You came to me, remember?"

She walks to the other side of the room and tosses me a T-shirt from the ground. It hits me smack in the face. Annie's

always been a good shot—one year of high school softball and she’s apparently Bob Gibson. She does not miss her target.

“Thanks,” I mutter. “Ah, I have school in an hour and a half.”

“I know.” She shakes her head. “Can you give me thirty minutes? Please, O.” She bends, picking up a pair of gray sweats, then throws those at me too.

This time I’m ready, and I catch them.

“Just in case,” she says before stepping out into the hall.

I turn to look at the red lights of my alarm clock, next to the lamp that Annie switched on. It’s the brightest thing in this room. Not even the sun is awake yet. I groan and knock my head back against the headboard. “Annie,” I grumble, knowing I’m getting up. Knowing I’m going. Why? Because it’s Annie, and I’d pretty much do anything for that girl. Even talk about some guy she’s been dating and kissing and spending a whole lot of her time with.

“I heard that!” she calls through the closed door. “Let’s go, Bailey!”

I need half an hour to get ready for school and fifteen minutes to get there. I can give my best friend—the secret love of my life—forty-five minutes. After all, she’s been through something. She broke up with her boyfriend.

*Again.*

I slip the T-shirt over my head—then toss it right back off. *Blech.* I really need to do my laundry. My second year of teaching middle school science and buying a fixer-upper home has taken every ounce of my time. Well, not every ounce. I make time for my family. And I give Annie time. Truthfully, all that she wants.

Barefoot, I shuffle to the dresser against the one open wall in this room—the wall that still has its guts showing. I reinsulated the entire house this summer, but I didn’t get all the drywall back up. I’ve been waiting for my next paycheck to finish that job.

I pull out a plain gray tee and slip it over my head. I've already got black sweats on, so all that's left are shoes.

Annie, in tune with my thoughts, cracks the door ajar one foot and tosses my tennis shoes into the room.

I cover my yawn with a fist, then grab a pair of socks from the top dresser drawer. I pad my way over to the exit, snatch up my shoes, and open up the bedroom door.

She stumbles her way into me. Head to chest.

"That's what happens when you put your ear to the door. *Eavesdropper.*"

"I wasn't eavesdropping. There's no one in there for you to talk to! I just wanted to make sure you were actually moving and not going back to sleep."

"Oh. I'm up. Thanks to you, thirty minutes *before* my alarm is set to go off."

"Hey!" She turns to trot down my wooden staircase—it still needs sanding and staining. "Did you not hear what I said earlier? The guy your sister set me up with and I broke up last night."

I trail after her and stop short when we hit the landing at the bottom of the stairs. "I heard." I grin down at her—because I can't help it. Even if it is six a.m., it's Annie. "I'm pretty sure she set *you* up with Levi. And Meredith up with James. You dated for two months, and his last name always set you on edge."

Her right hand holds at her hips, her fingers drumming. "All information that has nothing to do with the fact that I am in mourning right now."

"*Mourning?*" My eyes turn to slits—not to see her better but to tell her I know that isn't accurate.

"Okay." She sticks her tongue out at me. "Not mourning. But not jumping for joy either. Can we please go to Elsie's? I'm starving."

I give one exhaling nod. "Yes. Let's go. But if I'm not back here by 6:45, I'll be late."

“And you *cannot* be late.”

I follow Annie outside to her green Volkswagen Bug. I swear I’m too large to fit into this contraption—but it’s running, and I don’t have time to argue with her about who’s going to drive. So, I stuff myself into the thing and wait for her to take off.

Elsie’s is a mere half mile from my place. It takes us one minute to get there with the early hour and almost zero traffic. The sign out front reads *closed*, opening at seven, but we both know the door will be unlocked.

And Annie is Elsie’s favorite granddaughter, so she’ll be happy to see us.

“Don’t tell Grammy about James.”

“Why?” I rub a hand over my right eye, still attempting to look awake.

“Because she never knew he existed, and she’ll just be upset that I dumped another guy. Okay?”

“Okay. Okay.” I hold up my hands. “Going in now?”

“Yes.”

We walk side by side, Annie’s arm brushing mine. I can’t help it; I breathe her in. Because Annie is like breathing in sunshine. She’s like an orange grove in full blossom. *Always*.

“So, if we’re here to talk about James, but we can’t talk about James... then how is this going to work?”

“Follow my lead,” she says, pushing on the front glass door of the café. “Grammy?”

Annie’s 5’1”, gray-haired grandma pokes her head from the kitchen door. “Ann? Why are you here so early? What feelings are you eating away?” She sets one hand on her wide hip and gives Annie the evil eye. Like she might be in trouble for having feelings.

“None!” Annie swallows, her eyes swinging from Grammy to me. “Um, it’s Owen. He’s going through a breakup.”

## ANNIE



h, Owen.” Grammy sighs. “I’ll start on the pancakes. You two find a booth.” But she doesn’t disappear back through the kitchen doorway. No, she shuffles farther onto the restaurant floor, standing right in front of Owen. Up on her tiptoes, she slaps him around the neck and pulls my best friend down to her level. She holds his back with her left arm and slaps his neck three more times with her right hand—Grammy’s version of a hug. “Sit. I’ll have food out in a minute.”

Owen gives me a sideways glare, but it’s O. He isn’t mad. He doesn’t know how to get mad. It’s one of the many things I love about him. He’s been my best friend ever since Jocelyn Lander tripped me walking down the hall in third grade. He pulled me to my feet, and I wanted so badly to cry—a new town, a new school, and I was getting quite the welcome—but then I looked up to his messy blond hair, crooked front teeth, and that giant smile. I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t pout. I couldn’t feel badly for myself—not with Owen smiling at me.

“*My* breakup?” he whispers as we slide ourselves across from one another.

I helped Grammy recover these booths just last year—they look fantastic. We went for a shiny, sparkling blue. It fits the diner’s vibe well. I feel a small sense of pride every time I sit in one. Even now, while Owen attempts to glare at me.

“I had to say something! And this way, if she hears us talking, it’ll sound normal. Only we’re talking about you rather than me.”



Owen's eyes dart from my face to the kitchen door. "So," he says, the coast clear. "Why'd you dump James?"

"I did not *dump* James. It was mutual—mostly. Mr. Buttman and I weren't going to last, so..." I shrug, unable to finish that sentence. I don't like saying the truth out loud. And I've never said it to Owen.

"Mr. Buttman." Owen smirks and scratches at his neatly trimmed beard. Yes, sometimes he is still a twelve-year-old boy. I love that about him too.

But I don't let him know it—not now, anyway. "You're a child."

"Me? You broke things off because of his *name*."

"Not true!" I bark, but I did hear it everywhere we went.

*Reservation for Buttman.*

*Here's your paper, Mr. Buttman.*

*Buttman takes the lead.*

"You didn't? Because you keep referring to him as *Mr. Buttman*."

I swallow and nibble on my inner cheek. Yep, I'm doing that. Maybe because James Buttman, after only two months of dating, looked at me like I was an old hat—comfortable, but nothing to get excited about. And then, he had the audacity to ask me if I ever thought about the future. *The future*. As in, one day he'd like there to be a Mrs. Buttman, all while looking at me as if I were... *unlovable*.

Geez Louise. I hate that word.

Maddox Powell described me that way years ago, and it's never left my head—*Annie, you're just unlovable*.

"That's his name," I say, swallowing down a whole load of feelings. "And apparently, he doesn't hate it because everywhere we go, he refers to himself that way."

My knees jolt, knocking into the underneath of the table with the swinging open of the kitchen door.

“Grammy!” I squeak. “You’re back.”

“I already had the batter made up.” She sets a plate in front of each of us. And because *Owen* is the one suffering, he’s got three more pancakes on his stack than I do.

Well, that’s not fair.

I’ll steal one off his plate the minute she turns around.

But in less than thirty seconds, she’s back. “I brought you my homemade butter syrup.”

“The butter syrup!” I yelp. That’s the good stuff. The stuff she brews once a year and bottles. She doesn’t sell it, and she only lets us use it on special occasions.

“That’s right!” Grammy sets a hand over top of the closed Mason jar. “Not for you, Miss Annie. This is for Owen. You can wait until Thanksgiving.”

My shoulders slump. A little butter syrup would really cheer me up right now.

“Go on,” Grammy says to Owen. “Give her a try.”

“Ah, sure. Okay.” Owen goes in for the Mason jar, but his hand just touches the glass when he pulls it away, hissing and shaking out his fingers. “It’s hot.”

“Of course it’s hot,” Grammy barks. “You can’t serve butter syrup cold.” She twists the lid off the jar, and her indestructible fingers lift the jar over Owen’s plate, dumping a healthy portion onto his six stacked cakes. “Let me watch you try it.”

“Grammy,” I mutter, but it’s a quiet plea. One nobody hears. I don’t want to get smacked upside the head.

“Um.” He lifts one brow, his eyes darting from his stack back to my Grammy’s wrinkled, serious face. Pancakes are a pretty serious business in our family. “Okay.” Fork at the ready, he cuts into his stack, lifting a triangle of fluffy homemade hot cakes to his lips. He’s got one eye on my Grammy, who won’t take her beady blue eyes from him. Slowly, he moves the bite to his mouth.

I'm not worried. Would Grammy be offended if he didn't love the bite? Of course. But it's butter syrup and her fluffy homemade cakes. He *will* love it. No doubt. Only psychos don't love Grammy's cooking. And Owen is no psycho.

Owen's eyes flutter closed, and he lets out a small audible moan.

Grammy grins. Wrinkles form around her mouth and eyes. "That's a good boy. Now tell me about your girl trouble."

His eyes flick open, and he stops chewing altogether.

"Oh, Grammy, you don't need to listen to Owen's troubles. That's what I'm for. You can go get ready to open the shop. I know you're busy."

"No," she says, her gray brows furrowing. She smacks my hand and I refrain from shaking out the sting. "Don't tell me what to do. I have time. Four minutes."

Owen forks another triangle of pancake and shoves it into his mouth.

"Well?" Grammy says. But Owen has stuffed his cheeks like a starving squirrel getting ready for the winter season.

I clear my throat. "You see, Owen has been dating this girl—with a really stupid last name, by the way."

"Don't judge." Grammy shakes a finger, first at me, then at Owen. Then she snatches up my fork and cuts into Owen's pancakes, nodding towards them. And Owen follows suit, stuffing the freshly Grammy-cut bite into his already full mouth.

"Right, well, that isn't why he broke up with her." I stare at my stack, my eyes going wide. "Just a fact. *Buttman* is a pretty lame name."

"Buttman? That isn't a name." Grammy's lips curl, and she shakes her head no.

"Okay, well, this *girl*, she wanted to talk to Owen about the *future*. Like the wedding bells kind of future." I don't mention the old hat-type glances—because that's my inner

turmoil to mull over and nobody else's. Yep, I get to keep that gem all to myself.

*Joy.*

Owen suddenly coughs and sputters. Small chunks of pancake fly out onto the table.

Grammy smacks him on the back over and over, like she's Rocky Balboa beating a punching bag; all the while, her eyes are on me. "Continue."

I press my lips together, watching the pair of them. I cough once too, choking down a laugh. "It was just too soon. They'd only been seeing each other casually for a couple months."

"A couple months? I was married after two months of courting," Grammy says with one more hard smack to Owen's surely bruised back.

I purse my lips. "Right. That's right. But that was different. It was... serious."

"How many times has she met your family?" Grammy asks, looking at a red-faced Owen. He's chugging water, trying to get everything down just right.

"None!" I spit, tripping over my words. "None times."

"She's never met your mother?" she says to Owen.

Owen shakes his head, eyes sliding from me—for confirmation—back to Grammy.

"She never met your brothers?"

I translate that to James never having met Kayla. My sister would not have approved—although she does know about Mr. Buttman.

After watching me for confirmation, Owen shakes his head once more.

"Never?" Grammy bobbles her head like this is impossible news. "I'm not surprised she broke up with you."

"No"—I point at Owen—"she broke up with *her*."

Grammy scoffs. “You’re so much better than...” She snaps and looks from a silent Owen to me. “Than...”

“Ah.” My brows furrow, thinking. “Jame—e. *Jamie Buttman*.”

“No.” Grammy shakes her head. “I told you, Buttman is not a name.” She returns her focus to Owen. “You’re so much better than this Jamie that you never introduced her to your mother? Your brothers? *Never?*”

Owen swallows down his bite in one large gulp. He shrugs as if his mouth were still full, holding him back from answering.

“No,” I say for him—for myself. “Not better. There just wasn’t the connection there should have been. So it made no sense for him—for *her*, for Jamie to talk about such things.”

“Do you need help finding a nice girl, Owen?” She wraps her iron grip around his forearm. “I could help you.”

“No!” And just like that—Owen finds his voice. “No. Thank you, Elsie, but *no*.”

My little Grammy stares at my best friend. “Annie will let me know when you change your mind. Okay?” She gives his back one more smack. “Okay.”

Owen’s lips screw to the side, and he nods. He’s smart not to argue with her. He’d lose.

We watch her as she snatches up her butter syrup and walks back to the kitchen, the door swinging behind her.

“Did James really talk about *marriage?*” And my friend looks as horrified as I feel—and he didn’t even see the *old hat* expression. How could James talk about the future *and* look at me that way?

More often than not, I fear that Maddox Powell had a point. Maybe I should have taken James up on his offer. Sure, he looked at me disapprovingly, but he still wanted to have that next-level talk.

No. No way. That’s the Maddox Powell refusing to leave my head talking.

I blow out a breath and answer my friend. “He implied. A lot. I wasn’t even that into him.” I puff out a breath. And I am certain he didn’t love me. “So, how could he jump there?”

“What I don’t understand,” Owen says, “is how we’ve been friends for fourteen years and this is the first time I’ve tried this syrup. How?”

“She doesn’t give it to just anyone.” I lift one shoulder with my defense. “It’s not even on the menu.”

“I’m not just anyone,” he says—and he isn’t wrong. Owen has been my person for more than fourteen years. I can’t imagine life without him.

But that doesn’t mean Grammy’s just gonna give up the good stuff. He isn’t her person.

“That’s true,” I say. “Now, can we please get back to the matter at hand? We’ve only got twenty minutes left until I have to return you to that hovel you call a home.”

“Hey,” he protests, but we don’t have time to argue about the fixer-upper he’s living in.

“Owen!”

“Right. Go on.”

“I write an advice column!” I moan.

His brows furrow like he’s confused.

“I regularly report on my podcast about my dedicated, thoughtful, researched, helpful, true advice.” My eyes fall to the bow and arrow tattoo on the inside of my right wrist.

“You’ve lost me. I thought we were here to talk about your breakup.”

“We are.” I give him a pointed stare. Stay with me, man! “Eighty-four percent of my readers send in questions about love.”

“Okay,” he says, but the word takes way too long to get out. He still isn’t following me.

“Love, dating, sex, marriage—even though I’ve never been married or even engaged. They ask everything from what to give their partner for a birthday gift that says *I truly love you* to how to get their significant other to put down the toilet lid.”

“Wait—you’re including that question in the love percentage?”

“You know it. They don’t ask how to help their son or dad or brother put that seat down—those guys they would just tell. They specifically ask about their husband, their boyfriend, their *person* because those guys, they don’t know *how* to tell.”

“What does this have to do with James? With your breakup?”

“I am a fraud, Owen!” And not someone another can love easily. I blink back the thought and go on. “I give advice, good advice, but I never date the right guy, and I can’t keep a boyfriend for more than four months. I research, but I never actually try out my advice.”

“Two months,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

“Your boyfriends—they last no more than two months.”

“Fine.” I grind my teeth, annoyed at how close he pays attention.

“That doesn’t make you a fraud, though. Relationships are difficult. If you don’t have the same problems as someone else, how are you supposed to try out that specific advice?” He reaches across the table and takes my hand. I let him. I need someone to tell me I am who I say I am. I’m not a fraud, a fake, or a phony. I’m not. Right?

Even all these years later, Maddox’s words haunt me. *Not one tear, Annie? You’re fake. How could anyone ever be with someone as unlovable as you?*

“And don’t chalk this up to you not having long relationships. You just”—he shakes his head in little bobbles—“you need to find the right person. That’s all.”

It's cliché advice—I hate cliché! I'd tell him as much. I'd yell at him if he weren't so earnest—or maybe it's the swinging kitchen door that shuts me up.

Grammy tromps out with two glasses of OJ in her hands. She takes one judgmental look at us, sets the cups down, then smacks Owen on the hand—the hand that holds mine. “No,” she barks. “It would never work. *Never*. You're too close. You know too much.”

Owen pulls his hand back, giving it a slight shake to take out the sting.

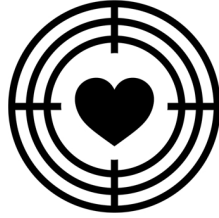
Two things are very accurate about my half-Italian, half-American grandmother: she knows her food and she smacks like a pro wrestler.

“It's not like that, Grammy. Owen was just comforting...” I dart a glance from Grammy to Owen, almost giving myself away. “*Himself*.”

“Oh, boy,” she groans. “Here, eat another pancake.” Grammy takes one of the untouched cakes from my plate and flops it onto Owen's. “I'll get more butter syrup.”



## O W E N



*It's not like that.*

It's lunchtime. Hours have passed, but I'm still hearing Annie's words to her grandmother. She said it like we could *never* be more. And I guess to Annie, we couldn't. But for me—it's always been *like that*.

I have done everything a man can possibly think of to get my head on straight. To distract myself from the feelings that Annie Archer always seems to stir inside of me. The feelings that apparently will *never* be.

I pull out my phone and look over the faces of my siblings, my mother, and Annie—my pinned phone numbers. My eyes linger on Annie's photo far too long. I've pinned the picture of the time we had a watermelon eating contest and she won. Her matted red hair sticks to her face where the watermelon juice drenched her, and there's a black seed stuck to the center of her chin. Freckles sprinkle her cheeks like a dusting of the sweetest sugar, and she's beaming with victory. It's my favorite photo of her, so of course it's my contact photo.

It isn't Annie's face I hit, though. She's the reason I'm feeling anxious. I tap Miles, needing his calm and collectedness right now.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Miles. You up for games after work?” It's been a while since we've played Madden on the PlayStation, but we're kind of giant children at heart.

“Video games? What did Annie do today? We haven’t resorted to video games in a while.”

“Or we could check out the community garden—or work on my house. I need to figure out mudding and taping.”

“Another Annie remedy. You okay?”

“No remedy. Nothing to do with Annie. What if we stopped by the clinic? Maybe Coco would let us take Rosie and Tulip out for a ride.”

“Horses?” Miles says. “That’s new.”

“Geez, I just thought we could hang out.”

“Sure. We can. I’ve gotta go, though. I’ve got a class in progress.”

“You’re at the studio?” I ask. He doesn’t normally answer when he’s in the studio.

“Nah. Cinnamon and Walt can’t make it up the stairs. We’re in a garage.”

“Huh. We could figure out a ramp tonight,” I suggest. He isn’t wrong—I am getting more creative... each and every passing year. I can’t give Annie up, but that hasn’t stopped me from trying to distract my one-sided feelings.

“The stairs are too steep. I don’t think a ramp would work.” There’s chatter in the background. One of my brother’s students is speaking to him.

“I’ll let you go, but later?” I ask, needing Miles to just go along with me. Come on, bro.

“Yeah. Come over after school. I’ll practice teaching you dry brushing before I teach my class tomorrow.”

Perfect. I can’t afford mud and tape just yet anyway.



*I*m halfway through sixth period when Annie’s name lights up my phone with a text. I don’t check my phone. Not when teaching. Not normally. And while Annie and I talk daily—we’ve been friends forever

—I don't even answer *her* messages during the school day. But she's got me rattled with this James stuff. Plus, the theory that she's a fraud. Annie is the most true person I know. And then there's the fact that she about burst into laughter when Grammy implied that we might be thinking about starting something up. Why is that so funny? Why can't I be the one to prove to Annie that she isn't a fraud when it comes to all her advice on love?

"Mr. Bailey?" Sam says. The kid tries to sit in the back row every day. Though there aren't assigned seats in this class, I make him change it up every now and then. Today, I've forced him into the front row. "Are we still in chapter two?"

"Ah—yep. We're reading silently. Chapter two, sections three and four."

Rylee, who happens to love the front row, raises her hand but speaks out before I can call on her. "But Mr. Bailey, you said we'd read all of chapter two aloud and check for understanding along the way."

"Right." I nod and tap on my phone once. But the banner with Annie's text has disappeared. "Read with your shoulder partner. *Aloud*. And if you have questions, ask."

The class sits quietly, looking from one to the other. It's the beginning of the year, they shouldn't be set in their ways with me yet. Just because I've done something the same way three weeks in a row doesn't mean I can't change it up.

"Let's go," I say, full teacher tone, and clap once.

There's a humming of chatter amongst the kids, and I plop down in my swivel chair—the one that should have been retired five years ago, but the district can't afford new chairs and I'm the new guy. Second-year teacher equals a crap chair.

I swivel toward my desk. Then, I flip my laptop open, like I'm one of these thirteen-year-old kids, and sneak my phone onto the keyboard, shielded by the screen of my computer.

I bring my phone to life and click on messages.

**Annie:** Maybe I should give Buttman another chance.  
Maybe I jumped the gun.

My heart patters with nervous energy at the thought of Annie getting back with that guy. He may work for my sister, but that doesn't mean I have to like him.

**Me:** You know that isn't what you want to do.

**Annie:** I got this question today, O... it's making me wonder.

**Me:** Then toss it. If it's making you question yourself, get rid of it. You don't need to question what you already know.

**Annie:** OWEN. You know I answer them all. ALL.

**Me:** Maybe this one got lost in the mail. It was never delivered.

**Annie:** It's an email.

**Me:** Even better. It's lost in the world of spam.

**Annie:** Owen!

**Me:** Fine. What's the question?

**Annie:** What if THE ONE doesn't exist? When do I decide to settle for option number two?

Settle? Seriously? This is rattling her? And making her consider... Buttman? Since when does Annie settle for anything? This fraud business is really getting in her head.

I need to say something—something inspiring, something helpful, something to get her out of the gutter that James and her doubts have put her in.

But then... I'm not the advice columnist.

**Me:** Annie Archer does not settle.

**Me:** The end.

I tap my toe, waiting for her response. Three bubbles light my screen, and I watch them. Intently. My eyes are glued to those bubbles. My head repeats the words, willing her to believe them: *Annie Archer does not settle*.

When—

I am tapped on the shoulder.

It's a light tap. A gentle tap. And yet, I leap like someone just dropped a rattlesnake down my pants.

Somehow, somehow, someone approached me, and I didn't realize it. I am in a room full of tweens and hormones, and yet I missed someone walking up to my desk. In my leap, my cheap, should-have-been-tossed-years-ago rollie chair slides out from beneath me.

I come down hard. On the ground. My butt hits the cement ground first, and then my head.

*Ouch.*

Pain shoots through my backside. And out my ears.

Double ouch.

Sam and Rylee peer down at me—from this place of shame on the ground.

“What do we do when we're finished reading?” Sam says.

Rylee nudges him in the ribs. “And are you all right?” Her nose wrinkles, and her hair swings from side to side as her body is at a ninety-degree angle to look down at me. “You hit pretty hard.”

I squint because suddenly there are two Sams and two Rylees, and I'm pretty sure exponential growth isn't happening in my classroom. “Did anyone else see that?”

Sam stands straight, looking out at the classroom, then he's back staring at me on the ground. “Yep. I think Teag missed it.

He's asleep back there.”

Rylee disappears, and I'm left with Sam.

I should get up. I will. As soon as the room stops spinning.

“Office,” says Kimberly, our school secretary, through my classroom intercom. “Can we help you, Mr. Bailey?”

Can they help me?

“Yeah,” Rylee says. “Mr. Bailey fell down. He hit his head pretty hard. He might need a stretcher.”

“A stretcher?” I groan.

She's called the office? They aren't calling me. Rylee called them.

“I do not need a stretcher,” I say, but I'm still on the ground and I'm not sure the words project enough for the ladies in the office to hear me.

“Oh dear! Phyllis!” Kimberly cries. “It's Mr. Bailey,” her panicked voice says, and then she's gone. Our connection has been disabled, and I couldn't be more grateful.

“Rylee,” I deadpan. “Oh, Rylee Nelson.”

“Yes, Mr. Bailey?” Rylee's long brown hair trails over one shoulder and floats into the air as she bends over to peer down at me.

“I do not need a stretcher. Let's make a class rule. We don't use the intercom unless I say so, okay?” I push up onto one elbow—but that one movement sends my head into a tailspin. Sure, I'd love to jump up and show these kids that I am fine, with only my pride wounded. But I'm not one hundred percent sure that I can.

More kids gather around my desk, stretching their necks to peer down at me.

“But what if you're like dead?” Teag says.

“Hey,” says Sam. “Good news, Mr. B. Teag's up.”

“If you’re dead, then you won’t be able to say anything.”  
A group of kids behind Teag nod in agreement.

“True.” My classroom is officially a merry-go-round. But I fake it. As cool as I possibly can, I say, “If I’m dead, you can call.”

Teag nods, appeased with my answer.

“How about blacked out?” says Aven Parker from the back of the room. “What about then?”

“Right, you might not be dead *dead*. But you still wouldn’t be able to speak.” Teag points a finger at Aven, giving his friend all the credit for his brilliance.

I am saved from answering his question as nurse Phyllis bursts into my room with a crew of custodial workers.

# ANNIE



*S*bite on one nail and stare at my computer screen.

**What if THE ONE doesn't exist? When do I decide to settle for option number two?**

The author's added a P.S., one I didn't mention to Owen. Because this question is ready to kick me while I'm already down.

**How do you know your advice works? Have you tried it all?**

I love my job. I am good at my job. I take each and every one of these questions to heart. I take them seriously. I fact-check everything. When I got my journalism degree, I considered being a professional fact-checker.

But she isn't wrong... real, live, personal experience is invaluable.

And I'm giving these people my second-rated, researched opinion as I don't have the personal experience of a long-term relationship.

Maybe that means "the one" doesn't exist. Maybe it means not everyone has a "one." I don't know. For the first time in my two years as an advice columnist, I don't know where to go for this answer. How do I check this fact? Is it even possible? I'm unsure. I have no words.



I always have words!

With my hands on my keyboard, I flip over my right hand, staring down at the tattoo I had inked into the inside of my wrist the night before college graduation. Maddox had called me fake—all because I didn't weep when he broke things off with me. I am *not* fake.

My bow and arrow remind me of that. I wanted something physical, something visual. Something I could look at every time I write a letter. Something to remind me that my goal is to help others. Straight and narrow.

*Words are like arrows. Once loosed, you cannot call them back.* I don't know who he was quoting, but before my gramps died—he always said that.

I want to give people something real. Something that gives them comfort and actual help.

I don't know how to help this person. I haven't personally tested all of my advice. I honestly don't know if there's one person for each of us—and if there is, will I get that? Maddox Powell has made me completely unsure.

I pull on my headphones and open up my podcast software. I have a planned Tuesday twenty-minute session where I talk about certain questions and information I've researched. The podcast gained a following fast and brought in readers to our online paper from all over. My little Ask Annie column has readers far and wide now.

My listeners are used to an occasional, casual thought from Annie. I need to talk this out. If it's terrible, I won't publish it. But I want to be honest. I cast my gaze back down at that arrow, pointing toward my palm. I want to be true to myself and the person who's asked this question.

“Hey, everyone,” I say. I'll add my instrumental intro set later. I just need to get this out. “Annie, here. I've got a question that's stumping me. A question that needs more voices than my own.” I don't even realize how right I am until the words are out of my mouth. “Most of you know that I'm not married. I haven't found *the one* yet. I also just got out of a

two-month relationship. Not long and not *the one*. But this question has me wondering... What if there isn't one person for me? One right, whole, perfect person to fill my boyfriend role for the rest of forever?

“Sad in Sandpoint has asked: What if THE ONE doesn't exist? When do I decide to settle for option number two?” I swallow and look down at her P.S. For now, I skip over it. “Friends, I just broke up with a guy because he talked about his cat too much, and his last name made me cringe. Are those really good reasons? Did I just throw away an opportunity for ‘the one?’ I don't know. Maybe there isn't one person for everyone. Maybe it's up to us what we choose to make of each relationship. I don't think anyone should settle, but then maybe we get out of a relationship what we put in. Maybe we create ‘the one.’” I stop talking. I'm rambling, not thinking. Just thoughts on top of thoughts.

But maybe I'm right. I switch off my mic and sit back in my office chair, forgetting what Maddox Powell said to me all those years ago. For my reader's sake.

Maybe we create “the one.”



How opposed are you to falling in love?” I stand on Owen's front porch, hands on hips.

“*H* Ahh...” My best friend looks more confused than normal.

“Why are you in pajama bottoms? And why the ice pack?” A blue-gelled pack with ice crystals melting and dripping at the corners is tucked in Owen's palm. I snatch my phone from my back pocket and bring it to life. 3:24 pm. “Wait. Why are you home? You don't get home from school until four. Sometimes four-thirty.”

I hadn't paid attention to the time, just my need to talk to Owen. I can't test this theory on myself—my heart and fears won't let me. But Owen—he is the most lovable person I know. If anyone deserves love, it's him.

“I had an accident at school.”

“An accident?” I move past Owen, letting myself inside.

“Yeah. Nothing major, but the school nurse says I might have a minor concussion.”

“Concussion! You teach science, not P.E.” How in the world did this happen? I’m tempted to smack the man’s arm. What is he doing hurting himself? But then, he is concussed, so maybe hitting him isn’t the best idea.

I slip my hand into his, shut the door behind me, and lead him over to the one piece of furniture in his massive living room: his hand-me-down couch. “Talk.”

“Um—”

“You know, tell me what happened.”

He blinks—like remembering is difficult. Or maybe painful. “I fell out of my chair.”

I shake my head. Now, I’m confused. “Explain.”

Owen groans and slaps the blue gel pack to the back of his head. “I was sitting at my desk, reading your text, actually.” He swallows, blue eyes on me. “And the crappy chair at school just... just slid out from under me. I landed on my backside.”

“How does a chair just slide out—did it break?”

“No.” He shakes his head again. “It’s a crappy chair. I don’t know exactly how it happened. Just that it did. In front of *thirty* seventh graders.”

I press my fingers to my vaulted mouth, attempting to stifle a laugh. My middle finger presses up on my nose. I loosen the Hulk-press I’ve got going, and with it a giggle escapes. I swallow down the chuckle. “Oh, Owen.”

“Yeah.” He shuts his eyes and leans his head against the back of the couch, the ice pack sandwiched between his head and the back cushion. “I’ve had those kids for three weeks. I’ll have them for forty more. The only thing they’re going to remember me by is Phyllis Macey attempting to pick me up in her arms and carry me out of the room.”

“Mrs. Macey is still the school nurse?” Another bout of giggles leaks through my filter, and I smash my lips together.

I’m worried. I care.

But he isn’t making this easy.

“She is. And she’s still bodybuilding.”

I can’t stop the laughter that takes over my body. “Owen,” I say, between breaths and giggles. “O.” I try so hard to look sad, to look sorry, but it’s hard to be convincing when my laughter has taken on a mind and life of its own. I take his hand in mine again. I hold it tight and press it close to my chest. “That’s awful. Just awful.”

“Yeah,” he says, his eyes like ocean waves rove over my face. “I can see you’re real broken up about my rough day.”

“So, did she make it? You said Mrs. Macey attempted to pick you up and carry you—”

“No, she didn’t make it! I’m six foot one and two hundred pounds, Annie.”

I give a one-shoulder shrug. “I thought she might be able to.”

“She got me off the ground for a second, but I forced her to let me go. I walked to the office.”

My full lips, just like Grammy’s, bunch to the side. I can’t help it. I’ve got a picture in my head, and I need Owen’s confirmation. “Forced, how? Like a wiggling toddler or like a WWE wrestler?”

Owen clears his throat. His blue eyes skirt my gaze.

I squeeze his fingers with my left hand while caressing his forearm with my right. “Oh, Owen. The toddler?” I smirk, and another giggle escapes me like floating bubbles in the bath.

“What was I supposed to do, slam Phyllis Macey into the ground like I’m Steve Austin? In front of all those kids?”

“Because you would have slammed her to the ground like Steven Austin had the kids not been there?”

*Fact*—from a girl who checks facts—Owen is the nicest human on the planet. He works in the community garden, and he volunteers a couple times a month at the old folks home. He would *never ever* have slammed Mrs. Macey to the ground. I'm surprised he didn't *allow* her to carry him down to the office just to build her confidence.

He's not a pushover.

But he does genuinely care about other people and their feelings.

He blows out a sigh, leans his head back, and avoids the question. "My head hurts."

"I'm sorry. I really am sorry, O."

"Yeah. I know. I was supposed to go to Miles's place. He was going to teach me how to dry brush tonight."

"Are you interested in painting?"

Another fact: Owen has a lot of hobbies. He gardens, he games, he volunteers, he plays pickleball with his brothers.

And now he's going to paint?

He bought this house, this *fixer-upper*, and he's learning how to repair everything himself. Even it's becoming a hobby.

Ugh. Sometimes at night, I think about this house caving in on him, and it takes everything inside of me to not drive over and force him to pack a bag and move in with me.

"Aw, well." His tone tells me he isn't interested—not really. "It could come in handy after I learn to mud and tape."

"I'm pretty sure that isn't the type of painting Miles will be teaching you."

"Truth." He blows out a sigh. "Well, it doesn't matter now. I'm not going anywhere tonight."

"Do you need me to play house? I can make you dinner and tuck you in." I give Owen my biggest, cheesiest grin, but I only get a glimmer back. A funny, sad glimmer.

Once upon a time, my sophomore year of high school—the year I’m pretty sure Owen’s shoulders exploded and his abs came in—I thought that maybe we’d *evolve*... into something more. That we’d *play house* for real one day.

But we didn’t.

Jeff Price asked me to the prom, and Owen asked Sarah Bennet. It was a fleeting thought, a little bitty crush—one that I’m reminded of as I make my joke.

We’re best friends. I know it. He knows it. We weren’t meant to be more.

I don’t know if *the one* exists when it comes to love. But I’ve got *the one* when it comes to besties. I’ll throw on an apron and cook up some soup if Owen needs me to. But—

“Nah,” he says. “Coco’s coming by with food.”

“Right! Your sister.” Sometimes it’s weird thinking about Owen having another woman in his life. He always had Lucy; his momma is the sweetest. It’s clear where Owen gets his heart. But Coco is new to me. Truly, she’s new to Owen too, since she was adopted as a baby and only reunited with his family a year and a half ago. “Huh. That still throws me sometimes.”

“Yeah?” he says, his eyes closed once more.

“Do you need to stay awake?”

“Get with the times, lady. Concussed people can sleep all they want these days.”

I bite my lip, watching him, then think back to Coco. “Does it still throw you? Having a *sister*?”

His chest rumbles with a chuckle. “Not usually. I’m pretty used to her. Honestly, most of the time, it feels like we’ve always had her. She’s one of us.”

“I can’t imagine not knowing Kayla my whole life.” My one sibling lives in Post Falls, just fifteen minutes from here. She lives there with her husband of nine years, Tim, and their two sons, eight-year-old Bucky and six-year-old Steve—because Tim has a thing for Captain America. I see them at

least once a week. So the thought of not knowing she existed until recently baffles me.

But then, Owen's always been better at the unexpected than I am. It didn't surprise me that he accepted and loved Coco from the minute he met her. That's just Owen.

He squeezes my fingers. "What did you come by for? I'm pretty sure it wasn't to make me dinner or talk about my long-lost sister."

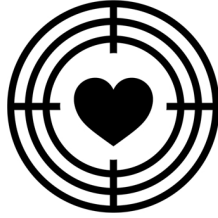
"Right." I hiss, taking in his sleepy form and bumped head. "It can wait."

"Nah. Go ahead. I'm just going to sit here with my eyes closed listening to your every word, Annie."

I smile at him. Sure, he doesn't see it, but I don't do it for anyone's benefit. I do it because Owen, more than anyone I know, produces smiles. He makes others happy. He's like the sun. He's a vitamin that everyone in the world needs and some don't have enough of.

Where the jury is still out on me, he is the most lovable human on earth.

## O W E N



“You’re a scientist, right?” Annie’s voice is like ringing bells, singing me off to dreamland. Only, I’m not going to sleep. I’m just sleepy. I’m listening. Closely.

“Y      “Hmm,” I hum, remembering her question. I’m a science teacher. She knows it. I know it. I don’t feel like that question really warrants an answer.

“Well,” she continues, “I’m going to conduct an experiment. And I need you.”

“You need me...” I say, liking the sound of that. Annie needs me. Good, I need her too.

“Yes, I need your help. Scientific help. How do you feel about falling in love?”

“You mean I haven’t yet?” I blink my heavy eyes open. I *am* tired. I said those words out loud. Those buried and forever hidden words. They aren’t supposed to be spoken out loud.

“You’re tired.” Her hand slips from mine, and I’m sorry I opened my big, dumb mouth.

It’s the last thing I hear her say, the last thing I think, before drifting off.



*I* wake to the smell of baked bread and the sound of chatter.

“If you could take your past and present advice and incorporate it into your real-life study, now that



would be perfect.” *Coco*. My sister is here.

That’s when I notice the TV is on. It’s muted, no sound escapes the box on the ground, but it’s clearly on. Ariel is swimming under the sea, and while her mouth is moving, again, no sound. My niece, Alice, lays on her stomach, on the ground, feet up and kicking in the air.

“That’s brilliant, *Coco*. I’m going to do that. If I can talk Owen into it, anyway.”

“And maybe instead of finding *the one*, your study should be building a long and lasting relationship. There are things you just won’t have him do on a first date. Things that wouldn’t make sense. But things that could very well lead to finding the right person.”

“True,” Annie says. Though I can’t see either woman, their voices are loud and clear. And utterly confusing. “I really like the idea of answering this question with some life experience.”

“Maybe you need another test subject besides Owen,” *Coco* says.

“Test subject?” I murmur.

“Uncle Owen!” Alice scrambles to her feet and runs over, hopping onto the couch and my stomach in the process. My stomach rolls. “Mama says I cannot bother you because you probably have a headache.”

“You never bother me.”

“I know.” Alice rolls her little eyes. “Crazy lady.” She sits on my stomach, and as I’m still lying down, there’s no possibility of sitting up now. “If you could marry Ariel or Belle, who would it be?”

“Yeah, O, we wanna know. Who’s it gonna be? A sexy fish lady? Or the beautiful bookworm?” Annie stands to the side of the couch, one hand on her hip. Her head tips to the side and one red lock falls in front of her eyes. Her freckled face peers down at me.

Alice huffs. “Ariel is not a fish lady. She’s a mermaid. She sings. She collects things. She’s got layers, Annie.”

“That settles it,” I say. “Ariel it is.”

“Makes sense. You’re much more of a prince than a beast.” Annie gives me a wink. “Hey, squirt. Coco needs a little assistance, can you go help her?”

Alice slides off of my stomach with a loud, exhausted groan. “You may refer to me as Alice, Beauty, or ma’am. But *never* squirt.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Annie says, giving me a sideways grin. She waits until Alice has slipped into the kitchen before sitting on the edge of the couch next to where I lay.

I scoot back, making a little more room for her.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

“Better. I think.” I’m pretty sure I wasn’t all that beaten up to begin with. But if Annie wants to take care of me, I’m going to let her.

She shifts towards me, reaching out a hand and combing her fingers through my hair, brushing it to the side. “Well, your sister made soup. So, you’ll have to sit up.” She stands and holds out a hand to me, offering help. Again, I let her. If she’s going to let me touch her, I’m not going to argue.

I know.

I’m pitiful.

But it’s Annie.

One day, Annie will find someone she can’t live without, and all of those touches and moments will be a memory. So, I’ll take them while I can.

I sit, just in time for Alice and Coco to bring me a bowl of chicken noodle soup and a slice of bread. We sit around my living room, Annie and Alice on the floor, while Coco and I take up this couch. We eat and chat, and after a moment, Alice is consumed by the mermaid again. Only this time I turn the sound up for her.

“So, what was that I heard about an experiment? About me?”

Coco and Annie share a glance.

“I had an idea,” Annie starts.

“A good one, I think,” my sister chimes in.

“I’m questioning my advice, O. Is any of it good? Is any of it valid?”

“All because of one question?”

“One question that I don’t have an answer to. One question that’s made me question every piece of advice I’ve given.” She swallows. “She also asked how I know if any of it works. Sure, I fact-check. But I never experience it.”

“It’s good advice,” I tell her, my head clearer than it’s been all day.

Annie shrugs. “Maybe... I need to know for sure.”

“Okay, an experiment.” She’s not wrong—I am a man of science. I like experiments. “How can I help?”

Annie clears her throat and plops down on the couch between Coco and me. “I need someone who will let me watch while they actively put my advice to work.”

“O—kay,” I say, long and slow, as I dive into the pool of denial. Maybe I don’t want to know how she plans to involve me in all this.

“So.” She takes my hand. “Will you, Owen Bailey, be my romance guinea pig?”

Alice giggles—though not at Ariel or Flounder. Nope, her seven-year-old eyes are on us.

My sister sits on the other side of her. She pokes her head around Annie to see me. “It’s a good idea, Owen. It’ll be fun. You’ll get to date a bunch of different girls, try out your bestie’s fabulous advice, and maybe find—”

“*The one*,” Annie says, repeating the words of the one question that’s caused all this trouble.

“You want me to date?”

Annie gives a silly grin and nods her head like she's one of those custom-made bobbleheads.

“And you want to come on those dates with me?” I inch closer to the edge of this couch.

“No, silly,” Coco says. “You’ll just report to her, she’ll ask you to apply advice that she’s given, and we’ll see how it plays out.”

“*We’ll?*”

“Well, mostly you and Annie. But I’m invested now.”

“Invested?” I only have one-word responses at this point.

“Please, O. *Please*. It’s a win-win! You validate that I’m not some dumb fake fraud, and I help you find the right girl.”

The *right girl*? She’s kidding, right?

# ANNIE



*I* pull out my phone, my notes app ready to go. “All right. First, tell me about your ideal woman.”

“My what? I—Annie—” Owen shakes his head like I’ve asked him to dive into a pool of sharks.

“We can’t conduct this experiment unless I have some facts.”

“Attractive,” Coco says, attempting to help Owen get going.

“I’m not shallow,” Owen says, swinging his gaze around to Coco. Owen never looks angry exactly, but this wouldn’t qualify as a happy stare, that’s for sure.

“Of course not,” she says.

But at least Coco is thinking in the right direction. “You should be attracted to the person that’s meant for you.”

“Exactly.” Coco nods.

“My turn!” Alice bellows, smacking her hands to her little thighs and completely forgetting about her movie. “She should be a princess. And wear pink! And love puppies.”

My brows are in a frozen lift. I swing my gaze from Owen to Alice.

“You’re not typing,” Alice says, her little fingers wiggling in the air.

Owen clears his throat and nods at me, telling me to write it down. Then he repeats, “Pink, puppies, and princess.”

“All the best things in life start with P. Oh, why couldn’t Daddy have named me Penelope?” Alice flops down onto a pillow, a dramatic sigh falling from her chest.

“What else, Owen? Surely, you’ve thought about this.”

He peers at me. Like I should know the answer. Like the answer to his question is hiding in my pocket. He squeezes his hands together in his lap, then says, “I hope she’ll be happy. And spirited. I hope she’ll laugh. A lot.”

I type and type and then wait for more. I don’t want to interrupt him. He’s on a roll.

“I hope she’ll value her work and the people in her life. Maybe she’s a little too competitive and a bit impatient.”

I snort. He wants a girl who’s impatient? Oh, my best friend is a good one. When he pauses, I ask a question just to keep him talking. “Extrovert or introvert.”

“Does it ma—” Coco starts.

But Owen interrupts her. “Extrovert. One who likes to take risks.”

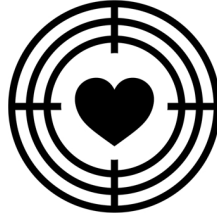
I smack his shoulder. Risks? “Okay, Mr. We’ll-Bungee-Jump-Someday. I totally heard you tell Miles that bungee jumping is for people who don’t want to live long.”

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug, his blue eyes shining at me like a newly scrubbed gem. “What can I say? That’s what I want.”

“You’re a goof. And I love ya. I have no doubt someone else will too.” I chuckle and give him an encouraging nod.

Of course someone will love him. Why wouldn’t they?

## O W E N



Sure, I've described Annie—to a T—but she doesn't seem to realize it. She laughs and jokes that someone out there will love me. But I don't want that. Not when she means someone other than herself.

The problem is, right now the only person I see is Annie. The only girl taking up room in my head and my heart is Annie. The only person I want in any way possible is—you guessed it—Annie.

My brother, Levi, would throttle me if he could hear my thoughts.

And he isn't completely wrong. A happy person doesn't inflict self-harm.

I am a happy person. I am an easy-going, playful, optimistic guy.

So, why do I torture myself day after day, week after week, year after year loving someone who doesn't love me back? Not like I want her to.

But then, I'm not really sure you get to choose who you love. Maybe you do. Either way—my choice or not—I love Annie Archer. And I have for fourteen years.

Annie is a remarkable, accomplished human. Her heart and laughter are big. So big, I'm certain they could smother all the bad in the world.

At least, that's what I think.

Levi does not agree with me. More than anything, Levi hates that the happiest person he knows (his words, not mine) is reduced to a pile of mush every couple of months because of a girl.

It isn't Annie's fault, though. She's never asked for more. She's never considered it. It's not that way with us—or whatever it is she told her grandmother this morning.

Still, that doesn't change the fact that once every two to three months I end up a puddle on Levi's doorstep.

"This is great," Annie says, looking over her notes. "I should go. I need to map some of this out. See how some of these things connect with questions I've gotten." She stands. "Do you need anything? Can I—"

"I've got Coco. I'm good."

"Are you sure, because I'd planned to stay and—"

I cut her off again. She can't stay. She has work to do. "I'm sure. I just needed a nap. I'm good now. Really."

Her coffee-brown eyes squint down at me.

"Really," I say once more. "If you want to help, meet me at school tomorrow. Eight am. I'd love help fending off sixth-and-seventh graders as they attack me with questions and judgment."

Annie stifles a laugh, then leans down and places a soft kiss on my forehead.

*My head.*

As if I were her dog or little nephew.

How many times have I imagined her lips? How many times has my brain conjured what they might feel like? How I'd trace them with my finger, memorize their shape, and claim them for my own... How I'd tease them open and take her in with every single one of my senses?

How many times? I have no idea.

Now, they've been pressed to my head, and I'm reduced to a slobbering, four-legged hound dog. Fan-freaking-tastic.



“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Annie says, tucking a strand of her straight auburn hair behind one ear. She gives me a quick wave before walking out the door.

Don’t mind me. Just time for my two-month meltdown.

“Alice, baby,” Coco says, reminding me that I am far from alone. “Remember where Uncle Owen keeps his paper and crayons?”

She nods, her blonde locks bobbing.

“Well, Daddy would love for you to draw him a picture. He gets home from his trip today. Remember?”

“Yes! He wants a pony picture that looks like Rosey!”

“Yes!” Coco says. “Go sit at Uncle Owen’s table and draw just that for Daddy, okay?”

“Jude’s out of town? Where’s Lulabelle?” My head is fuzzy, but I’m just now noticing that my baby niece is missing from this scene.

“She’s with Mom,” she answers quickly. “*Owen.*” My name is like a warning.

“Yeah?” I lean back against the couch, deflating.

“How long have you been in love with Annie?”

And then I choke on nothing but my own spittle.

“I know I’m new to this family. But I can’t believe I never saw it. How long, Owen?”

I swallow and mindlessly search for the ice pack I had before dinner before my nap.

“Owen,” my sister warns again. She blows an exasperated breath from her lips. “I can’t believe it... all this time and I never realized.” She bows her head in a shake.

I am a mouse in a trap. There’s no escape. So— “Forever,” I say. “It’s been forever.”

She leans her head on my shoulder and takes my hand in hers. It’s not what Miles or Coop would have done. It’s definitely not what Levi would do to me in this minute—nope,

my oldest brother would kick my backside. Sometimes I need that. But this—this is new, and well, it's comforting.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't know."

"It's not a big deal."

Coco lifts her head. "Being in love is a very big deal, Owen. A huge deal. It's an astronomical—" She bites her lip, studying my face. I'm not sure what she sees there, but that stare says a litter of puppies is dying, and there's nothing my veterinarian sister can do for them. Nothing she can do for me. "*Deal.*" She spouts the last word like it's a sentence all on its own.

"It's not. Not when it's unrequited."

"I hate that word. I hate it."

"I don't especially like it," I tell her.

"Have you told her?" She runs her fingers over the length of my arm, over and over. Why is that so comforting too? Coco hasn't been a mother that long, but she's got the job down.

"No. Why ruin our friendship when she doesn't feel the same way?"

"But what if she does?"

"She literally told her grandmother this morning that it wasn't like that between us."

Coco's front teeth make an appearance once more, clamping down on her bottom lip until I'm afraid they'll produce blood.

"Coco," Alice calls from the other room. "Uncle Owen doesn't have any brown. I can't draw Rosey without brown!"

"Coming, sweetie."

My sister stands, her hand still in mine.

"Coco?" I say. It's a question, one that Coco reads right the first time.

“She reverts back and forth. I’m usually *Mama* these days.”

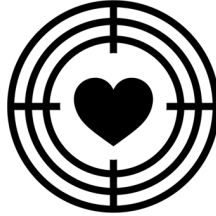
“I like that she’s calling you mom,” I tell her.

“Me too,” she says, her eyes filling with unshed tears. “This conversation isn’t over, okay?”

I nod, my head starting to pound again.

When Miles walks in, brushes and canvas in hand, I think I might be saved. Maybe I’ll get out of my Annie talk with Coco after all.

## O W E N



ow long have you known?” Coco says to Miles, a brush in her hand. He’s teaching us both to dry paint.

“*H*Err—he’s teaching Coco. I’m listening, watching, and asking questions to get them off the Annie topic.

My sister won’t be distracted, though. She had our mother pick up Alice, and she is all business now.

“Oh, man. Um. Always. Since before they graduated high school.” Miles looks at me as if I will give him confirmation of how long he’s known that I’ve been crushing on my best friend. Although—crushing isn’t an accurate term. It’s one that Miles used once. I let him use it. Because it sounds so much better than what this is—strange, crazy, stupid longing for someone who looks at me as nothing more than one of her many friends.

Okay, that isn’t true either. Annie and I are *best* friends. We tell each other things we don’t tell other friends. We spend time together that we don’t spend with other friends.

Yep, when I choose torture, I go all in.

“*Always?* And no one told me?” Coco says, flicking our brother on the shoulder.

“Sorry,” he says, rubbing a hand over the spot she flicked. “I assumed you knew.”

“Well, what are we going to do about it, Miles? Should I call Levi? We could get Coop here via FaceTime.”

“No,” I groan. “Levi hates Annie. Coop needs to focus on college, not me. There’s nothing to do. It’s time for Owen to move on,” I say, talking about myself in the third person, which only makes me want to smack myself.

But the truth is, I don’t want to move on. I want Annie.

There’s a pound on the front door. No bell rings, because like everything else in this house, the doorbell is broken.

I know that pound. I swivel my head around to look at Coco.

“All right... so maybe I already called Levi.”

I groan, and my head starts to throb again. She means well. I can’t get mad at her, not when she doesn’t know better. Not when she only wants to help me.

“You don’t need to beat the door in, sweetie,” I hear Meredith say on the other side of this door. She and Levi have been together as a couple just four months now. But I wouldn’t be shocked to hear my brother had popped the question—he’s never been so smitten or so happy in his entire twenty-nine years of life. It wouldn’t surprise me if Meredith popped *that* question first either—she likes trying new things, and I wouldn’t put it past her.

I couldn’t be happier for my brother. I wouldn’t want him with anyone else. And yet, it’s another testament that I might enjoy torture. I refuse to give Annie up—torture. I am happy and even proud watching Levi move forward with his life, to have found his person, yet at the same time, it’s kind of like adding lemon juice to an open wound—torture.

I truly am happy for him.

I’m not selfish.

So, I happily suffer in silence.

I don’t bother getting up; Levi will eventually just walk in. But before he can, Coco is at the door, opening it for them.

Immediately, she pokes our brother in the belly and whispers, “Be nice.”

“I’m always nice,” Levi grunts back.

“Levi might be the nicest person I know,” Meredith says with all the sincerity of a priest taking his sacred vows.

Miles smothers a laugh beside me, but Coco doesn’t hide her scoff.

“You’re right, Meredith,” I say. Levi *is* the most selfless of us all—even if it doesn’t always seem that way.

Another scoff from Coco. “Owen, we all know you are the kindest person on the planet. So—”

Levi’s grunt interrupts her speech. “Kind or just annoyingly agreeable.”

Coco pokes Levi in the belly again. “Not annoying. He’s kind, he doesn’t judge others, and he’s got good intentions—*always*.”

“Maybe,” Levi says, pulling a folding chair from my entry closet. He opens it up and taps the back. “You can sit, Mer.” Then he grabs another for himself.

Coco sits on my other side. We’re one big happy family—having an Annie intervention.

“But,” Levi says, “when those good intentions make him lose himself, I don’t like it.”

“Excuse me?” Coco’s narrowed eyes dart from me back to Levi. “What does that mean?”

“Haven’t you noticed?” Levi says, lifting an ankle to his knee. “Owen changes around Annie.”

A vein in my forehead throbs. I don’t change. Not really. I just like having things in common with her.

Coco’s furrowed brow tells me she *doesn’t* know—and Miles doesn’t speak up to defend me, which means he probably agrees with Levi.

“How?” Coco crosses her arms.

“Owen, what do you think of the Dallas Cowboys?”

I swallow. “You’re confusing fun with preferences.”

“Wait,” Coco says, turning my way. “You don’t like the Cowboys?”

My mouth opens, but I sound more like a motorboat than anything. “Ah—not really. I do like watching them play.”

Her shoulders stiffen. “But you bought tickets to a game. You bought Dallas Cowboy T-shirts and foam fingers and—”

“I took Annie. They’re her favorite team.”

“You went on *your* birthday,” Coco says. “You said it was a gift to yourself.”

“It was. Annie was so happy that day.”

And then my sister—who has become more like a dear friend—whacks me in the arm.

Levi gives one approving nod.

“Tell her how you feel about rap music.” Levi flicks his chin my way.

“Noooo.” Coco covers her face with her hands. “You stood in line for hours for those Mayzee Haze tickets. *Hours*, Owen.”

“None of that matters. People do things like that all the time for the people they love.”

“That’s true,” Meredith says. She gives me a small smile. She won’t take Levi’s side just because she loves him. She’s spent her whole life wanting freedom and agency. She’d never let anyone take that from her.

I point at Meredith, like her opinion is the only opinion that matters here.

“Does Annie know you don’t like rap music?” she asks, and any hope I’d had for a defense crumbles to the ground.

“*Owen*,” Coco says, but it isn’t accusing, just sad. Which is somehow worse.

“It’s not a big deal, you guys. I just like making her happy. We’re happy together and—”

“And one day, he thinks she’ll wake up from her stupidity and realize that she loves him back—that he’s the one who’s always there when she’s happy.” Levi could have punched me—it would have been less painful than his words, than his mocking, disbelieving tone.

Because maybe he isn’t wrong. Maybe I am hoping that one day Annie will wake up and realize how good we are together. How *happy* we are together.

Sure, maybe I don’t like the Cowboys, and maybe those tickets cost me a full month’s salary, but the look on Annie’s face was worth it. The fact is, I *am* happy when I’m making her happy.

What’s wrong with that?

“You need this experiment more than I thought,” Coco says. “Don’t you realize, Owen, if she’s the right one, she’d be going the extra mile to make you happy right back? You need this. For yourself.”



## ANNIE



Tap my pen to my notebook, nibbling on my bottom lip and staring at my sister, who is too busy to stare back. “So, what do you think?”

“Set up your best friend and make him follow all of your dating advice? Ummm, what if he never hits it off with anyone? You’ll never get past first date advice.”

We stand in my sister’s laundry room, and I watch as she attempts to scrub grass stains out of Bucky’s new tan dress pants.

“I’ve thought of that,” I say, handing her another Mr. Clean scrubbing sponge. She’s killed her current one. “I’ve asked him what he wants in a woman, and I’m going to do thorough research before setting him up. We’ll find Owen’s dream girl.”

Kayla smirks and pauses her scrubbing. That girl has muscles, like insane muscles, due to scrubbing little boys’ clothing. Sure, she played college basketball and coached at a CrossFit gym for three years—but nothing has built up her biceps like carrying around chubby little boys and scrubbing stains out of their clothing.

My sister turns her body a full forty-five degrees and studies me, one of her manicured brows lifting.

“What?” I say.

“You are going to set Owen—*your* Owen—up with girl after girl?”

“Yes.” I’ve been very clear. What doesn’t she understand?

“And you don’t think that’ll be difficult?”

“Why would it be difficult? Owen is one hundred percent lovable.”

“*Lovable?* This again?”

Ugh. Kayla is the one person I told about Maddox Powell and the speech that makes me question my desirability every single day of my life. And every time she brings it up, I wish I’d kept my trap shut.

“You know what I mean. It’s Owen.” I shake my head, thinking.

Her second brow joins her first in a skyrocketing competition. “Exactly.” She dips her head, her brown eyes locking with mine. “You don’t think you’ll get jealous?”

“*Jealous?*” I jute my body back and blow a wet raspberry from my lips. “No. That’s... that’s just...” I grunt. “*Lame.*”

“It isn’t lame. You know—”

Feet patter along the tiled ground toward us—six-year-old Steve’s feet—and my sister goes quiet.

“Steve!” she calls, and my bare-chested nephew stops in his tracks like a well-trained labradoodle. Steve has the same red in his hair that his momma and I have. Only he took the scissors to his a week ago, so there’s a lot less of it. “Where are you going, buddy?”

“Bathroom,” comes his one-word answer.

“What’s on your hands.”

Steve’s hands hide behind his back, ninja-fast.

“Steve Allen, show me your hands.”

Steve moves his right hand from behind his back and gives my sister a balled fist, his round belly poking out overtop his blue jeans.

“And the other?” Kayla sets one hand on her hip—she means business, mom business.

Steve crams his eyes closed. If he can't see her, then maybe she can't see him.

"The other," Kayla says. I'd probably do anything she asked too if she used that tone with me. *Yikes*. My sister could give Professor McGonagall a run for her money.

Little Steve deflates and he shoots both hands out toward her, opened and exposed. They are both red as if he'd dipped them in paint.

"Jam or marker, Steve?"

His lips purse.

"Steve Allen," Kayla says, snatching one of the little boy's hands. She brings them to her face, and for a second, I think she's going to taste those germ-infested six-year-old's fingers. But then she sniffs. "Jam. You know you aren't allowed to finger paint with raspberry jam, young man. Not again!"

Steve's face falls to the ground—clearly, he did remember and didn't care.

"Where's your shirt, Steve?" Kayla says, this interrogation far from finished.

Steve freezes, his mouth a cemented line. No words can escape.

"Is it as red as your fingers?"

He lifts his head, his nose wrinkles, and his teeth clench. A hiss fizzles through his teeth, and he nods. But the brave boy keeps eye contact with his mother.

Kayla crouches and tugs the little boy into her arms by his belt loops. She kisses his cheek, which is as just as red as his fingers. "Go get your shirt so I can scrub it, okay?"

"Okay, Mama," he says before taking off like a rocket.

Kayla looks at Bucky's pants—they will never be the same again—and sighs.

"Kids," I say, though I don't know much about it. I love my nephews, but I've never been baby-hungry or little-child-adoring.

“At least he was honest with me,” she says.

“I guess.”

“You aren’t even honest with yourself.”

“Hey,” I moan, glancing down at the arrow on my wrist.  
“What does that mean?”

“That means if you think you’re going to be okay setting Owen up with other women, you’ve deceived yourself. The crash and burn of your reality is going to be harsh, Annie.”

I roll my eyes. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. I’d be happy to see Owen with someone who deserves him.

“You know,” I say, skimming over the subject of Owen, “I thought you were going to lick Steve’s fingers for a minute.”

“I almost did,” she says with a shrug. “I’m a mother, Annie. My superpower is not being afraid of anything and knowing what’s happening before I’ve been told. In a sense, we do have eyes in the back of our heads.”

I smirk and fold my arms over my chest.

“For instance, I’ve seen you and Owen clearly for years. That’s more than you can say.”

## ANNIE



’m writing all about it. You’re okay with that, right?” I jot down a few notes in my Owen binder. “I mean, that’s the point of all this. Well, one of the points.”

“Because the other point—other than proving to myself that I do give my readers valuable advice—is to find Owen love.”

“Um. Sure. Yeah.”

“When is your lunch break over?” I ask, closing up the binder and looking at the wall clock above my desk. Before Owen can answer, I add, “Margo loved the idea when I pitched it to her. She wants me to do a podcast episode about each of your dates too. And maybe I’ll talk about the experiment on Sid’s YouTube channel.”

“Wow. Um. That’s—”

“Great, right?”

“*A lot.* It’s a lot. And it’s great.” Owen sounds tired—the effects of his concussed head.

“If all goes well, you’ll be getting ready for a date two weeks from this time!”

“Or,” he says, “I’ll be getting ready for period six. Seventh-grade science.”

“Right, I meant after school. I have to go, too. But I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

I have one million things to do to get this new Ask Annie section up and running. If I wrote out a list, I am certain there

would be one million items on it. In fact, I need to write a list—so make that one million and one.

And yet... I cannot get Kayla's words out of my brain.  
*Jealous?*

Why would helping Owen make me jealous?

Because of a tenth-grade crush? No way. That's over and done. I love Owen enough to do anything for him—and this experiment will be helping me right back.

My lip stings before I realize that I've bitten it—hard. I don't want to be selfish when it comes to Owen. But if something helps me *and* him, that isn't selfish, is it? It's what they call a win-win.

Before I left the other night, Kayla asked why I just didn't make myself the experimental group.

Me? Why not me?

Well... because I need to be on the outside looking in. To be objective. To see things for what they are.

At least, that's what I told her.

The truth is, we both know the real reason. The one I wasn't willing to bring up.

It's a wound I will not share with all of Coeur d'Alene.

Owen isn't wounded. He's a sweet little hottie who happens to be very eligible.

Yet he doesn't date—*ever*.

See? Win. Win.



Two weeks later, I'm sitting in a booth at Elsie's, reading the story I've launched. I'm calling it "The ONE Experiment." I don't explain that Owen is my best friend—just a willing participant. I tell how he will report and follow my advice and we'll see where it all takes him. After a time, we may even be able to report if Owen's found *the one*.

I retell the same information on my weekly podcast while sending a shoutout to Sad in Sandpoint.

Kicking it old school, I pretty much put a personal ad in the paper for my best friend—right next to my article. The ad reads:

***Seeking a Soul Mate***

***Twenty-four-year-old, straight male—known for his straight-up goodness—is looking for someone to share his life with. Someone spirited and joyful. Someone who loves to laugh and play. Someone competitive, who looks for adventure and values hard work. Someone who loves life and family and who wants something real.***

***Seeking female between the age of 21-30.***

***Click on the link to fill out the form for Ask Annie to review.***

***\*Participants should know and understand that this is for Ask Annie’s “The ONE Experiment,” and male participant will be going on multiple dates.***

“Bah!” Grammy smacks the table with a fresh mug of coffee. “The *one*. No such thing. You’re doing this to our Owen?”

“Grammy,” I yip. “How long have you been there?”

“I’ve been reading over your shoulder for five minutes. You didn’t hear me?” She sets one hand on her hip; the other tugs at my right earlobe.

“I didn’t.” I swallow.

“Owen is really doing this?” she says.

“He is.” And I feel the need to defend myself. “He deserves to find the right one, doesn’t he?”

She balks, throwing a hand my way.

“You don’t believe that one person is meant for another?”

She wrinkles her nose before taking the seat across from me. She shakes a finger, her eyes slits. “I believe in hard work. I believe in forgiveness. I believe in looking for the good.”

I give her a small smile, one that’s thoughtful. “Do you believe in *love*?”

“Yes. But what is love without work, forgiveness, and positivity?”

I pull in a breath and blink over at my wise, semi-crazy, half-Italian grandmother. “Grammy, do you think there are people out there who are... *unlovable*?” I swallow, pull up my big girl pants and listen.

She thinks a minute, her wrinkled pointer tapping to her cheek. “Hitler. He had to be unlovable. Stalin.” Her lips cringe. “No one could truly love him.” She thinks and tilts her head a little. “Beau Sanders.”

“But Gram, they weren’t—wait, *who*? Beau who?”

“Beau Sanders, a boy I grew up with. Terrible human. He asked me to the junior prom and then never bothered to show up. Just left me standing there waiting.”

My hand finds my heart. “Oh, Grammy. I’m sorry.”

“Bah. He wasn’t worth my right pinky nail.”

My brows narrow. “So, you think there are people out there who shouldn’t fall in love?”

“Yes.” Her head nods curt and quick. “And here you are, playing matchmaker. Dangerous game, Annie Archer.” She stands and brushes her hands together. “Now, eat your pancakes.”



It takes another week to weed through the women who filled out my Google form. Owen has attracted every single, straight female creature in a twenty-mile parameter.

“What about this one? She seems nice.” Meredith points to her laptop screen, and I lean over from Owen’s round tabletop



to see what she's looking at.

It's an applicant I've already ruled out.

Coco reaches from the other side and peers at her screen as well. "I thought you put an age limit on this, Annie."

"I did. That didn't stop a few ladies from fudging the numbers. See—" I point, tapping the screen where she's typed in her age, twenty-two. "You have to look over everything, Mer. Some of these ladies will do anything to go out with someone like Owen. See the photo?"

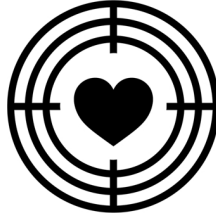
Each application has a series of questions and a place to upload a photo.

Meredith's brows cinch. "Why lie about your age and then upload an actual picture?" She stares where I've scrolled for her. The woman is, at the very least, sixty.

I shake my head. "Owen," I call to my friend in the kitchen, "you are so lucky you have us!"

Coco coughs out a laugh. "Yep. Lucky."

## O W E N



Operation Set-Owen-Up-On-A-Date-He-Doesn't-Want is in full swing.

“Hey.” My sister nudges me hip to hip.

I turn away from the counter to see Coco and her wrinkled brow staring at me like a fragile vase tipping on the edge of a drop-off. That is not the same face she just had on for Annie. Clearly, Coco has missed her calling. She should be acting.

“You okay?” she asks.

“I’m fine,” I say, and it’s mostly true.

“Is all this dating stuff driving you crazy?”

I shrug. I don’t exactly love it, but if it helps Annie. “I’m fine.”

“Fine?” She dips her head and whispers, “You’re fine letting the love of your life set you up and coach you on dating?”

See—the brothers never really talk about my *thing* for Annie. We all avoid it until I have a meltdown, and then Levi gives me a giant scolding. It’s routine. It’s customary. Why mess with a really crappy awful thing?

“Yes,” I say, my tone low, though my words aren’t incriminating me. I dip my head and peek at the open doorway into the living room. But Annie isn’t rushing in to accuse me of being in love with her all these years.

“You are not fine!” Coco hisses, then she flicks me on the shoulder.

“It’s okay,” I lie—again. “Maybe I’ll meet someone nice.”

“Owen—” Coco groans, but she’s interrupted by a squeal from the front room.

My sister’s mouth freezes in its half grimace, and I pause mid snack assembly.

“I’ve got her!” Annie yelps. She hurries into the room, sliding across the old, worn linoleum in her cotton socks.

*Oh, boy.* She is way too excited.

As if Coco has forgotten why we’re here, she says, “Who?”

The wireless printer sitting in the corner, along with some unemptied moving boxes, hums to life.

Annie trips her way over to the thing and holds up the white sheet of paper it just spat out. She beams like she’s holding up our nation’s flag, waving it for all to see. As if she’s on ice, she slips her way back to us, dangling the sheet in my face.

“I’ve got her, O.” She puffs, and you’d think she just got back from the gym. “Take a look.” She holds out the paper, face down, her bow-and-arrow tattoo pointing directly at me—which feels like a sign... but it’s not. How can it be when Annie is literally handing me another woman on a platter? A cheap, white, copy paper platter.

So, I take it. I agreed to this. Let’s see who I’ll be dating.

Annie sidles up to my left side, and orange blossoms fill my senses. The girl smells like a grove in the heart of Florida, ripe for the picking. “Look,” she says, simultaneously tapping the paper with her left hand while her right wraps around my waist, tugging my hip to hers.

Coco watches from the side like she’s got a front-row seat to the freak show.

I swallow. I breathe. I try to focus—but it’s hard with Annie’s arm around me, her hip flush to mine, and her orange blossom scent hypnotizing my head.

“She works for an animal shelter!” Annie says as if the fact makes this girl and me the perfect match. “She’s from Post Falls. She’s got three cats.”

“I’m allergic to cats.”

“Well, they won’t be on your date, silly.” She taps the paper again. “And she’s always wanted to learn to grow a garden!” She bellows the last part like she’s just struck gold.

“So?”

“So? *Owen*.” She swats my stomach, then parks her hand on her hip. “You love to garden.”

I scratch my jaw, my fingers meshing through the bristles of my beard. “I do.”

“And you’re a teacher.” She shakes her head. “You can *teach* the girl to garden.”

“Sure. In like six months.”

“Hey, where’s your positivity?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, shoving down my reservations about dating another girl. Because this is also about Annie trusting herself. “Those are great connections. You aren’t wrong.”

“Of course I’m not wrong. When am I ever wrong? I see everything!”

“Maybe not everything,” Coco mutters.

Annie scoops a lock of auburn hair behind her ear. Her pink cheeks have been sun-kissed with freckles—ones I would gladly spend the day counting and studying. “I think she’s perfect. Isn’t she pretty? Ang, from Post Falls.”

Pretty? I hadn’t noticed. I hadn’t spent more than a millisecond on the photo at the top left of the page. I scan up now, with Annie guiding me along like a puppy.

The photo is in color, and I can see the woman's blue eyes staring back at me. It sort of feels like she's actually staring at me. Like her eyes are UFO saucers making me dizzy—not in a good way. Not in a, what Coco would call, *swoony* way. But a *I-might-vomit* way.

A *I-can-tell-you-right-now-this-isn't-going-to-work-out* way.

Nope. Ang from Post Falls and I were not meant to be.

## ANNIE



Owen's eyes are glued to Ang's photo. He is already falling. I can see it in that stare—or is it a glare?—and in that sweet sort of grimace that's slanting his mouth. Sweet, more than grimace. It isn't a *grimace* grimace. It's a *this-girl-looks-interesting* grimace.

That's a thing. Right?

"Jude just texted," Coco says. "Motherhood calls. I've got to get back to my girls, but let me know when you two set up the first date." Her eyes scroll from me to Owen. "I'd like to be informed."

"You bet," I tell her. "We're Owen's crew." I laugh, imagining the three of us, Coco, Meredith, and me, all getting Owen ready for his big date. After this experimental story is complete, the community will probably vote to make me their town matchmaker. Well, all except Grammy. She will petition against me.

"Hey guys." Meredith pokes her head into the kitchen. "Levi's making me dinner. I've got to run."

Ugh. *Levi*. I curl my lip—just a little. While Owen is my best friend and Meredith is my new friend, I do not care for Levi Bailey. Sure, Owen didn't have a choice in the matter—they're brothers. But I honestly don't know what sweet Meredith sees in the man.

He's a grouch, and he's never once been polite to me.

I sober my expression and give Meredith a wave.

Coco wraps one arm around my back and gives me a hug goodbye. She does the same with her brother. My arm is still around him too. I drop it with Coco's embrace. "Call me later," she says to Owen, her irises bouncing once in my direction.

He gives her a small nod.

Owen is a catch: he's slim and broad and buff. His blond, naturally highlighted hair always looks a little like he's just left the beach. His smile could possibly win awards. He's easy to hug. And he's easy to love.

Ang from Post Falls doesn't stand a chance. She is about to fall fast and hard for one of the best.

*You're welcome, Ang.*

The minute Coco and Meredith are gone, I sit on Owen's couch and pat the space next to me. Owen sits so that his side brushes mine, and I loop my arm through his. "So, what do you think?"

"About?" he says, his fingers stroking the tips of mine.

"Ang," I say, nodding to the print I set on his coffee table. "Will you go?"

He blinks down at me. "I said I'd go."

"Yeah, but are you *excited*? You don't seem that excited and..." I peer at her photo again. "She's hot. I picked a good one for you." He has to be excited, to want this. I can't be the most selfish person in the world. Not when it comes to Owen.

"Is it going to help you?" he says—and maybe on his list of qualities, I should add mind-reader.

"Yes, but O. I want this to help you too."

"You know me, I'm not really looking for someone."

I bite my bottom lip, my eyes still on Ang's face. "I know."

"But this is going to help the column." It's a statement, not a question. "And you—your confidence. You're good at your job, Annie. If this will help remind you of that, I'm in."

I close my hand over his bicep and tuck my feet up under me. Peeking up at Owen, I give him honesty. I owe him that. “I think it will. But can’t it help me and you at the same time?”

“I’m willing to go,” he says, peering down at me. “I’m willing to try. As long as it helps you.”



ayla,” I say, repeating my sister’s name for the third time. I’m starting to feel like one of her children.

“*K* At least she offers me a glance this time. Still, her nose is buried in her son’s top dresser drawer. She pulls out a blue-and-white flannel shirt that has a blob-shaped stain on the front.

“Ka—”

“I see it, Annie. This is the woman you’re setting Owen up with. Got it.”

“Yes, but what do you think?”

She shifts to the bed, laying out the stained flannel shirt. “Buck!” she hollers, and the chatter and play of my nephews from the front room ceases.

“Isn’t she pretty?” I say, holding up the copy paper with Ang’s information on it.

“I don’t know. I guess.”

“You guess?” I say, peering back at the blonde in the photo.

“Bucky T. Matthews, if you aren’t in this room in 3... 2...”

I pause my insistence and watch. My sister is like a rocket launcher. She counts and then something usually explodes. But those boys come. If they don’t—well, gosh, I’m not sure what would happen. I’ve never seen that before.

The tapping of racing feet pads over the carpeted ground, and then my eight-year-old nephew is in the doorway. His brown hair is buzzed short, and his pale cheeks have gone rosy red with his race.



“Yes, mama?” he says, and his throat bobs with a gulp.

Kayla stands, hands on hips, in front of the little man. “Bucky, why did we buy that flannel shirt?” She points to the shirt spread out on the bed. The one with the big red stain across the front.

But Bucky surprisingly perks up with the question. He’s on *Jeopardy*, and he knows the answer to this one! “School picture day.”

“That’s right. School picture day. And do you remember what I told you about this shirt?”

“You said, ‘Don’t wear your picture shirt until picture day.’” Still, my kamikaze nephew is grinning ear to ear.

“That’s right. So, *why* did you wear this shirt, mister?”

Bucky shakes his head. “I didn’t. You said, ‘Listen up and listen good.’ And I did, Mama. I didn’t wear it.”

“Buck,” Kayla groans. “If you didn’t wear the shirt, then how did it get the red stain?”

“Oh, that.” Buck trots over to the bed and picks up the shirt, ready to reenact for us. “Steve brought his Kool-Aid in here, and when he spilled it all over the desk, I knew just what you’d say: *if you spill it, clean it up.*” He gives her a big missing tooth grin. “So that’s what I did.”

“With your shirt? You cleaned it up with your picture shirt?”

“Yep. You said you don’t like us using the good rags on Kool-Aid or jam or marker or—”

And that’s when she deflates. Hands fall to her sides, head rolls back, and a raspberry blows from her lips. “You didn’t put it in the laundry,” she says.

“Nope. I hadn’t worn it yet.”

“Right.” She plops herself onto Buck’s unmade bed. “Well, what are you going to wear to picture day?”

Buck wrinkles his nose, clearly not a fan of the long-sleeved button-up, and points at the ruined flannel.

I'm pretty sure Kayla's eruption is coming, but I still try to diffuse it. "Ah, Buck. You can't wear that now. Do you have something else?"

His little brown eyes brighten. "Sure. I'd like my picture taken with Thor." He pulls out a raggedy red T-shirt that looks as if it's been worn a hundred times and might be a size too small for him. Ironically, it would have been perfect for cleaning up red Kool-Aid.

My eyes dart from my nephew to Kayla. I wait for the steam to fly from her ears. When it doesn't, I ask Bucky, "Ahh, anything else?"

"Spiderman would be okay too." He rifles through the drawer, then pulls a blue shirt with a small tear at the hem and holds it up for me.

There's a reason Kayla's the mom and I'm not. "Buck," she says, pulling the faded red tee from his hands. "Why didn't you clean up the red Kool-Aid with this shirt? It's already red?" Her cheeks are pink, and her words clipped, but she doesn't lose it.

Oprah, Dr. Phil, and our mother would be so darn proud.

"Thor does not drink Kool-Aid. He's strictly an ale man."

"Ale man?" I say.

Kayla runs a hand down the front of her face. "It's true, he is." Then she opens drawer number two and pulls out a short-sleeved button-up, yellow-and-gray plaid.

"Aw, mom. That's from Silva's wedding." A long moan escapes my nephew.

"Well, you get to wear this because this," she says, holding up the long-sleeved, stained shirt, "is no longer an option."

That's when I realize this explosion is going to be two particles coming together and combusting on contact. Particle one: Kayla. Particle two: Bucky.

Hold your applause, Oprah—we haven't made it through yet.

I step between the two—after all, I am a problem solver. “What if you compromise? Buck could wear the Thor shirt underneath his button-up?”

Buck is already tossing his pajama shirt to the side. He likes my idea.

Kayla sighs, tired, like it’s the end of the day, not the beginning. “Fine.”

I watch as my sister buttons that plaid shirt up over Thor and to the brim. She sets both hands on the boy’s shoulders and pulls him in for a kiss on the cheek. The thing is—Buck’s cheeks could have countless germs on them. And she doesn’t care. She just dives in, smacking her lips to that dirty cheek.

“We *will* be combing your hair today!” she yells as he zooms from the room, pants not on his body but in hand. “No compromises, Buck!”

I plug one ear. “There it is.”

“There’s what?” she says with a yawn. It’s eight in the morning, and she’s tired already. I may never be up for motherhood.

“Your explosion.”

“Explosion? I don’t explode. It’s a well-known fact that little boys do not hear what you’re saying half the time. I don’t *want* to raise my voice, Annie. It’s a necessity.”

But with my nephew off and my sister’s attention back, it’s easy to return to my original topic. “So?” I say, holding up the paper for Kayla to see.

“She loves her cats? How many cats are we talking? Isn’t that a red flag?”

“No. Cats are not a red flag.” I can feel the wrinkles bunching up my forehead, but I can’t quite smooth them out. “Yes, Owen is allergic, but it’s not as if he’s going back to her place. They’re going to dinner.”

“Owen’s allergic? *Annie.*” She shakes her head. “Are you doing this on purpose?”

“Ahh—yes, helping my best friend and my career. Why yes, I *am* doing it on purpose.” I roll my eyes and cross my arms over my opened blazer and graphic tee. Where has Kayla been? I’m pretty sure I’ve made it all very clear.

“No, the cat thing.”

“What cat thing? I didn’t buy her the cats. What?” I toss my arms out of their fold and glare.

Kayla, still in her PJ pants and oversized T-shirt, that I’m pretty sure belongs to Tim, gives me a glare right back. “You just said Owen is allergic to cats.”

“So?”

She scoffs and shoves Buck’s stained flannel shirt into the hamper at the end of his bed. “So, I’m pretty sure that isn’t ideal for long term.” She tilts her head and gives me a chancing stare—like she’s won this match. Which she has not, by the way. “And I’m pretty sure you realize that.”

“It’s a cat, Kayla. If she’s *the one*, she’ll get rid of them.”

“People don’t just get rid of their pets, Annie.”

“Then, he’ll take allergy meds.”

She absentmindedly makes Buck’s bed. “I guess he could.”

“See? Hah!”

“Hah?” She pulls up the comforter on Bucky’s bed and peers back at me, brows raised. “Did you just say *hah*?”

“Yes. You want a fight. Well, that’s fine, but I’m going to win.” I set my hands to my hips—power stance. Who cares that I’m wearing a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup tee beneath my blue blazer.

“We’ll see,” she says. “I still call sabotage.”

## ANNIE



Trifle through Owen's closet. "Okay, so you need to ask at least three personal questions and tell her at least one thing that's meaningful to you."

Owen stands behind me, shirtless—yep, he's my best friend, but I'm not dead. I know about the abs and pecs and hours of gym time waiting behind me for a shirt.

"Why three?"

"Because studies show that the more quickly we can relate and make a connection, the better. Plus, when *Lonely on Lewis Ave* wrote to me and told me they just couldn't connect with women, I told him to ask his dates meaningful questions and to give up at least one piece of personal information about himself. We're proving my advice, Owen." I peer back at him between the green button-up and the yellow polo. "Remember?"

Fact: Owen hasn't been on a date in months, maybe even a year. Where I'm always dating, he's never dating. Just another reason he's the perfect experimental group.

I blink, taking in Owen's tan skin that sort of shines like a greased-up runway model. His belly button is peeking back at me, and I feel a teeny-tiny flush come over my cheeks. Nothing to write home about. Certainly nothing I'll be telling Kayla about. Because it's just that—*nothing*. It's just warm inside Owen's closet. He needs air conditioning. And a shirt. That's all.

“Got it,” he says, repeating my instructions. “Three questions and one meaningful fact about me.”

What a good student.

I tear my gaze from Owen’s abs—I’m pretty sure my eyes cross; there cannot be that many lines on one man’s abdomen. I spin back to the closet. “Don’t you have anything blue? Blue makes your eyes pop.”

“It does?” he says, and there’s a smirk behind his tone.

A bead of sweat slips from my hairline to my nose. I swat it away and turn on him, hands on hips. “Well, what would you pick?”

“Um, that shirt,” he points to the ground at the orange polo he wore to work all day. “The one you made me take off.”

Yeah... well, he’s not putting that back on, not for Ang from Post Falls. “Show me something blue.”

Owen walks over—barefoot and bare-chested. I’m just a few inches shorter than him in my four-inch heels. His eyes never leave mine as he leans past me, his arm brushing my cheek while pine and musk fill my senses. “Blue?” he says, pulling out a light blue button-up on a hanger.

I swallow. *Whew*. This closet might as well be a sauna. Owen has got to get on that air conditioning. It doesn’t help that we are having the warmest fall Coeur d’Alene has ever seen.

“Perfect,” I say. I’m not afraid to keep eye contact with him. “*Blue*.” I take the dress shirt from his hands, only to shove it into his bare chest and all those incredibly distracting abs. I step from the closet, embracing the cooler air out in his open bedroom. “Top two buttons undone, no undershirt. I’ll wait downstairs.”

Kayla would call me a drill sergeant... and okay, I may have sounded like one just now. But this has to go well.

I pace back and forth over Owen’s destroyed hardwood living room floors. And when he finally trots down the stairs—loafers on his feet, blue dress shirt tucked into dark jeans,

brown belt around his waist—I feel like it might be Christmas morning and my gift is walking right toward me.

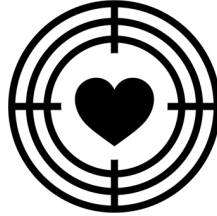
He looks perfect.

Perfect enough to... hand him off... to Ang from Post Falls.

Yep.

Perfect.

## O W E N



Despite the persistent asking, I did not let Annie wire me with a mic and earpiece. Nope. My best friend has me going on this ridiculous date. She'll have to suffer by *not* coming along.

Okay, it's not ridiculous. Annie's advice is sound—ask questions and share something meaningful. All things that would potentially help a couple connect on a first date. All things that would lead to a second date.

Only Ang is not Annie. There's nothing I could tell this woman or hear from this woman that would make me want to take a second glance.

So, why am I here? Because Annie asked me to be. Because when I asked if doing this would help her, she said yes. Sure, she also spouted something about it helping me as well, but that's beside the point.

I stand outside a Post Falls Italian restaurant, my fingers on the door handle. *Breathe*. I can do this. I can go on a date—my first in a year—and not think about Annie the entire time.

Ugh... not true. Especially this date and this girl, who Annie picked and primed herself.

I will most definitely be thinking about Annie Archer. No doubt about it.

Annie told me to look for the brown and white sweater and, well, just Ang. It's not as if I didn't see a photo of the girl.



The restaurant is packed, but I spot the girl sitting at a table for two, all by her lonesome. Brown-and-cream sweater, blonde hair, high cheekbones.

She spots me too, apparently. She's waving.

Did Annie post a photo of me along with the story? I don't remember seeing one, but this girl has no doubt of who I am.

I pull up my Underoos, nod at the hostess, and head Ang's way. I hold out a hand, but Ang, tiny in frame but strong in might, grabs onto my shoulders and pulls me in for a quick, WWE-type hug.

"Hmph," I grunt as she squeezes all of the air out of my torso.

"I cannot believe we're here. We're here!" she squeals, and I hold back shaking a finger in my ear with the sharp pain that shoots through my head. "Can you believe it? I picked you. You picked me. And here we are."

Do I tell her that Annie actually picked her? I didn't have a say in the matter.

Ang blinks, smiling up at me like a Barbie doll, large and miniature all at the same time, waiting for me to say something.

That's right—*Owen must speak*. "Yeah. Here we are."

"Eeek!" Ang squeals again. "Here! We! Are!" she shouts, and a few people at tables near and far glimpse our direction.

"Ah. Should we sit?"

"We should. We should sit right down!" She beams—the girl isn't lacking in excitement.

Our table is square with only two chairs. I sit across from where she sat just seconds ago. Ang sits too but takes one look at me across the table and shakes her head. Holding tight to the seat of her chair, she scoots it around the corner so that she's sitting right next to me.

"Oh. Um. Hello there." Heat surges up my neck and into my ears. My eyes itch. She's so close, my pupils have to

adjust. “That’s a nice sweater.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Ang snatches up my hand. “Touch it.”

“Oh,” I say, because apparently “oh” is my new favorite word. Ang rubs my hand over her arm, shoulder to wrist, again and again. My head knows it’s just her *arm*. And yet, not only do I feel uncomfortable, I’m starting to think I might be doing something inappropriate.

“It’s genuine.”

I nod. Genuine what? I have no idea. She forces me to pet her one more time, then I pull back my hand.

*Clearly*, this isn’t going to work. But I can salvage something. I can at least complete my assignment. Three meaningful questions and something about myself.

“Um, Ang, where do you work?”

“You didn’t read that on my application?”

I didn’t. Annie probably did. But I didn’t. “*Um...*” Perfect, a second favorite word: *um*.

“I work for the Post Falls animal shelter.”

That’s right. Annie mentioned that.

A cross between a tickle and an itch run its way up my nostrils and out my eyes. I wrinkle my nose, attempting a scratch without actually scratching.

“What do you do there?”

“I help care for the animals.” She laughs. “I do whatever they tell me to. It pays the bills. And I like the cats.”

“The cats. Right. You have a couple, don’t you?” Is that three questions or just two? How long does a date have to last to count as a date?

“Seven.”

I cough, then I sputter—though I haven’t anything in my throat. *Seven*? Did she say seven?

“Mmm-hmm. There’s Tulip and Monkey and Benny Boo and—” She ticks off each on her fingers.

I'm choking on each cat's name, when the waiter greets us. "I'm Jamal. I—" Jamal looks at me, and I can't really blame him, I'm still hacking. "Honey, do you need a drink?" He sets one hand on his hip, examining me but not moving.

I nod and cough while Ang decides this is the perfect time to caress my back.

Another server passes our table and Jamal nabs a glass of water from the tray she carries. "Here, sugar. Drink up."

I do, but the coughing doesn't stop.

There are two Jamal's through my blurred vision, but he's waving his hand in the air. "No cuddling, *girl*. You've got to swat him. *Swat!*"

I feel a tap on my back as Ang pats me over and over again. My eyes sting, and my throat clenches. That's when I realize: sure, I'm coughing, but I'm also one hundred percent allergic to my date. She just had me pet her sweater, which I'm now certain is covered in cat hair. And she's still touching me.

I'm dying—can that be my one personal fact?

*Shared.*

My homework is done.

## ANNIE



Why is he sitting so close to her?” I adjust the binoculars on my face. “Why is she touching him? Do you see her touching him?”

“*W* Kayla sips from her fast food cup. Her cola must be out because there’s nothing but slurpy sounds coming from her straw. She shakes the cup—nothing but ice. “You said we were going to have fun.”

“I said we were going to have fun staking out Owen’s date. This *is* fun. You’re having fun!”

“Am I? Because—”

“Kayla, will you just look at him? Look. She’s *touching* him. Isn’t that odd? I mean, he just got here. They *just* met.”

“You need to be careful, Annie.” She wrinkles her nose and tries to pull more liquid from her straw—without luck. “You sound a little... *jealous*.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not jealous. I’m protective. It’s Owen.

“Here.” She waggles her fingers my way. “Let me see.” My sister adjusts the binoculars to her eyes. She watches Owen, and I watch her. “Oh! Holy marbles! He’s kissing her. He’s got his arms around her back and his tongue is down her throat!”

“Owen!” I wail—or maybe it’s a shriek. Either way, it’s instinct. It howls from my mouth without permission. I snatch the binoculars back from Kayla. But I’m clumsy and nervous, and they somehow become a hot potato in my hands. “He

didn't! He wouldn't!" I'm yelling and fumbling, all while trying to get these stupid binoculars to face the right direction.

Kayla snorts.

The binoculars fall into my lap, and I huff out a tired breath. My heart thunders as if I just ran a mile. My fingers clasp tight around the steering wheel, and I breathe, telling my heart to simmer. "Why did I bring you along?"

Kayla snorts again, laughing so hard I'm pretty sure she isn't breathing. Tears stream down her cheeks—each one laughing at my expense. "You didn't want to be alone. I only came because you promised me some fun, and this mom really needed a night away from home. It's game night—do you know how rowdy our children get during game night? I had to tell Tim you were having a mental breakdown for him to agree to let me miss it."

"A mental—" I scoff. "Well, you look like you're having all kinds of fun," I say, letting bitterness drip from my tone.

"I am now."

I square my shoulders and huff out a breath. "He wouldn't kiss her within twenty minutes of meeting her."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! That isn't like Owen." We've been friends fifteen years, and he's never tried to kiss me.

*Whoa, I tell my brain. Strike that thought from the record. It has nothing to do with Owen dating.* The mini courtroom judge inside of my head slams her gavel, striking the thought away like it never happened...

"I know Owen," I say to my sister and lift the binoculars back to my face. They fall an inch, and I fumble to put them back in place. I blink, fairly certain I'm seeing things. Because there *are* arms around Owen, though he isn't kissing anyone. And those arms aren't Ang's. I move my gaze to the petite woman standing to the side of Owen, one hand held out to him. While tan arms wrap around his waist, hands clasping in front at his abs. The owner of said hands is a mystery as they

stand behind him. “Kayla!” I bark, but my head isn’t able to form a complete sentence.

“What is it?” She tugs on my elbow. “Let me see.”

But I don’t give her back the binoculars. No, I move up to Owen’s face. It’s red and contorted and quite unhappy.

*Crap!*

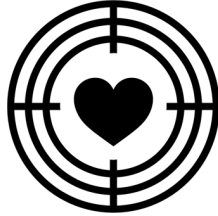
Crap. Crap. Crap.

I drop the heavy binoculars into Kayla’s hands and reach for the door handle.

“Wait. You’re going in there?”

“I think Owen’s having an allergic reaction.”

## O W E N



There's a light tickle across my forehead. But my eyes are heavy, and I don't feel the need to open them.

The tickle—almost like a light massage—travels from my head to my ear to my chin. I take it in. I embrace it. I'm comfortable right where I am. Something—a vague, distant memory—tells me it wasn't the case not that long ago.

“Steve,” I hear a not-so-familiar voice call. “Stop driving your matchbox cars on Owen's face. Let the man rest.”

Matchbox car?

Steve?

Okay... I may have to open my eyes. If I'm able... Is any of this real?

I try my left eye first... but my right eye is startled to attention and opens wide with the brown-eyed, red-head, and freckled face that's two inches from my line of sight.

“He's done w-esting, Mom!” *Steve*, Annie's nephew, holds a red dump truck right in front of my eyeballs. Another guess—the very truck he'd just been driving over my face. Then Steve's face is back, peering down at me. He grins, big and wide, showing off a gap between his two front teeth. What looks like a chocolate milk mustache gives him a small Joker vibe when he smiles like that.

“Steve?” a woman scolds.

Then Steve's eyes, inches from mine, staring down at me, turn to slits. "I am I-won man," he whispers.

"Annie, don't ever let your husband choose the names of your children. This is what happens when they think they're actual superheroes."

"Steve." *Annie*. That's Annie talking. "Hey Stevey-boy. Go help your dad. He's in the garage. With tools. *Lots* of tools."

Steve lifts his hovering head, standing upright. He's got a green cape tied around his neck, and he lifts one arm into the air. "I am I-won man!" he bellows before taking off like a jet.

"Nu-uh!" another boy yells.

I'm slowly putting the pieces together. If my truck-driving masseuse is Steve, this yeller must be Bucky.

"Iron Man doesn't have a cape, dumb bum!"

"Bucky T., do not call your brother dumb," Kayla yells. *Kayla*—that's who spoke before. Kayla.

It's taking me a minute to put all of it together, but my head is clearing.

Only—why am I at Kayla's?

"Hey there, sleepy head. How ya doing?" Annie sits on the coffee table next to this couch I lay on.

"Sleepy?" I lift up on one elbow, but my head goes fuzzy all over again. The room is spinning. I am having really bad luck with my head this month. "What's going on?"

"Ahhh." Annie bites her bottom lip. "What's the last thing you remember?"

I think. And think. "Date. Blonde girl—"

Annie nods. "Ang."

"She wore this sweater. It—" I cinch my brows, thinking. "It was covered in cat hair."

"Yes, it was. And she made you pet her like a golden retriever."

"Yeah. And then—"



I see the arm of Kayla handing Annie a glass of water, and then it's gone.

"And then," she says, setting the water on the table next to her, "you went into anaphylactic shock. Ang thought you were choking on something. I guess you were, in a way—your tongue. Jamal, the waiter—"

"*Jamal*," I say, remembering the man who wrapped his arms around my middle.

"Yes, well, with Ang's encouragement, he attempted to give you the Heimlich maneuver—which you didn't need. Needless to say, we were all lucky that I was... *passing by* and saved the day with your EpiPen." Her coffee-brown eyes widen—which means she isn't telling me something. I know Annie, and I know when she is purposely leaving out information.

"Passing by? You were passing by in Post Falls?"

With her lips pressed tight together, she nods. "Mmm-hmm."

"Annie..." I sit up, but I'm dizzy. I am not normally this high maintenance. But the forces against Owen's head are winning, two to zero.

I reach for the water that I'm assuming Kayla brought over for me. I down it in two gulps and look out at Annie, then just past her. I've never been inside Annie's sister's house before. Sure, I've met Kayla, but she's a good eight years older than Annie; we never hung out with her. This place is loved and lived in, from the orange fingerprints on the white door frame to the Legos scattered over the living room floor.

"I was visiting Kayla. And the boys. And we went out. And passed by. And—"

"You were spying on me."

She breathes out, her shoulders deflating. "I was spying on you."

I lean back, and the leather couch wheezes beneath my weight. "Well, thanks. You probably saved my life." I shake

my head. “I’ve never had a reaction like that before. There wasn’t even a cat in sight.”

“I’m pretty sure she had her sweater made from her cat’s hair. I’m sorry, Owen. I don’t know how I missed the crazy in that application. I thought she was the real thing.”

“Yeah, well—”

“We’ll do better next time.”

“Next time.” I shut my eyes. *Ugh*. “I did ask three meaningful questions.”

“No way. In the twenty minutes before you lost consciousness?”

I clear my throat. *So manly. So heroic*. I am a dreamboat—as Grandma Bailey would say. “Yeah, well, I’m not sure it did you a lot of good—”

“No, I think it did. Ang said she really liked you, that she could tell you were there for the right reasons, that you were showing up for her. That is until you blacked out.”

“But I can promise you, Annie. That woman is not my *one*.”

“Maybe not—”

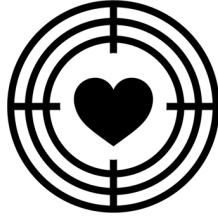
I raise one brow.

“Okay—*definitely* not. But to find the rose, you have to be willing to weed through... well, the weeds. You’ll only know for sure that you’ve tried if you show up. And that’s what you did, Owen. Those were Ang’s exact words. Don’t you see what this means?”

“That finding my one is going to mean several visits to the emergency room?”

“No.” She groans, reaching out a hand for mine. “My advice is sound. Yes, Ang isn’t right for you, but she is right for someone. And the things you did made her feel like she is worth being found.” She swallows when her eyes meet mine. “Not by you. But someone.”

## O W E N



I'm not gonna lie, I enjoy making my students believe that I have hidden cameras all over this classroom and know what's happening at all times. Really, I just use my peripheral vision. "Rylee Nelson, *phone*," I say, my teacher voice in full volume. My family likes to tease me—I'm so soft that there isn't a mean bone in my body—but I have a teacher voice. And I'm not afraid to use it.

I continue drawing my solar system on the whiteboard, but I'm pleased when I hear Aven Parker ask, "How'd he do that?"

"Uhh, Mr. Bailey," Rylee says. She's walking toward me now, phone still in hand. "This is you, right?"

I blink and give Rylee my full attention. "Your phone needs to—" I start, spouting school policy, but pause when I see what's pulled up on her screen.

Annie's story.

I swallow.

I peer down at the screen, and it's as if *O. Bailey* is in neon lights, blinking up at me.

What kind of seventh grader reads an advice column?

"Aw. Yep." My teacher voice has been buried under a pile of seventh-grade cell phones. I clear my throat and then, for some reason, reconfirm. "That's me."

With the confirmation, three more students have generated around the board and me.

And then—

“You’re letting Ask Annie find you a girlfriend?” and “My mom’s single,” and “Is this for reality TV?” all come in at the same exact time.

One thing my mom always instilled in us was a safe place to ask questions. We couldn’t give her one that she wouldn’t answer. Believe me, Cooper, my youngest brother, tried. *Hard*. But she answered them all with a straight face.

I take that approach now. If I act as if this is no big deal—just like Mom did when Cooper asked why Levi’s high school girlfriend couldn’t have a sleepover—then it’ll blow over. If it’s no big deal to me, it’ll be no big deal to them.

“Come on guys, take your seats.”

“But Mr. Ba—”

“I’ll answer your questions one at a time. But only if you’re in your seat. The bell rang two minutes ago, and you all know the rules. Ms. Nelson, your phone, please.”

Rylee slips her phone into her backpack and shoots her hand in the air. I nod her way, and she asks, “Is this for real?”

“As in real dates? Yes.” I say it like it’s an everyday science-related topic.

Three more hands shoot into the air.

“Okay guys, we do have work to do today. I’m giving you the next three minutes to get your curiosity and questions out of the way, and then we’re done with this, okay?”

Stacey Killpack only waggles her hand higher with my limitations. I point her direction. “Is this like for TV? Are you the next Bachelor?”

I cough on a laugh. “Ah, no. This is to help out my friend, Annie, who runs a really cool column for the online Idaho Times.”

“So, it’s a joke?” Sam says—out of turn. But I can’t give Annie’s column a bad name, not even amongst seventh graders.

“No joke. I’m going on dates, and I’m trying out her advice. It’s working.” At least, that’s how Annie spun it in her column this week. The thing is, her advice is sound. But Ang was not the right person. The best advice, the best tactics, the best date wouldn’t have been enough.

Brynn Cash has both hands in the air, and just to get her to drop them, I call on her next.

“My—my mom is single. She has been for six years, and she said this is the year. She’s going to get out there—or something like that. I can send you her number!” She pulls her cell from her backpack pocket.

And while I am trying to play it cool, heat rises up my neck and into my cheeks. I must be flaming red at this point. “Whoa,” I say, keeping my tone as cool as Lucy Bailey’s when she gave Miles and me that very long sex talk. “That would be completely inappropriate. I’m not allowed to date Moms. Just like you aren’t allowed to have your phone out during class.” I stab my pointer toward her backpack, and she hustles the thing back into her bag.

Eight minutes after my internal three-minute timer went off, I have every single student’s attention, and we haven’t talked about the solar system once.

How did Mom do it? I’m sweating like a pig.

I stand up from leaning against the edge of my desk and clap my hands. “All right! Science time. Take out your books. We’re in chapter four today.”

“Mr. Bailey,” Rylee says, hand raised, though I haven’t called on her. “Why don’t you just date Annie?”

Mr. Cool has left the building. He melted in the corner about ten seconds ago. “Ahhh, well. We’re friends.”

“So you like her,” Rylee says.

I tug at my button-up collar. “I do.”

“And you know you get along.”

“Yes.”

“It sounds pretty simple to me.” Rylee lays her fat textbook onto her desk and opens it up, giving me the out I need.

“Yeah,” I mutter to no one but myself. “Me too.”



Annie sits with her back in the crook of my couch and lifts her legs so they are neatly in my lap. “When Pouty in Pocatello asked if first impressions were really that important, I told her absolutely. It’s important to put your best foot forward. Eighty percent of couples don’t return for a second date because of a bad first impression.”

“Is that true?” I ask, my fingers mindlessly massaging at her ankles.

“Heck yeah, it’s true. Owen, you know I check my facts.” She studies the paper in her hand. “So, this week, we’re going to work on first impressions. I know things didn’t go well with Ang. Maybe we’d be on a second date had the first impression gone off better.”

“You mean, had I not gone into anaphylactic shock?”

“Well...” Her eyes pause their roving, but she doesn’t look at me. “Yeah.”

“I don’t think so. That girl is not right for me.”

Annie pulls her auburn hair up into a little bun on top of her head. “I know. I’m sorry. I saw a few connections and got excited. But this”—she picks the paper back up and holds it out to me—“is Belle, and I think you’re going to really like her.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?” Annie’s auburn brows pull together, and she at least gives me a glance.

“Why, Annie? Why am I going to like her?”

“Because”—she bobbles her head in a shake—“because she teaches science at the university.”

“Soooo... we teach the same subject.”

“Yes—and that’s a connection worth investigating.”

“All right.” I move my hands over top of her feet and down to her painted-red toes. “Are you going to pretend you aren’t following me around again, or do I get to know this time?”

She settles a little deeper into my couch. “That’s up to you. Whatever makes you more comfortable. We are working on first impressions.”

“Okay,” I say, rubbing at the pad of her foot. “Either way, I know you’re watching.”

“You can always pretend I’m not.” Her auburn hair bobbles in the loose bun on top of her head, and her sprinkle of freckles dance as she scrunches up her nose.

I’m watching Annie so intently, so studiously, that I’ve forgotten what we were talking about.

“O!” she shouts, thrusting her feet from my grasp and jolting upright. “Look at this!” She springs over to my side of the couch so fast, so hard, that the right side of her overlaps my left. She is halfway on top of me—I’m not complaining. She holds up the paper she printed half an hour ago and turns her head to look at me. But we are so close. So close that Annie’s button nose runs into mine. She laughs, but whatever she’s found is so urgent that she doesn’t pull back. “Look.” Annie taps the right side of the paper.

I read aloud. “Allergic to cats.” My brows raise, and my eyes return to her face. I can only see half of it—and it’s awfully close to mine. I am living off of orange blossoms at this point. “Wow. Now, that’s a love connection.”

She turns, looking at me again but not moving away. We are close enough that it would be tragic not to kiss her. My eyes drop to her mouth, and there isn’t a possibility she doesn’t notice. My breaths go haggard with the thought, and she must feel them; they are right on her cheek.

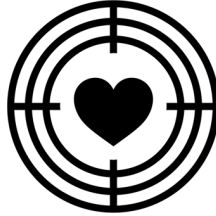
“Well, it’s something,” she says, her coffee-brown eyes watching mine.

And then tragedy strikes.

I don't kiss Annie. I don't even try.



## O W E N



*I* pound on Levi's front door.

Levi opens up, his brows cinched and a frown on his face. "Already?" Levi sighs and gives me the once over. "Have you been drinking?" he says, even more disgust in his tone.

"One beer. One beer and an entire carrot cake."

Levi wrinkles his nose. "Why carrot?"

"Because it reminds me of Annie's hair."

My brother rolls his eyes but steps aside to let me in. "What happened?"

I step over the threshold, thankful Levi doesn't live with our mother anymore. It's a whole lot easier to grovel, knowing I won't be worrying her. "I almost kissed her, Levi."

"No, you didn't. Go sit down, I'll get you a drink."

"I did. I almost did it." It's on my last insistent "did" that I realize Levi isn't alone. I swallow and try to pull together my depressed state—though I know I'm too far gone. "Ah. Hey, Meredith."

"Hi, Owen." She grins like I didn't interrupt whatever they've got going tonight, like I'm not a mess.

"I should—" I say the minute Levi returns with a clear glass of water and two Advil.

"Nope. You don't need to go."

“But—” I say, my eyes darting to Meredith and back to Levi. I’m interrupting, and not everyone in Coeur d’Alene knows of my pathetic episodes.

Levi crosses his arms over his chest. “Mer and I were just having dinner. You can join,” he says. Then, turning to the girl who completely tamed and stole his heart, he says, “You don’t mind, do you, Mer?”

Meredith shakes her head.

“Owen is stupidly, hopelessly in love with his best friend. So we get to repeat this show every couple of months or so.”

“Levi,” Meredith scolds.

But he isn’t wrong. I’m a fairly happy dude—until I’m not. Until I let all of this Annie stuff catch up to me, and then I fall apart. For a night. Before putting myself back together.

“This,” Levi says, pointing to me as I slump onto his couch, “is exactly why Coco is wrong. Annie turns you into a puddle of mush every time I turn around. And she thinks you should go for it?” He scoffs.

Meredith flicks Levi in the chest. “Go get him one of the cookies I made and be quiet.” She sits down next to me. “Start from the top. Tell me what happened.”

So, I do. I tell Meredith what happened tonight. I tell her how I’ve loved Annie the majority of my life. I tell her how as pathetic as it may sound—or truly be—I’d do anything if I knew it would make Annie happy.

“Including cheer for the Cowboys.” Levi makes a small gagging noise.

“Shush.” Meredith waves a hand at him. “You’re both crazy.”

“Hey.” Levi moans, but I say nothing. I am crazy.

“Owen,” she says, pulling up her legs and crossing them. “Do you know what the definition of insanity is?”

“Um—” I think for a second. I do, but is Webster what she wants?

“It’s doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. Take it from a girl who made some pretty huge changes not that long ago.” She pulls in a breath, her chest filling and then releasing. “You have to do something different if you want a different result. You do everything and anything to make her happy—but Owen, you look pretty miserable.”

I’m not always miserable. I bottle it up. And when it overflows, it isn’t pretty. But this isn’t me. Not always. Not really.

“But—”

“No buts,” she says, and while Meredith may be small and semi-inexperienced, she is persistent. “You have to do something different. You can’t live the rest of your life like this. It isn’t fair to yourself. The thing is,” she says, dipping her head so that her eyes meet mine, “it isn’t fair to Annie, either. You are essentially lying to her.”

*Oof.* That sounds awful. I’m not a liar. And to Annie...

But that isn’t what I’m doing...

Only maybe it is.

I sit a little taller and replay in my mind her words—*insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results*. And for the first time, I don’t feel completely hopeless. Maybe I don’t have to keep riding the broken record. “What do you suggest?”

Meredith’s eyes turn to slits. “This is scary. I get that.” She pats my arm. “But she answers all the letters from her advice column, correct? So, write your own letter.”



**D**ear Annie—

“No. No one just calls her Annie.” I delete the two words I’ve typed out. The only thing I’ve gotten down. I have to leave for my date with Belle in twenty-three minutes, and I haven’t figured out what to ask my best

friend yet that will convince her she could possibly love me back.

**Dear Ask Annie—**

Yes. Much better.

And now what?

“Knock. Knock,” calls a voice from downstairs. It isn’t Annie, though. It’s Coco—and the crew. I hear the racing footsteps of my niece Alice and the squawk of my six-month-old niece Lula. “Owen?”

“I’m upstairs,” I yell back. And I’m still in my underwear. I have no idea what I’m wearing tonight. What in my closet is first date, first impression Annie-approved?

With the herd of elephant feet pounding up my stairs. I grab the sweats sitting on the floor next to my desk. I yank on the pants just as seven-year-old Alice pushes through the door.

“I’m here for all your money, you filthy varmint!”

At least, I thought my princess-loving, ballet-dancing, girl-power niece was the one who just pushed through the door.

“Check me out!” Alice bellows, and then she twirls—aww, there’s my girl.

I take her in—head to toe. Hat to spurs. “Are you dressed like a cowboy?”

One of her blonde brows twitches. Can a seven-year-old twitch like that? Like a possessed, full-grown woman?

“A *cowgirl*,” Coco says, a little puff to her breath after trekking up the stairs with chubby little Lula in her arms.

“Girls can be cows too, Uncle Owen. Don’t be sexist.”

“Sexist?” Again, I eye my sister.

“It’s new. First grade is a whole new ball of fun.”

“I learned that word yesterday,” Alice says. “You can thank Evelyn Marshall for that information. She sits next to me at lunch, and her mother’s boyfriend is a sexist pig.”

“Young lady—”

Alice folds her lips in on one another, eyes wide on Coco. “I didn’t say Mel was a sexist pig—Evelyn did.”

Coco sighs, giving up the fight. “This is her Halloween costume, Uncle Owen. Doesn’t she look great?” Coco shifts Lula to her opposite hip.

“Fantastic,” I say, holding out a hand to high-five Alice. Then, I reach a hand out for my baby niece’s fingers. “Hi, Lula.” She latches on to me, but she’s sleepy. Her eyes droop, and she lays her head against Coco’s shoulder, her dark hair, so much like my sister’s, curling around her ears.

I was pretty sure there couldn’t be a sweeter infant than Alice, and then Lula was born. I was wrong. She is equally as sweet as her sister—though already different, even at six months old.

Alice pulls a gun from the holster at her hip—a pink-handled pistol.

“Ah-ah-ah—” Coco says, pointing a finger at her stepdaughter. “Remember, we don’t point guns at people.”

“Then how am I supposed to kill the bad guys?” Alice rolls her eyes like she isn’t seven, but seventeen. Still, she doesn’t point her silver-and-pink pistol at either of us.

“You aren’t,” Coco says—and her tone tells me she’s tired, not amused.

“A cowb—” I swallow, hard. “Cowgirl? I thought for sure you’d be a princess or a ballerina.”

Alice latches onto my fingers and twirls once beneath our clasped hands. “Silly, Owen. Halloween is a special day to be something you’re not. I *am* a princess. I *am* a ballerina. So, that would make no sense at all. Are you going to dress up like a teacher or an uncle?”

“I guess not. How can I argue with that logic?”

“You can’t. At least that’s what Jude told me as he sent back the other two costumes he’d bought her.” Coco cracks a grin.

“He is a smart man,” Alice says.

“He is.” Coco crouches so that she’s eye level with Alice. “Sweet pea, can you play with your sister for a few minutes while I help Uncle Owen? He has a date tonight.” She waggles her eyebrows at the girl and Alice bursts into a fit of giggles.

“I am the best at playing with Lula. We both know it.”

Coco nods, laying Lula on a blanket on the floor next to where Alice has decided to perch herself. “It’s true.” She gives both of her girls a peck on the head before standing to peer at me. “You aren’t dressed at all. Annie said I just needed to come approve your outfit.”

“Annie sent you?”

“She did.” Coco’s standing three feet away, but eyes seem to narrow in on my bare chest. She takes one step closer. “Owen, is that... Is that a *tattoo*?” She says, now two inches away. She’s inspecting the two inch circle inked into my skin—the one I forgot all about.

I jolt back with her words and search the ground for a T-shirt. Because—yes, it is a tattoo, one I am still not used to having.

The other night, between my one beer and Levi’s house, I sort of stopped to get some very permanent, spur of the moment work done on myself.

I’m hunched over searching the ground—the place where I normally keep my dirty laundry. Ironically, I cleaned it all up yesterday.

“Owen,” Coco groans. “Stop that.”

I huff and stand straight. “Yes. It’s a tattoo.”

“It looks new.”

“It is new.”

She clears her throat. “A bullseye, huh? Right over your heart, eh? Interesting.” Not interesting—she knows *exactly* why it’s a bullseye. “Maybe you shouldn’t take Annie swimming anytime soon.”

I swallow. I have no words. But I can still move. I scurry over to my dresser, open a drawer—why didn't I go there first? And yank out a white T-shirt. Fumbling, I attempt to force my head through an arm hole before finding my way into the thing correctly.

Coco crosses her arms over her chest, her eyes blinking, before she puffs out a breath and says, "Annie said she'll sort of meet you at the restaurant. Whatever that means." She grasps her left hip and tilts her head. "You aren't wearing sweats, are you?"

"No. Um. I—" I point at my desk. "I hadn't gone through my closet yet."

"Well, what were you doing? Maybe you should have me approve all of your future decisions." Her eyes fall to my chest once more before returning to my face. She studies me. "Owen Gray Bailey, you're turning the loveliest shade of guilt I've ever seen. What *were* you doing?"

A bubble of giggles sounds from the girls just three feet away from us. I glance at them before darting my gaze to my guilty laptop opened wide for everyone to see.

Coco follows my line of sight. "Dear Ask Annie? You're writing a letter?"

I clear my throat. "Um. Yeah. Meredith suggested it."

"What kind of letter," she says, taking a seat at my desk.

"Um, a letter to convince Annie that she might love me back," I whisper—low enough that my snitch of a niece doesn't hear.

Coco's head whips in my direction. "Serious?"

I swallow, which I'm pretty sure everyone this side of Coeur d'Alene Lake heard. "Yes."

"*Brilliant.* Annie answers everything. And she's experimenting right now." She sets her fingers to the keys.

"Whoa—hey, what are you doing?"

“You *need* to do this.” She stands and pats the back of the chair, willing me to sit. “Owen, you’re doing something! I’m so proud of you.” She lifts one brow, then mutters, “This is much better than your not-so-subtle tattoo.”

I sit with her urging. Coco stands right behind me, her face hovering over my shoulder. “What are you going to ask?” she whispers.

“I—I’m not sure.” I stare at the screen and Coco stares just behind me. “Any suggestions?”

“Yes,” she says, nudging me over with her hip so that we now share this armless, swiveling office chair. She shoos my fingers away and begins to type.

**Dear Ask Annie—**

**What are your feelings on dating a friend? Like a best friend? I’ve been in love with my best friend for years, but too afraid to make a move.**

**Sincerely,**

“Whoa. Too afraid? I—no. *No.*” I shove my fingers back into play and delete the line.

“What have I written that’s false?”

“*Afraid?*” I say, defense in my tone.

“You are afraid, Owen. You are afraid of being rejected—”

“No. I’m not. I’m afraid of losing her. If she doesn’t feel the same, and I confess—then I’ve lost her.”

My sister covers my wrist with her hand and squeezes. “Still afraid,” she says. “Now sign it.”

I reread what she’s written. None of it is fiction. None of it is fabricated. And doing the same thing, but expecting different results, is, in fact, insanity. I add: **But I fear I’d end our friendship with the truth.** And then, I sign it.

**Sincerely,**



## **Ready in Red**

“In red?” Coco asks.

I shrug. “My Buick’s red.”

“Perfect.” Her blue eyes flutter up to mine. “Now, hit send.”

## ANNIE



*I* sit three tables away from Owen in this swanky joint that Kayla found online. I'd never heard of it. But we are testing first impressions tonight. So, something swanky for the college professor it is. Plus, I had Owen stop and pick up flowers on the way here—roses. Yellow, not red. Classic, but not overly romantic vibes. Well, unless you're me. Yellow is my favorite.

I've reminded him to smile. Owen's smile is sort of epic. And while that kid is almost always smiling, he didn't smile at Ang but once or twice. I think he must have been nervous—or, in his defense, dying.

He's also going to incorporate the ask three meaningful questions and share at least one meaningful piece of information about yourself. I suggested that he share about his sister. Discovering you have a long-lost sister is pretty unique and personal.

But Owen doesn't think that sounds like first-date type of sharing.

So, I think he's planning to share his love of teaching.

I'm watching Owen, both of us waiting for Belle, who may lose points in the first impression category, seeing how she is officially two minutes late when I sense rather than see the presence at my side.

"Are you ready to order?" says an older gentleman who looks like he fell right out of an old black-and-white film. His tone is droll, and his mustache is so immaculately trimmed I'm

guessing he uses a ruler when trimming. He's even in a white shirt and black pants, with a black vest to boot—then again, so are all the other waiters. But this guy—he is Mr. Swanky waiter.

“Um. Sure. I'll take the cheapest item on the menu and some water.”

Mr. Swanky clears his throat, and I think it's an attempt to get me to look at him. “You'd like the peanut and cucumber salad? Or sparkling water with your water?”

I knit my brows. “How about the cheapest entree? Err—no, bring me the peanut salad. That'll work.” I clamp down on my lip and take my eyes away from Owen for a second. “Um, how long can I sit here with my peanut salad?”

To my surprise, Mr. Swanky has no questions. He gives me an answer with very little thought. “Twenty minutes, ma'am.”

I hiss. “What if I throw in the sparkling water?”

“Thirty.”

I pull in a breath. I guess that will have to do. I am measuring first impressions. That should give me plenty of time. That is, if Belle decides to—

“Oh! Shh! There she is!”

“Yes, ma'am.” And with that, Mr. Swanky leaves.

Belle's hair rains down her back like a waterfall. She's pretty—very pretty. Which, for some reason, makes my skin itch.

Owen hands her the yellow roses, and I see her cheeks blossom into a grin. I may only have a side view of the girl, but the flowers are a hit. We are off on the right foot.

Owen smiles at her, and while it isn't forced, it isn't exactly natural either. My friend could beat out Ryan Gosling in a looks contest with his true smile.

Still, I mentally check off roses and smile. He's doing great, and Belle seems to be reciprocating all of the attention.

I watch for another five minutes when Mr. Swanky is back with my peanut salad and sparkling water. Huh. There's not much to it—there's not even one lettuce leaf. It's just a bunch of cucumbers in some sort of sauce with crushed peanuts on top.

“Hey, Swanky,” I say, reaching up and tugging on the man's sleeve. “Can you listen to what's happening at that table”—I flick my chin in Owen's direction—“there.”

“Swanky? Ma'am, my name is Bernard.”

“No kidding. For real?” I giggle. He even has a name out of an old movie. “So, can you?”

Bernard bends over until his face is level with my own. “Can I what, ma—”

“It's Miss. Or better yet, just Annie.” With my foot, I push on the leg of the chair next to me until it pushes out from the table a foot or two. “Sit,” I whisper.

“Um—”

I keep my eyes on Owen—I cannot miss a thing. “Sit down, Berny.”

He does, and I give him a quick glance, only to see his Adam's apple ping-ponging from the top to the bottom of his neck. “It's not my break, Miss. I shouldn't.”

“I'm your table. Aren't you here to help me?”

“Yes, ma—Miss.”

“Okay,” I say, a catch in my breath. I don't know why I'm so nervous. It's not my date. Nope—not my date, but it is my career. It is *my* Owen. “See that table.” I lift my chin in three bobbing motions. And Berny is a smart ol' guy because he gets it.

“Table twelve. Three down.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“What about them, Miss?”

“I’m going to let you in on top-secret information. Have you heard of that advice column Ask Annie?”

I’m surprised when he nods. My column has reached far and wide. I have made our little online paper known. Margo, my editor, told me as much. I know from the letters that I receive that readers are finding me from hundreds of miles away. So why not Berny?

“For real?” I smirk and whisper. “That’s me. I’m Annie.”

“You? But you’re a child.”

I full-on look at Bernard now. “*Not* a child. And I research. I can fact-check like nobody’s business. I’m writing this new piece—testing love advice I’ve given.”

“Oh, I know. The One Experiment.” He rests his chin in one hand, his elbow on the table, and peers across the room with me toward Owen.

“Owen is my friend. The ladies write him, and I weed through them. Then Owen goes on a date trying out my advice. Tonight we’re working on first impressions. But it would be so helpful to have some ears over there.”

Bernard gives one curt nod, then pushes himself out from under the table. His chair scrapes on the hard floor, and the noise is deafening. Multiple sets of eyes are on us now—including Owen’s.

I give him a full-teeth grin since Belle isn’t looking and take a sip of my sparkling water. Owen turns back to his date, and I feel the slightest ping of... *something*... not jealousy. It couldn’t be jealousy. But *something*. Something that wishes he were still looking my way. That he’d return the funny smile I just gave him.

I lean back in my seat, watching as Bernard weaves his way through the tables until he gets to the one right next to where Owen and Belle sit. He’s good. He isn’t interrupting their conversation to ask if they need something. He’s cleaning the already clean table next to them while he listens.

I might have to bring Berny with me whenever Owen goes out. Or maybe we’ll have all of his first dates here.

Berny wipes and wipes at the table... until someone two tables down asks him something. He's up with a quick glance my way, and then he's gone to the back. He's back quick as a wink, though, with a fancy dish of something for the man, and then he hustles his way back to me.

Without being persuaded this time, he scoots into the chair next to me. "They're talking about their families. She's an only child, and he is telling her about growing up in a family of boys."

"Good. That's good. I'm assuming Owen asked about her family. That was step number three tonight."

"He seems to be enjoying himself. As does she. Do you need me to record anything?"

"Record? No." I purse my lips. I couldn't do that... Could I? "No. That won't be necessary. Thank you." I can't lie. I feel a little like Batman with Alfred by my side. Together, we are invincible. "If possible, just stay close in the vicinity. Let me know if you hear anything important."

I get another curt nod, and then he's off.

My peanut cucumber salad has gone warm and mushy by the time I'm done watching Owen and Belle. How long should a first date last? Because this one is on hour two. I guess James and I went out for a couple hours, but not all in one place. My heinie is going sore in this hard chair, and I'm about ready to starve to death.

I send a text over to Owen.

**Me:** When will you be wrapping this shindig up?

But he doesn't even look at his phone. I know he's wearing a smartwatch, but when he glances down at it, instead of reading, he lays one hand over the face, silencing the thing.

*Hey.*

Rude.

But then, he's on his feet. He says something, and Belle laughs like he's a professional comedian. Owen can be funny, but not *that* funny.

Yep, let's move on. Time for Owen's third first date, where we will focus on sincere compliments.

Owen doesn't look my way as he and Belle walk right past me. They're so close that I could stab Owen in the leg with my fork. I don't. But I could.

Where are they going? Wasn't this long enough? Besides, they came in separate cars.

I'm searching for Berny. I need my check, and I need it now. How else will I follow them to wherever it is they're going when—

"Hey there, Sherlock." Owen plops into the chair next to me. Berny's chair. "Is Watson going to make an appearance again? I'd like to thank him for the continuous refilling of our barely touched water cups."

"Wats—what are you talking about?"

"Your waiter friend. Don't think I didn't notice him cleaning all the tables around us and filling up our water cups even though he wasn't our server and our cups were so full I thought for sure he'd cause them to run over."

"That's just Berny." I wave it off as if Bernard and I have been friends for years. "Don't worry about him. Although, I do like this place for your next first date." I huff. "Sorry it didn't work out, but I've got another letter in mind. Candy. Sure, her name sounds like she's a small child dressed in all pink, but she's great!"

"Wait." Owen shakes his head. "Belle and I set something up for next weekend. I've got a second date, Annie. Your advice worked, spot on." He gives me a small, closed-lip grin.

"Well, of course, it did," I say with a gulp. It's good advice. I knew it was.

Bernard isn't wrong. I am young. But I do have life experience. And I studied psychology and journalism in

school. Not to mention my fact-checking skills.

So, there you go.

My advice works.

I'm not surprised.

I'm also not nearly as thrilled as I should be.



## ANNIE



knew this would come back to bite you in the a—”  
Kayla pauses mid-sentence, only to interrupt herself.  
“*J*“Hey! What did Mama say about putting yogurt in your hair? Huh? Yogurt isn’t gel, Steve!”

“It’s not biting me anywhere, Kayla. It’s working. Owen’s got a second date. He said”—I bristle a little with the memory of his words—“she’s interesting to talk to.”

“If it isn’t biting you in the—” Steve runs over, officially shutting up his potty mouth of a mother. He hands her a leather belt without any explanation. Kayla clears her throat. “If it’s working out just dandy for you,” she says, her tone sweet as she buckles the belt—not around my nephew’s waist, but crossed over one shoulder and the boy’s chest, so he looks like some kind of Amazon warrior. “Then”—she turns Steve around and pats him on the behind, sending him on his way—“why do you sound so prickly?”

“Prickly? I’m not prickly. I’m thrilled.”

Kayla huffs out a laugh. “You sound thrilled.” Then, without even turning her head, my Jedi sister yells, “Bucky T. I see you! You slather any more yogurt in your brother’s hair, and I am buzzing every inch of yours off.”

My nephew’s hand freezes mid-air. A dollop of yogurt hangs from his fingers and plops onto Steve’s head. Bucky gasps, both of his hands clapping onto his own head before he races down the hallway.

I watch the scene with a furrowed brow. My sister's back to the entire thing. "Why yogurt? Why would they do that?" I say, unable to stop the wrinkle forming over the bridge of my nose.

"Why do little boys do anything they do? The better question is why are you doing this, Annie?"

"Doing what?"

"*This*. Setting Owen up on all these dates—"

"Two," I interrupt. "Two dates."

"When you know it makes you feel uncomfortable. Why aren't you examining that? Why aren't you being *honest* about that?" She taps my wrist—right at the point of the arrow inked into my skin.

Fact—my sister knows the symbolism behind my tattoo, and she knows just how to get to me.

I sit a little taller, ready to run but not willing to give in to cowardice yet. "Okay, number one—it doesn't make me uncomfortable. Number two—you know why. I'm testing my advice first hand, rather than just reading about it. And Owen was more than willing to help. Besides, I'm helping him too." That's all truth—straight and narrow.

"*More than willing?* Maybe you need to reexamine that statement too."



**W**hile I often write at the office, I do all of my podcasting from home. My apartment may be small, but it's functional. And the tiny second bedroom is perfect for my office. I never have to take down my equipment.

"First impressions matter," I say into the mic. "That initial meeting lasts far beyond that one moment in time. Think about someone you admire—and think back on your first meeting with them. I'm not saying you can't turn around a less-than-great first meeting. But to move things in the right direction, we must put our best foot forward in all aspects of life,

including our social life.” I talk for six more minutes. Sharing the advice that I gave to Owen and that he successfully has a second date after being himself while following some simple guidelines.

That date is in two days. And while I’ve got a plan for *second*-date advice for my best friend, I’m also avoiding thinking about it. Don’t ask me why—I don’t have an answer. And that is the honest truth.

I pull up this week’s letters.

My assistant, Jolene, rifles through them at the beginning of the week, organizing them for me. So many letters ask similarly themed questions. So, she files them by theme, I choose the best options for the paper, and the rest we email back with a private answer. Usually, an answer that I’ve researched for one will work for multiple. I write a few of the letters, then using my outline and advice, Jolene emails back the rest. I’d like to email them all, but there isn’t enough time in the day.

I read the majority of the letters, and Jolene is great at flagging the ones she knows I’ll be interested in.

I click on the first file, the first flagged letter, and read:

**Dear Ask Annie—**

**What are your feelings on dating a friend? Like a best friend? I’ve been in love with my best friend for years, but I fear I’d end our friendship with the truth.**

**Sincerely,**

**Ready in Red**

Did my sister write this letter just to try and throw me off again? The email address would suggest that she didn’t. That this is a real letter. A real question.

For once, I don’t research. I don’t fact-check, I just write. These are my feelings. My emotion. My advice.

My column.

Dear Ready in Red,

I'm sorry to tell you that I think in most cases this isn't the best idea. Sure, if you're Chandler and Monica from *Friends*, or Emma and Mr. Knightly from Jane Austen's classic novel, it's going to work out. But, if you aren't a part of a favorite sitcom or a classic book, chances are your fear will come true. If he or she doesn't reciprocate your feelings, where do you go from there? Will your friendship be able to survive? Or will it forever be an awkward mess?

I don't know the specifics of your friendship. I can't answer those questions for you. But they are definitely ones you should consider before diving in with confessions you can't take back.

Sincerely,

Ask Annie

I hit send and move on to the next batch of flagged mail from Jolene.

Mail comes in at all times on this account. But not usually a reply. So, it's hard to ignore when my Ready in Red letter blinks back at me with a reader who has replied to my email—and within two minutes. I click on the letter and read.

So your advice is for me to swallow down my very real, very earnest feelings simply because I'm not a fictional character?

This must be a man.

No greeting. No goodbye—just defense. Although I'm being rash, Owen wouldn't behave this way. But lame Belle, who I'm certain is all wrong for my BFF, might. I'm

immediately slapped with what Kayla said. I don't even know Belle. And If Owen likes her, she's probably worth liking.

Greeting or not, I can't ignore his email.

**Dear Ready in Red,**

I start professional—this is still my job, after all.

**How sure are you that your feelings are sincere? Are they real enough to risk your friendship? That's the question. I wouldn't advise anyone to lie about how they are feeling.**

**Sincerely,**

**Ask Annie**

“There,” I say and brush my hands together. Done.

Except, Ready in Red isn't done with me.

**Then, what's a guy to do? My feelings ARE real. But I also don't want to lose her friendship.**

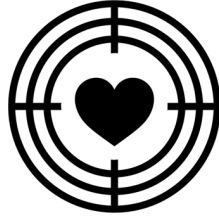
“HA!” I yell while pointing at my computer screen. “Guy! I called it.”

And while this guy may not be polite enough to start and end his replies with a greeting—really, he did in his initial letter—a reply doesn't necessarily call for it. I am being... what did Kayla call me the other night? *Prickly*. And he does seem sincere.

I hit reply, and like Ready in Red, I don't bother with a greeting or a goodbye this time.

**Let me do some research. I'll have a letter for you in Sunday's paper.**

## O W E N



“So, when’s your date?” Levi says as we lift a piece of sheetrock against one of the exposed walls in my bedroom.

“Tonight. Annie should be here any minute with my daily dose of dating advice.”

Levi grunts. I’ve decided his dislike is all my fault. It’s my own doing—hiding all these years. Meredith is right. I’ve been insane. And all it’s ever gotten me is mush. Not literal mush. I become the mush, which is way worse.

“You don’t sound excited.” My brother holds out a hand. I steady my side of the sheetrock with one hand, and with the other, I hand him the screw gun.

“For the date I don’t really want to go on?”

“That, and Annie coming over,” he says above the noise of the power tool in his hand.

I clear my throat and hold my hand out for the screw gun. “I always like it when Annie comes over.”

“Except...” he says and waits like he’s expecting me to finish that sentence.

And then, I do. “Except that I took Meredith’s advice, and I wrote Annie a letter and... I didn’t love her advice.”

“Really? The all-righteous, all-knowing Annie Archer isn’t perfect?”

“I’ve never said she’s perfect.” But she’s close. She’s kind and funny. She isn’t afraid to get her hands dirty. She’s beautiful—like crazy, insanely beautiful. She truly wants to help people. Which is why her advice to just forget about my feelings without even really knowing the circumstances or depth was frustrating—and unAnnie-like. I’m anxious to see what she writes in tomorrow’s paper.

“You’ve implied it plenty,” Levi says with another grunt. “What advice did she give you?”

“She’s revisiting it.”

“Okay, but what did she say that has you all...” He peers over at me and just waves a hand.

“She compared me to a fictional character and pretty much said, unless I want to lose my friend, I should forget about it.”

He grunts again. Levi speaks perfect caveman—he could be a translator.

“What?”

“I kind of agree with her.”

I could punch him—and my face must show it.

“I’m sorry. I just think someone who turns you into a groveling idiot and makes you lie about your feelings isn’t someone you should pursue.”

I grind my teeth and walk over to the next sheet. “I don’t lie. And the idiot part isn’t her fault. It’s the reason I need to change what I’ve been doing.”

“You do lie.”

I pull in a breath. I know what’s coming, and yet, I can’t come clean.

“How do you really feel about the Dallas Cowboys?”

“What does it matter?” I heave the right side of the next sheet into his hands. He knows how I feel. So, why does he want me to say it?

“It matters because it’s one of the many—”

“Not many,” I bark.

“Yes, many things that you lie about.”

“I don’t lie. I just don’t care enough to disagree.” I swallow and don’t make eye contact with my brother. Nope, I focus on this screw gun.

“You hate the Cowboys, Owen.” He reaches over and snatches the gun away from my hands.

“Hate is a really strong word.”

“It is,” he says, forcing another screw through the sheetrock and into the stud in the wall. “And I’m pretty sure you *hate* them.”

“Maybe in junior high—”

“Nope, always. Until Annie brought you home that Cowboys jersey from Dallas.” He stands straight, letting go of his side of this sheet. It’s half screwed in and won’t fall over on him.

A door bangs from the floor below, and then—

“Owen?”

Annie’s here.

“Upstairs,” I yell. I give Levi one glance, hoping he’ll behave.

Annie’s trotting feet sound over the stairs, and then her red head pokes into view. “Hey! I bought you a new shirt, and I’ve got notecards with—” Her eyes fall on Levi. Her smile falters. “With notes.”

“Sounds like a good use for notecards,” Levi says, screwing in the last corner of this sheet. He smacks the screw gun onto my desk.

Annie’s lip curls. I’m pretty sure these two turn into misbehaving children whenever they’re near each other. “Hello, Levi.”

“Annie. Always *unhappy* to see you.”

“Same,” she drolls.



“Can the two of you just be nice—for a minute?” I stand between them, feeling like the referee they always turn me into.

“I’ll be nice. I’m not sure it’s in Levi’s DNA.”

“Charming,” Levi says. “Like always.”

“*You*—go back to work.” I nod at Levi, then turn to Annie. “*You*—you brought a shirt?”

“Ooo, yes. You’re going to love it.” She pulls a purple polo from a Macy’s bag.

A smirk snorts from my brother’s lips. “It’s *purple*.”

“Thanks,” I tell her.

“Thanks?” Levi says, his disgruntled eyes on me. “You hate purple.”

I glare. “I don’t,” I say. “It’s fine. It’s just a color. I don’t have hate feelings for any color.”

“Wait. Do you not like it?” Annie shakes her head, glancing down at the purple people eater in her hands. “It’s okay if you don’t.”

I lift one shoulder. “I don’t dislike it. Thanks for thinking of me.”

“No man wants a purple shirt.” Levi snatches the screw gun from my dresser, eyes on Annie.

“I’m guessing that isn’t true. You don’t speak for every male species in the world, Levi Bailey.” Annie sets one hand on her hip and gives him a glower right back.

“In this one case, I do. I speak for every single man that has ever lived, that ever will live. We don’t like wearing purple.” He takes one step toward her, and I’m ready to leap in if necessary. “We’ll wear green. We’ll wear yellow. Heck, we’ll even wear certain shades of pink. But none of us want to wear purple.”

Annie blows a puff of air from her nostrils. “You are such a bull.”

“A bull?” Levi says with a snicker.

“Yes, you are bullheaded and—and stupid. I have no idea what cute little Meredith sees in you.”

“Whoa,” I say, one hand held out as if to hold Annie back.

“Well, I know exactly why Buttman didn’t hang around long. You probably tried to put him in a purple shirt too.”

Annie’s eyes turn to slits, but instead of another jab at my brother, she turns to me. “Owen, do you like this shirt?”

“I said thanks. I’ll wear it.”

“That isn’t the question,” she says, her brown eyes blinking. “I asked if you like it.”

“Um.” My mouth goes dry as the desert.

Levi and Annie are tugging on me, one on each end, and I’m just a giant CareBear whose arms are about to be ripped off.

I clear my throat. “It probably wouldn’t be my favorite shirt in my closet.”

“That isn’t the question either. Geez.” She flaps her arms at her side. “It’s a simple question, Owen! Do you like the shirt?”

How did Levi mouth off and I’m the one getting in trouble?

“Owen?” Levi says, waiting for me to answer just as impatiently as Annie.

Clammy prickles run their way down my back and across my arms. I swallow. “No.” I flick one accusing glance Levi’s way. “I don’t.”

Levi smacks his hands together, sending sheetrock dust flying in the air. “My work here is done.”

It’s far from done. Only half this wall is sheetrocked. Still, I’m not going to argue with him. Not now. Not with that death glare Annie is giving me.

Levi leaves, and that's when I begin to grovel. "I'm sorry. I wish I liked it. I—"

"Owen." Annie shoves me in the chest—and man, it hurts. She may be small, but she is fierce. "I'm not mad that you dislike the shirt."

"You're not?" I swallow again. At least, I try to. I'm still having trouble finding any saliva in my sandpaper mouth. "Because you seem pretty mad."

"I am!" she hollers. "I'm mad that you didn't just say that! I'm not a child who can't handle not getting their own way."

"I know that. I never would have—"

"Well, then why did you pretend?" She shakes her head and shoves the purple polo back into the Macy's bag. "Why didn't you just tell me you didn't like it? I'm your best friend, O. If you can't say that to me, then—"

"You're right," I say, not wanting her to finish that sentence. "I'm sorry."

"Fine." She heaves out a tired sigh. "Do you have time to go over my notes?"

"Yes. Of course. I knew you were coming."

"Okay." Annie flops onto my bed, scooting until her back hits the wall. She crosses her feet at the ankles and looks down at the cards in her hand.

I fall into the chair at my desk and gulp down every desire to scoop her up and show her exactly who the author is to that email she got the other day.

"Okay," she says, one toe tapping in the air. "The second date should be an active one."

"Right. You mentioned that. We're going rock climbing at the civic center, then out for ice cream."

"Perfect." She flips through another note.

"Don't be afraid to ask about her family." Another flip of a notecard. "And a first kiss is common for a second date."

Something shifts in her expression. “But I don’t think you should worry about that.”

Maybe I’m seeing things... but I’m pretty sure Annie is uncomfortable at the thought of Belle and I kissing. I stand, fueled with assumptions, and walk over to where she sits. I plop down next to her, scooting my side flush to hers. “Is it on a notecard?”

She smirks. “Well, yeah. But I don’t want you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

I refrain from laughing—this whole dating and article fiasco makes me uncomfortable.

She tips her head, peering up at me. “Just be yourself. No purple shirts and no Chinese food.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t like Chinese food,” I say as I mentally measure how far apart our lips are.

“Just me? I thought you didn’t like it either.”

Maybe Levi’s right about me.

Annie’s hand slips into mine, entwining our fingers and resting our tangled hands over top of her thigh. “Active and more questions. It’s going to be good.” She lifts one shoulder in a half-inch shrug. “Unless it’s not. That’s okay too. We’ll find someone else.”

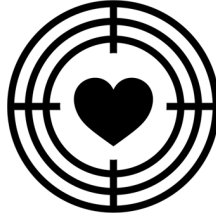
“You know, some of the kids in my class are reading your articles.”

“No way,” she says, her dark eyes like gems sparkle with her grin. “What do they think?”

And then I muster my bravery. All of it. “They want to know why *I’m* not dating you.”

A bout of giggles erupt from Annie; they murder every ounce of bravery I just gathered. She slips her hand from mine to pat my thigh and laughs—like I just said something hilarious. “Right. Well, again, I’m not here to make you uncomfortable!” She hops up from my bed, hands on her hips. “All right, so what *are* you going to wear?”

## O W E N



Cooper sits across from me—home from college for twenty-four hours.

We're going to have to get Mom a bigger dining room table. With the addition of Coco, her family, Meredith, and Cooper home, there isn't room for all of us.

"How was your date?" Cooper asks, and the entire family goes quiet.

Even little Alice is watching me. Lulabelle is officially my new best friend as she is too entranced with her mother's spoon to pay any attention to me. Sure, she's six months old, but I still appreciate her indifference on the subject.

I shrug and scoop a giant portion of mashed potatoes onto my spoon. I can't offer details if my mouth is full. "Fine," I say, then shove the bite in.

"You went on another date?" Mom asks. She, like my brothers, knows I like Annie. But unlike the boys, she doesn't taunt me over it. Still, I'm pretty sure Mom believes it's a crush and not deep, crazy, unrequited love.

I nod—seeing how my mouth is full.

"A second date with a girl named Belle," my sister offers.

"Is she cute?" Cooper asks, one of his brows lifted.

"Not cute enough to get him over Annie," says Miles—quiet Miles, always on my side Miles.

Traitor.

Let's talk about his nonexistent dating life for a minute.

I choke, and mashed potatoes poof from my lips, giving Cooper a freckled potato face.

"Ew." He groans as Alice giggles next to him.

Meredith's eyes are wide and frozen darting from Cooper back to me.

"Accurate!" Coco points to Miles, ignoring the fact that I just spat all over our brother.

"Ridiculous," Levi adds.

"Not ridiculous," Coco scolds him.

"Love is never ridiculous," Meredith says, giving Levi a small, unintimidating glare.

"Love?" Mom says. "*Owen?*"

I cough out a small splutter of mashed potatoes again, but this round only reaches the front of my shirt. "Excuse me," I say and head down the hall to the bathroom. I take my cloth napkin with me, needing some air and space as well as something to clean myself up with.

But I've just closed the door when there's a knock.

"Owen?" It's Coco. My sweet sister who has a heart of gold and a candor mouth. Our family changed when Coco came home. We were always good, but we became better.

Still, any of my brothers would be happy to give me a minute to process, to think, to be alone. Not Coco.

I open the door to find not only my sister but Meredith and Mom standing there too. Maybe they're holding an intervention... Nah, Levi would happily have joined had that been the case.

"Ah..." I begin, schooling my face to look fine and confused all at once.

"Owen, did you see the paper?"

Of course I saw the paper. It was the first thing I looked at this morning.

“Sweetheart, you wrote her a letter?” Mom’s voice is soft and kind.

I peer from one woman to the next. I think for a minute that Meredith will answer for me. This was her idea, after all.

When she doesn’t, I open my mouth. “I did. I just wanted to see what she’d say.”

“You saw it, right?” Meredith says, her eyes blinking.

“Yeah.” I lean against the sink of this small half bath and shove my hands into my pockets.

“Well, I didn’t,” Mom says, fingers wagging. “Someone pull it up for me.”

Coco has her phone out and opens the page before I can blink.

First, she reads my letter as context for Mom:

**Dear Ask Annie—**

**What are your feelings on dating a friend? Like a best friend? I’ve been in love with my best friend for years, but I fear I’d end our friendship with the truth.**

**Sincerely,**

**Ready in Red**

“In love? *Love?*” Mom pulls in a breath, holding it a second before letting her chest deflate. “Oh, my boy.” She reaches out a hand and while I’m not eight years old anymore, I take it. I love my mother. She is the bravest, strongest woman I know. And if she wants to hold my hand, I’ll let her.

“Read her answer,” Meredith says, saving me from speaking.

**Dear Ready in Red,**

**You’ve been in love with your best friend for years... and she doesn’t know? Does that mean for years, you’ve**

been dealing with stomach pain, headaches, digestive issues, racing heart, and tension—all symptoms of holding something in and keeping it to yourself?

With that said, there are times in life when we need to speak and times when we need to hold our tongue. The symptoms will pass. You need not confess every thought you've ever had—that won't necessarily bring you peace.

But if it's truly been years, and it's truly love, then you need to ask yourself this: Does she love you back? Will your confession, if unreciprocated, be worth it?

I can't answer that for you.

What I do know is this: if after years you are still asking this question, then you most likely (while going against my better judgment of NOT dating friends) need to do something about it.

Good luck,

**Ask Annie**

There's a short minute of silence after Coco finishes the letter before Meredith says, "So, what are you going to do?"

Mom's fingers squeeze around my own. "I think it's time to write another letter."



## ANNIE



*I* sit in one of the booths at Elsie's, my feet propped on the bench across from me. "Why not?"

"It's literally a deathtrap," Owen says through the speaker of my phone.

"Your complete mess of a house is the perfect place for a Halloween party, though."

"Not if we want all the guests to leave alive."

I know I'm being crazy—maybe it's all the advice I'm giving him, or maybe it's the purple shirt I *tried* to give him... But I swear Owen has been more disagreeable lately. Not really disagreeable. Just not agreeable.

I don't know.

And weirdly, I don't hate it.

"Fine. Grammy said we can use her place, but I'm telling you, it's not going to be as spooky."

"I'm okay with that."

I sigh out a laugh. "Fine. Have a good day at school. And I'll have a new girl for you by the end of the week." I silently revel in the joy I felt when Owen told me that he wouldn't be seeing Belle again. I didn't feel right inside when it came to that girl. She was... too perfect.

"Not for the party though, right? That can just be us being us and not a project. Right?"

“You’re never a project, O. You’re the prize. But no—not for the party.” I don’t think I could stomach that.

He laughs. “Gotta go, Annie. We’ll talk later?”

“Of course.”

I hang up, my cheeks swelling with a grin, then jolt to life at the scene in front of me. In fact, I might have peed myself a little. But my five-foot-one, gray-haired Grammy stands directly over me, a plate in one hand and a knife in the other. *Yikes.*

“You like that boy too much.”

“Owen?” I hold my hands to my chest. “It’s Owen, of course I like him.”

“No,” she spouts, setting the plate in front of me and setting the steak knife across it. “You like him too much.”

“He’s my friend. You have nothing to—”

“He’s a nice boy. A good man.”

And now I am officially offended. “I don’t deserve a nice boy?”

“You would take a nice boy and crush his soul into a million little unmendable pieces.”

“What? Gram!” I sit up taller. “I would not.”

“You would. You are like me. A man-eater.”

I scoff. “A man-eater? I—”

“We chew them up and spit them out.” She shakes her head. “Until we meet the man who can handle us, and then we marry him in two-point-five seconds.”

I blink, the chicken fried steak in front of me coming in and out of darkness. “I am not a man-eater, Grammy.”

“If Owen were right for you, Little Dove, you would have married him by now.”

“In two-point-five seconds?” I say, setting aside her offensive words to mess with her ridiculous logic.

“Yes.”

“So, in the third grade? I would have married him while nine years old?”

“Exactly.” She nods, both hands on her hips.

“Gram. Do you hear yourself? Married at nine?”

She bends, though she’s so tiny she doesn’t need to go far to meet me at eye level. She shakes a single finger at me. “I know about you breaking another heart, Annie Archer. You think I don’t, but I do. You had a man. And you broke his heart. Just like you have a dozen times before.”

“Ah,” I scoff. “It wasn’t right, okay? Would you want me to be with someone when it wasn’t right?” And! I did not break that man’s heart.

“No. But nor would I have you break that sweet boy.”

I groan. “Geez, Gram. I’m not interested in Owen. But thanks for all of your love and faith.”

“You are interested. So, I’m giving you two choices: marry him up or leave him be.”



he did not say that,” my sister croons into the phone.

“**S**I lift my feet onto my office desk and lean back in the chair I bought myself because my office chair was going to kill my back. Hmm... maybe I should buy Owen a chair.

“She did. She called me a man-eater and told me I could marry Owen or leave him alone. Like she was his protector or something.”

“Huh. All this time we thought you were Grammy’s favorite. Who knew it would end up being Owen?”

I giggle. “Truth.”

“So, which will it be? Marriage or ignore him for the rest of time?”

“Ha! Neither! She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” I open my laptop, ready to work, when a new email catches my eye. I see it because it isn’t new; it’s a reply. A reply from my friend Ready in Red. He must have seen my advice, and I’m not sure how he’s taking it.

“Except that she has loads of life experience and probably does know,” Kayla says.

“What?” I blink, my eyes having blurred over the email screen. “Oh, Grammy...”

“Steve,” Kayla barks loud and yet somehow sweet—*scary* sweet. “Put the pumpkin carving knife back. You don’t need that to eat your toast. You aren’t *carving* your toast.”

“Maybe he is.”

“Shut up, Annie. I love you, but I have problems—ones I’m willing to admit to.”

“Hey, what does that mean?”

“Tim just *had* to buy the boys pumpkin carving knives, and now Steve is pretty sure he needs to be carving something at all times. I caught him sawing off a chunk of his hair last night.”

“Yikes.”

“Yes, well, he informed me that it will go great with his Halloween costume. Zombie Steve Rogers.” She sighs, then, “Steve!”

“Okay. Bye. Bye,” I tell her.

Kayla’s boys are making me certain that I should never have kids. I don’t want to be in charge of anyone not sawing off their hair.

I turn back to my laptop with a hundred waiting emails inside and one that calls my name. I’m curious what my friend, Ready in Red, has to say about my advice. I’m surprised he’s messaged again. I hadn’t expected that. I open it up and read:

**That’s it?**

I need to do something about it... but what?

Any ideas from my favorite advice columnist?

I'm unsure if Ready in Red is being flirty or just complimentary. He's telling me he's in love... so I'm gonna go with the latter.

My mind rattles off half a dozen ideas, and rather than waiting, I email him right back.

Again, that's up to you. What are you comfortable with? What kind of message do you want to send? But a few ideas off the top of my head..

-Compliment her

-Find reasons to touch her

-Make eye contact whenever you can

-Serve her in some unexpected selfless manner

Or:

-Simply ask the girl out and see what happens

Or if you want to go bigger, grander...

-Make some big grand confession somewhere she can't ignore you or run from you

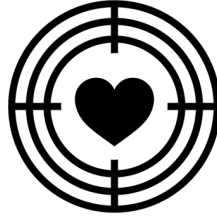
Disclaimer: all of this advice is ONLY if you're a nice guy who truly loves her and plans to treat her right. I can't be giving some jerk or sexist bigot ideas on how to get himself a girl.

Then for the first time in two years of writing as Ask Annie, I leave off the Ask.

Signing it just—

**Annie**

## O W E N



I don't email Annie back as Red. I decide to text as myself.

I should be prepping for next period, but instead, I'm reading emails from my friend, where I've asked her for love advice... to help me attract *her*. Yep, it's every bit as crazy as it sounds.

Mr. Zuckerman, our head principal, walks by my open classroom door, and I drop my phone into my lap, pretending to type on my laptop. He doesn't even look my way, but I sure feel like a seventh-grader caught breaking the rules.

I wait a minute. After he's out of sight, I pick my phone back up. I peek up at Annie's email, still open with her advice for Ready in Red.

"Do something to serve her... something unselfish." I don't really have a problem being selfish when it comes to Annie. I like giving her everything. But then I did just deny her this morning.

I open my texting app and write out a note.

**Me:** I'll clean up the tools and get Levi to help me cover the open walls. You can use my house for your party.

I sigh. And then, I hit send.

"I like this one."

The voice behind me sends me jolting in my seat—which is never good. Last time I bounced out of my seat, my head hit the ground, and I somehow ended up as Nurse Phyllis’s potato sack and Annie’s guinea pig.

Rylee Nelson leans past me to point at my computer screen. “Find reasons to touch her. That’s a good one.”

I slam my computer closed, almost nipping Rylee in the pointer. “What—why? What are you—Why are you here, Rylee?” I ask, stumbling over every single syllable.

“I knew you liked her. I knew the two of you should date. See? I should get an A just for that.” She sucks in a breath. “No—even better. Don’t make me take this makeup test. Because I’m so smart.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“Or you could just ask her out. Skip all the other ideas.”

“Rylee.” I cram my eyes closed and nod. “Makeup quiz. That’s right.” I puff out a breath and point. “Go. Desk. Sit.” I can join Levi’s caveman club now.

But at least she follows directions.

Rylee slides into her desk, second column, very first row. I snatch the planet’s quiz she missed yesterday and hand her the sheet of paper.

“I’m still voting for touch. Sometimes what you can’t say with words, you can say with a touch.” She taps her pencil on the desktop.

“You’ve got twenty minutes. I’m starting your clock now.” I ignore everything else she’s saying—though I’m secretly taking notes in my head.

There’s a text waiting for me back at my desk.

**Annie:** Have I ever told you how much I love you?  
You are the best best friend the world has ever  
known.

“See?” Rylee says, just behind me.

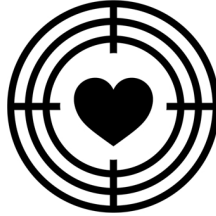


“Whoa!” My arms jerk, and I slam my phone onto the desktop.

She is a slithering snake, sneaking up on me in the night. Only it’s daytime, and she’s a thirteen-year-old girl.

“You need to let her know that you’re more than just a friend, Mr. B.” She holds out the paper I just handed her. “And this is the wrong quiz. I took this one last week.”

## O W E N



his is dumb.” Levi hangs a blanket over the exposed insulation in my living room. “Why would you want to hold a party *here*?”

“It’s Annie’s party. Not mine. She’s in charge of her office party this year.”

“Then why isn’t she holding it at her place or the office?”

“They’re both too small. Besides, she says my place has a certain look that’ll be good for the party.”

Levi grunts and crosses his arms over his chest. “If the look she’s going for is falling apart, then yeah, it’s absolutely got that look.”

“It is a Halloween party.” I pick up the last of the tools, ready to take it upstairs. Hopefully, there won’t be any partying up in my bedroom. “Are you and Meredith coming?”

“Did you already tell Mer about it?”

“Yeah. Annie texted her an invite.”

He grumbles out a little groan. “Then, we’ll be here.”

I smirk, though I’m not surprised. After living an extremely sheltered life, Meredith is ready to try anything good. And Levi can’t deny her anything. Though, I know he’d rather be cozied under a blanket with Meredith and only Meredith.

“Perfect. Don’t forget your costume.” I snicker.

“Sure,” he says, slit eyes and nodding. “Don’t forget your pride. You’re a good man, Owen. The best. You shouldn’t have to beg for anyone.”

I swallow. I hear him. I do. But forget pride. I want the girl.



I had no idea how many people work for an online paper. My house is full. The living room, the kitchen, and the back porch are overflowing with bodies... zombies, vampires, cheerleaders, and doctors who really don’t look like doctors.

Annie came as a paleontologist, and she brought me a dinosaur costume—green sweats, top to bottom, and a cap with spikes. It’s not bad at all, and it ties me to her. I always like that.

Ask Annie’s advice: find ways to touch the girl. It’s a good idea. I like it... And yet, I keep hearing a thirteen-year-old girl tell me it’s a good idea. Somehow that makes it more difficult to follow through.

Meredith has dragged my brother out onto the dance floor—aka, the center of my living room—or maybe he’s dragged her. Levi Bailey is dancing... and he seems to be enjoying himself. I stand to the side and wave at an extremely joyful Meredith.

I’ve no doubt that one day I’ll call the girl sister, so why not ask for a little sisterly advice? Coco isn’t here. She stayed home with her girl. Tomorrow, they’ll go trick-or-treating, and she didn’t want to be out two nights in a row. Parenthood sounds exhausting.

I watch as Meredith holds up her finger, indicating to Levi that she’ll be right back. She’s crazy if she thinks he’s going to stay out there—without her.

Just like I knew he would—he follows directly behind her.

And while I know Levi won’t agree with any of my plans, I don’t care. I ignore him while asking Meredith, “She

recommended physical touch. Do you think that's a good idea? For Annie, I mean." It's not like touching Annie is new... but I'll be touching her with new intention. She'll feel that.

Meredith nods at me. It's so loud in this room, so she cups her hand over her mouth and directs it my way. "That's perfect. Hold her hand. Stroke her arm. Brush a lock of hair out of her eyes." She gives me a thumbs-up before Levi pulls her back out onto the dance floor.

He doesn't seem to care that *The Monster Mash* is playing; he holds Meredith in his arms, and before long, I have to look away.

I go on the hunt for Annie. Last I saw her, she was in the kitchen, restocking food.

The noise dampens when I cross into the galley kitchen. It opens to a large dining space that Annie has decorated and splayed with all sorts of finger foods. There's still a hum of chatter, but the music isn't as loud.

Annie hasn't left the kitchen. She's chopping more veggies, assembling them to look somehow like little Frankenstein's. They'll stand right next to her pigs in blanket mummy men.

I stretch out my arm and snatch hold of her wrist. "Hey," I whisper, close enough so she can hear me. I don't let go but move closer, drowning in the orange blossoms that follow her wherever she goes. "Can I help?"

She nods, wraps one arm around my back, and goes up on tiptoes. She's touching me—hey, that works too. "Can you cube the cheese?" she asks, her lips at my ear, attempting to block out the noise of the party.

I move my cutting board right next to hers. My side brushes hers as I chop and she assembles. Does this count as touching, Ask Annie?

We've only been working a minute when some guy I've never seen before walks up. "Annie," he says, but his eyes dart to me. He swallows and his nose wrinkles. Yep—I'm

immediately not a fan. And I pretty much like everyone. “Great party.”

“Thanks, Marco.” Annie gives him a small grin but doesn’t sway from her work. I hand her my bowl of cubed cheeses, then rest my arm over her shoulders.

Marco’s brows lift as he looks me over once more. “I didn’t realize you were here with anyone. Couple costume, eh?”

To my surprise, Annie doesn’t deny what he’s said. “This is Owen.”

Marco gives me one dutiful nod, and then his eyes are back on Annie. “So, did you think about next weekend? My offer still stands.”

“I did. I answered. And it hasn’t changed,” she says, all while grinning, all while assembling little Frankensteins.

Is this guy hitting on her? In front of me?

Sure, I’m just a friend. But he doesn’t know that. In fact, he’s the one who implied we might be more.

I’ve watched guys hit on Annie before, but not when they thought we were together. And not *now*—now that I’m doing something. Now that I’m trying.

“Are these finished?” I ask, able to see very well that they are not. I mean, the cheese is cut, the meat is cut, the crackers are out, but the Frankensteins... only half are assembled.

“Um—”

“Great.” I run my hand down the length of her arm and entwine our fingers. “Dance,” I say, reverting back to my caveman days. For good measure, I give her a wink, and when I pull on her hand, she doesn’t stop me.

Levi is at the TV, messing with the remote and the list of upcoming songs. With a few clicks, he switches the song to something slow. Bless that grouch of a brother.

My nerves twitch, knowing I’m going to do something that I rarely do—at least not like this and not under these

circumstances. Still, I want to do this. Nothing but a hard pass from Annie could stop me now.

I lead her to the middle of the room, where ten other couples are coming together to slow dance. I don't let go of her hand. I pull her into me, wrapping one arm around her back and then the other. Her arms tangle up about my neck, and while we aren't dancing properly—like Grandma Bailey taught us all those years ago—we are dancing *close*.

Annie peers up at me, her full lips parting with her grin. Her hand comes up to ruffle the dino headdress I'm still sporting. "You look good as a T-rex," she says.

"You always look good." The words are out before I can stop them. It's like Ask Annie's advice has created a monster, and I'm going to have to mindfully rein myself in.

But Annie only giggles while batting her eyes at me like a goofball—as if I've made a joke. "Thanks for saving me in there."

"Who is that dork?"

"Dork?" Annie snorts. "Are we back in seventh grade?"

"Hey." I smile down at her. "I'm always in seventh grade."

"Well, that's true." Her pretty eyes shine like crescents. "That was Marco. He works in sports and he's forever asking me to go away with him for the weekend."

My grip around her tightens. *My Annie.*

I really should have been a caveman for Halloween.

"Not even a date?" I ask.

"Nope. Not that I'd go if it were only one evening, but—yeah, first shot in the dark, and he wants a weekend." Her brown eyes go wide. "So, thanks for the escape."

"Anytime," I tell her.

Annie's hands trail down until she's wrapped them around my waist. She pulls me tight for a hug, and I hug her back.

Meredith and Levi dance just feet away, and when Meredith catches my eye, she gives me an encouraging thumbs up.

We sway and dance to another song in this same embrace, Annie's heart thumping next to mine.

And when ballad number three begins, Annie grunts. "Ugh, *Levi*—I've got to change this setlist before there's a revolt. Oof, and check the food. I'll be back. Okay?" She pats my stomach like I might be a child she's taking care of or a grandpa she just fed, and then she's off.

And I feel utterly empty.

## ANNIE



I'm still in bed. I may never leave. It's a good thing the office offers a late show-up day to whoever plans the party. Because at this rate, I may never make it in.

Owen and I kicked everyone out at one a.m., and we were still cleaning at three. Annnnd... my best friend is now at school. *Teaching*. Behaving like a human. On Halloween—the day all children go nutty.

I should get up. I should get out of this bed and take him the strongest, largest, most obnoxious cup of coffee Coeur d'Alene has to offer.

And I will.

After ten more minutes...

Ten minutes turns into an hour. But I am up and out the door by 11:45 in the morning. Which feels like a small miracle. I stop by Elsie's, and while Grammy may not have the strongest coffee in all of Coeur d'Alene, she does have the best. Not to mention, I get pancakes to go.

And—I only eat one of Owen's.

He'll never know.

I park in the teachers' parking of the middle school lot. Then, I rifle through my glove box for my old sub badge. Yep, before I got my job at the Idaho Times, I was a substitute teacher for three months. I still have the badge, the secretaries



haven't changed in the last twenty years... between the two, I slip into the school with a wave and a "Hiya, Annie!"

I hold the coffee to-go carrier and the Styrofoam container of pancakes to my chest, praying I don't slosh hot, black liquid onto my Grateful Dead T-shirt or my pink blazer. They're my fav.

When I reach Owen's room, the door is closed and I don't have a hand to open it up. So, with the toe of my black Hazel Point heels, I tap the front of the door and peek in through the window. My bestie is bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and talking.

A girl sitting in the front row points to the door and this window I peer through. Owen turns his head, and I can't tell if he's thrilled to see me or not. He isn't frowning. He isn't smiling either.

Owen jogs over to the door and opens it up.

"Hey," he says, that Owen-warmth filling the space between us—I don't know how he does that. "What's up? I thought you'd be resting."

"I was." I shrug one shoulder. "Then, I thought of my poor bestie who had to get up at six to make it to work on time. And how you're having to function on hardly any sleep." I contort my face into a dramatic frown. "So I brought sustenance."

His eyes drop to the containers in my hands.

"Coffee and pancakes." I bounce my brows twice and push myself one more step into the room. Except that Owen isn't really moving out of my way. "Can I come in?"

He hisses.

"O?"

His cheeks puff out like helium-filled balloons before he pushes out all that hot air. "Ah. Sure. I'm just—" He lifts one shoulder. "*Teaching.*"

"I know. I won't stay long." I bounce my brows once. "I wanna see you in action."

His forehead wrinkles, but this time when I move forward, Owen steps to the side, allowing me into this room full of hormones and tweens.

The girl from before has her hand high in the air—the same girl who pointed me out to Owen.

Owen doesn't call on her. He leads me to his desk, takes the food from my hands, and directs me to his desk chair—the same one that almost killed him a few weeks ago. "This class will be out in twenty minutes, then I have a break."

"Sure." I nod. A twinge of stirring swirls inside of me at seeing this side of Owen.

"Mr. Bailey," the girl with her hand still in the air says. Everyone else is still. Like we might be hanging out in a graveyard. I'm pretty sure middle schoolers are not supposed to behave this way. "Mr. Bailey," the girl says again.

"Yes. Rylee. Do you have a question about the solar system?"

"Isn't that Annie Archer from Ask Annie?"

Owen's hands grip at his waist, reminding me of Superman. "I'm pretty sure Miss Archer isn't a part of the solar system."

"No, but—" she says, her hand still waving. "But it is her, right?"

"You mean," a boy next to Rylee says, "the lady who is writing about Mr. Bailey's love life?" This kid doesn't even think about raising his hand.

"Yes," the girl grumps in a whisper, her hand still in the air.

"Yes, Rylee, it's her. You can put your hand down. She'll be visiting until the end of the period. That doesn't mean anyone is getting out of their chapter summary assignment."

But Rylee doesn't put her hand down.

Owen grins, and while a touch forced, it's still got that Owen charm. "Yes, Rylee?"

“I’m raising my hand for Miss Archer. My question is for her.”

I can’t be sure, but I think Owen’s nose twitches. Is that a thing? Why does one’s nose twitch anyway? With his lips pressed into a tight line, he steps back, peering over his shoulder at me.

“Oh, um, sure. It’s okay.” I look at Rylee. Should I point? Do I need to use her name? She’s the only one with her hand raised; she should know I’m talking to her, right? There’s a reason I left middle school and never went back.

“You’re setting Mr. Bailey up on dates, right?”

I clear my throat. “Ah, yep. That’s right.”

“Well,” she says, that relentless hand still in the air. Isn’t she tired? There can’t be any blood left in those fingers. “Why don’t you just date him?”

I chuckle. Is this Kayla’s doing? Did she know I was coming here? Did she call this girl and set this up? I wouldn’t put it past her. “Well, Rylee, is it?” I know her name. I’m buying time.

“Yes,” she says, and when I get to my feet, her hand comes down.

“Well, Rylee. I’m testing my own advice. I’m helping Owen but also experimenting. You know?”

“Why not experiment on yourself? You could date him. Then it wouldn’t be secondhand information.” Rylee glances at Owen—I think this is something she must have learned in his class because he gives her a small, approving nod.

I swallow. “That wouldn’t really work.” I shake my head, waiting for Owen to jump in, to help me out—but he doesn’t. “We’re friends. I get my information first-hand—through him.”

“That isn’t how first-hand information works,” the helpful boy next to Rylee says.

“Besides, don’t you want to be friends with your significant other?” Rylee says. “I read something you wrote

last year that said something like that.”

Huh. Rylee is my sister’s spy *and* a fan.

Okay, puberty-bound Rylee, let’s do this.

“True, I did write that. But most relationships don’t start out as childhood friendships. There’s attraction and—”

“You don’t think Mr. Bailey’s cute?” The small crowd of girls sitting behind Rylee begins to giggle.

There are twenty-seven sets of eyes on me. Each burning holes into my Grateful Dead T-shirt. I look to Owen for help— shouldn’t he have a fireman hose to calm the girls down? — but he’s crossed his arms over his chest, his brows raised. He looks as if he’s waiting for me to answer.

“Well, sure. Mr. Bailey is very cute.”

“But he’s not *attractive*?” the boy next to Rylee asks. His blond hair is combed back, and his blue eyes are relentless.

“I didn’t say that.” I shake and nod and bobble my head in all sorts of incoherent ways. “He is. Mr. Bailey is very, *very* attractive.” My mouth goes dry as the desert. There is no correct way to answer this girl’s questions.

“So, what’s the problem then?” Rylee asks.

“Well, *Rylee*,” I say, the girl’s name coming out more like a curse word, “there’s more to a relationship than attraction.”

“Like what?” says the boy whose name I wish I knew— just so I could use it like a curse as well. These two are out to get me.

Finally, Owen opens his mouth. “Hand, Sam. Raise it, or she doesn’t have to answer.”

Does that mean I have a choice?

Sam raises his hand and, without being called on, repeats, “Like what? What else?”

I clear my throat. I suppose that means I’m answering. “Like similar hobbies,” I spout. “Like a real found respect.”

“You don’t respect Mr. B?” Sam says, hand raised and tone totally offended for his teacher.

“I do.” I cross my arms over my chest, attempting to protect myself somehow. “I respect him very much.” Then, I start to pace in front of the first row of desks. If I weren’t so flustered, I’d laugh at the seventy eyeballs traveling left then right along with me. “There’s just more to it. Okay? Communication.”

“You don’t talk?” Sam says—no hand.

“We talk all the time,” Owen says. “Every single day.”

I give him a small glare. Why isn’t he getting us out of this mess? He’s the teacher. Where’s his teacher voice? Where’s the principal? Heck, I’ll even take Phyllis, the body-building nurse, at this point. “Yes,” I say, “but also a special sort of trust.” I stop pacing and stomp. “And before you ask, Sam, yes, I trust Mr. Bailey!”

Then, Rylee shoots that never-tiring hand of hers up into the air. But at least she won’t speak. Not if I never call on her.

“Ry?” Owen says.

Ugh. What. A. Traitor.

“I’m confused. So, why aren’t you dating him?”

“Maybe she has a boyfriend,” says a girl at the back of Rylee’s column.

I point at her. That’s thinking, nameless girl in the back!

“Do you?” Sam. Sam. Sam.

No hand. I don’t answer.

“She doesn’t,” Owen says.

I huff, stabbing him with a glare. “No. I don’t. But I did. In fact, I just got out of a relationship. Plus—” I flail both my hands in the air with no real direction or reason—“some people are just meant to be friends.”

“How do you know?” asks Sam.

“I just know, okay.”

“That’s not a very good answer for an advice columnist.”

“If you don’t raise your hand, Sam”—I point at him —“then I don’t have to answer!”

A little blonde girl in the middle of this mess raises her hand half high and I’m already six feet under, so why not? I point at her.

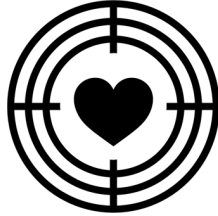
“I like your shoes.”

I hold my head high. “Thank you,” I say before backing up into Owen’s desk and picking up my coffee. “Chapter summary!” I bark before anyone has time to say more. I nod and bolt for the door.

I’m halfway down the hall when a hand on my wrist stops me short. “Annie,” Owen says. “You okay?”

I blow out a tired breath. “I am not strong enough for middle school. I have no idea how you do this every day, Owen.” I shake my head, certain I just burned a thousand calories. That was a workout. “I’ll talk to you tonight.”

## O W E N



I knock on Levi's front door until a spark of pain shoots through my fist. I hardly feel it—my blood is pumping.

My brother answers with a glower on his face.

“Hey,” I say, unfazed by Levi's frown. “Where's Meredith?”

“At her place.”

Which happens to be next door.

“Wait. You're home and she's home and you aren't together. Did you do something stupid? Do you need to apologize?” My brows knit. It's rare to see Levi without Meredith these days—unless she's in class, and she isn't. She doesn't have class after three any weekday.

“Why do you assume that I've done something? Maybe she needs to apologize.” He glares, and when I say nothing, adds, “She doesn't, of course. But neither do I. I was just grabbing some paprika.”

“Paprika?”

Levi holds up the red spice in his hand and shakes it. The thing is, I'm normally polite and interested and kind—but right this second, I just want to ask Meredith a question. So, I snatch the paprika from Levi's hand, trot down the steps of his duplex home, and walk right next door to where Meredith lives in this connected townhome.

I'm surprised my brother hasn't just knocked down a wall and made it one big house.

I knock on Meredith's door, paprika in my fist, but Levi pushes past me and opens the entrance.

Spices and savory scents fill the air—as well as sizzling meat sounding from the kitchen.

“Owen,” Meredith says with a grin. “I wondered why Levi knocked.”

I hold out the paprika for her.

“Levi's teaching me to make chicken piccata. Do you want to stay for dinner?”

“Sure,” I say at the same time my brother declines the offer given to me. “He can't.”

Meredith lifts one brow and turns back to her skillet. “How are things with Annie?”

Levi blows a raspberry from his lips. “I'm turning on the game,” he says, walking up behind Meredith. He leans down, her back flush to his chest, before setting a kiss to her cheek. “Let me know if you need any more help.” And then he's gone. Why does it feel like he twisted a knife into my heart right before leaving?

I'm glad Levi has Meredith. I'm glad someone could see past the hard, grumpy shell to the real him—the great man that he is—and love him.

So why does that tiny form of affection feel so painful?

I swallow down the strange hurt and remember why I've come. “I think it's time for another question. But not as Ready in Red.”

She looks up from her pan and the steaming stovetop. “Okay. What are you thinking?”

“How horrible would it be if I led her to dating me?”

“Ah, like you'd asked her out? That sounds good, Owen.”



“No, as someone writing in a question, a question that leads to me. All the kids in my class grilled her today about the two of us. It was great.”

Meredith’s dark blonde brows pull together. “Great? She was grilled? That doesn’t sound great.”

I lean against the kitchen counter and peer down at the tiled floor. “I think it forced her to think about why we haven’t ever dated. And I’m trying to do all the things she recommended from that last email she sent me, but—”

“I’m not sure about this.”

“Mer, she has another date set up for me. How long can I date all these other women?”

“I don’t know, Owen. That’s a question you have to answer for yourself.” She measures out her paprika. “I guess you could start with a letter. See what she says.”

“Thanks.” I give her a quick side hug, then hurry for the door, grateful for the reassurance, and ready to get started.

“What about dinner?” she calls.

“Another time. Thanks!”

I make it back to my place in record time. And sure, I may have one hundred and nine seventh-grade quizzes to grade, but I can map out a letter first, right?

**Dear Ask Annie,**

**I’ve been thinking about asking a girl out. We’ve been friends for years, but I’d like to start something more. How should I go about it? Do you have any experience in dating a friend? I’d love some first-hand information.**

**Thanks,**

**Waiting on Wednesday**

I delete and rewrite the “first-hand” line twice, but in the end, I leave it. I know my Annie. And while her advice is

sound, she's testing it out this very moment. With me as her guinea pig. So, knowing what I know, why wouldn't I use that to my advantage?

I just need to convince her that we're worth the try.

And that I'll still be around if she decides I'm not right for her.

I puff out a breath with the thought because I *am* right for her.

There's a tap on my front door—the one that desperately needs replacing—and then the thing clunks open.

“Owen?”

*Annie.*

Speak of the devil.

I blink at the second email address I've made up this month and the letter I've written to her. I fumble to click send and slam the computer closed just as Annie trips into my kitchen.

I hop up from the counter and catch her before she can right herself.

“Sorry,” I say, nodding at the uneven hardwood. “That's my next paycheck.”

Her fingers press into my forearms, her skin cool and soft. She hums out a laugh. “I've got an idea for your date with DJ.”

“DJ?” I say, dipping my head to meet her eyes. “What about Candy? You skipped C.”

“Excuse me?” She drops her arms, digging into her back jeans' pocket.

“I thought maybe you were going alphabetically—Ang, Belle... you know?”

She pauses with her phone midair. “Ooo, that completely appeals to my OCD side. And we did skip right over Candy —”

“It’s all good. D is close enough.” They’re all the same to me.

She wrinkles her button nose, drawing my eyes to her freckled cheeks and down to her lips. I swallow and meet her back at her brown eyes, like dark chocolate. *Mmm*. Just like her nose, those eyes also want me to think about her lips.

Or maybe I just need to check myself.

“Annie,” I say, taking her hands in mine. Advice number two from my favorite columnist—*touch the girl*. “This isn’t about the alphabet. This is about work. Giving advice, testing advice, seeing what works and what doesn’t. You’re picking accordingly. And you’re doing a good job.” Advice number one from my favorite columnist: *compliment the girl*.

“I am?”

“They’re nice women.”

“They are, aren’t they?”

I give her a nod. *Nice*—sure. Right for me—oh, far, far from it.

“Okay, well, this is DJ.” She holds out her phone so that I can see the face of a young, cute brunette. She’s cute. Very cute. But she isn’t Annie. So, I’m pretty sure I can tell you right off the bat that this isn’t going to work. “I’m thinking that for this date, we’ll test a comfortable environment.”

“Elsie’s?”

“No!” she pipes—a little too quickly.

“Why not?” I snatch hold of her hand, letting her know I’m not dropping the subject while touching her all at the same time.

“Because my grammy has some strange ideas about dating. About us.”

“Us?”

Grandma Elsie was pretty adamant when she told me that Annie and I can never be. But that doesn’t mean I’m banned from her café—does it?

“Annie?” I thread my fingers through hers and watch for a reaction... but there doesn’t really seem to be one. Does she not even notice my touch? Would I have to dip the woman and plant a kiss on her mouth for her to realize that I’m touching her? Maybe I should—

“I think we should double date. You with DJ, me with someone else. I think that’s the kind of comfort you need. And we both know I won’t be comfortable if Grammy is inspecting one of my dates.”

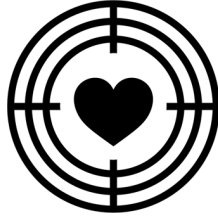
“You want to come on my date?”

She nods, and my fingers slip from hers.

“With a date? As in, you’ll be with someone, and I’ll be with someone else?” I’m pretty sure the ink of my bullseye tattoo begins to boil, burning a path of pain into my flesh, to the depths of my soul and heart.

She snorts out a small, unlady-like laugh. “That’s usually how a double date works, Trebek.” She tugs on the collar of my shirt, then takes a seat at my kitchen table. “Come look at her, and let’s talk about the plan.”

## O W E N



Meredith paces in front of my closet. Coco holds little Lulabelle on her hip while flipping through my rainbow of teacher polos.

“So, you’re going out together but not together?” Meredith swallows, a tentative expression glossing over her eyes. No doubt, she is remembering the date that Coco set her up on—all to make Levi jealous. Meredith may look tentative now, with my situation, but it worked for them. “I’m just not sure about this,” she says.

Coco’s look says she agrees with her. “Well, Annie’s picking him up in thirty minutes, so it’s happening whether we like it or not.”

“You could cancel,” Meredith suggests.

But I can’t do that to Annie.

Coco jumps in, knowing me better than she should. “But he won’t.” With our unique situation, Coco and I have known one another for less than two years. But there are things you can’t deny—and our bond is one of them. She is my sister and dear friend. “Besides,” Coco adds, “I think we need to see what comes of his letter.”

I swallow. This is all starting to feel like a very real game of Jumanji with not my life but my heart on the line.

“It was a good letter,” Coco reassures me. She clears her throat—which may be a tell that she’s about to say something I might not love. “And I might have written one too.”

Okay—a confession. “Coco.” I groan.

A hiss sounds from a suddenly still Meredith. “I wrote one too.”

“No.” Air exits my nostrils as if I were a bull. “You didn’t. This isn’t happening.”

“What isn’t happening?” Levi says from the doorway.

Coco presses a kiss to Lulabelle’s head. “We just told him that we wrote letters to Annie about the two of them dating.”

Levi grunts. At least he’s consistent.

“Don’t give us that look.” Coco flings a hand his direction. “You wrote one too.”

“WHAT?” I bend over, hands on my knees, unable to catch my breath.

“Mom made me,” Levi says.

“Mom?” I say, my body still doubled over, my eyes on the scratched and worn wood of my floors.

“Sure. After the girls wrote one and mom heard about it, she made us all write one, Coop and Miles too.” Levi pounds me on the back. “Don’t freak out. We all made new accounts and signed those idiotic names people sign for things like this.”

I lean into my hands, pressing into my thighs. “Let me see.” Standing, I hold out a hand for Levi’s phone. My family lines up like the troublemakers they are. Sweat trickles down my back. I may need to shower again before we go. But then, I know there won’t be time. I’ve got some reading to do before I get dressed and Annie will be here shortly.

Coco:

**Dear Ask Annie,**

**From a fan who truly cares about you  
—maybe take some advice this once.  
You’re setting your “friend” up on  
dates. Well, he sounds pretty great.  
Are you sure you want to be setting**

him up with a stranger, with anyone other than yourself?

From,

Someone Who Cares

*Oh, crap.*

Meredith:

Dearest Ask Annie,

Shouldn't your life partner be your best friend? I recently found mine. He is first and foremost my friend. Doesn't everyone deserve that? Including you and your O. Bailey BFF.

Love, blessings, & joy,

Happy at Last

*I'm gonna be sick.*

Levi:

Ask Annie:

Why anyone would ask you for help is beyond me. You have what you claim to be the best man in your life, and you haven't even considered him for yourself? What does that say about you? What does that say about him? What does that say about anyone who writes a letter to this ridiculous column?

It makes absolutely no sense at all.

Questioning Quietly

"You insulted her? Was that really called for?" I sit in a crumpled heap at the end of my bed, reading one letter and then passing on the phone for the next. I'm tempted to text Miles, Coop, and Mom and ask for a screenshot of their letters. But then, what's the point? They've already sent them.

“While it wasn’t the most polite of letters,” Meredith says, “I feel like he brought up some valid points. Maybe it’ll be good for her to read it.”

*Maybe.*

And maybe it will be obvious that the Baileys have decided to take over the Ask Annie column with ridiculous letters and accusations.

Maybe they’ve all outed me and my feelings.



## ANNIE



I stand in my jeans and bra, tossing one shirt and then the next onto my bed. Nothing looks right. They all look the same. What am I going to wear?

Why does it matter? I don't like Adam.

A text rings through from my sister.

A series of wide-eye emojis string across the screen.

I set a hand on my hip and open the wordless message, just as another text comes in.

**Kayla:** Forty-two? Forty-two letters asking why YOU aren't with Owen? That's... a lot, Annie.

**Me:** Forty-two and I still have fourteen emails to open, all put in the same file folder by my assistant. What is happening, Kayla? What's going on with my experiment??????????

**Kayla:** Uhhhh, your fans are seeing through you and giving you a piece of your own medicine.

**Me:** This is crazy. What are people thinking?

**Kayla:** They only read what you write, little sister. Everything they're saying comes from what you've written.

I drop my phone onto the bed, and I'm grateful when it lands face-side down. I snag a shirt from the middle of a mounding pile and slip it over my head.

I'm going to be late... Late picking up Owen. Late getting to the restaurant. Late for my date.

With Adam—from work.

Why Adam... because I gave this advice:

***Make your date and yourself comfortable. Invite others to ease the pressure that a first date can create by including people who are known to ease your stress levels.***

So... I'm not really doing this for Adam or me. I'm doing it for Owen. I'm doing it for the column.

So, while it may not matter if I'm late for Adam, it does matter if I'm late for Owen. I don't want to ruin anything for him because my head is stuck in a folder of letters that are utterly strange and confusing.

I grab a jacket on the way out the door as a brisk, thirty-eight-degree November breeze hits my cheeks. I slip my arms through the sleeves of my brown leather jacket and ignore the texts pinging in my pocket from Kayla.

I skip up to Owen's front porch with too much built-up energy inside of me. I knock and then push open the stiff, rickety door.

I step inside, not paying attention to the space in front of me, and almost run into a tall, stout chest that doesn't belong to my best friend.

"Ugh." I grunt as I stop myself short. "*Levi*. What are you doing here?"

He gives me a false, snarling smile. "Nice to see you too." And then he snickers. His eyes glaze over me, and the snicker turns into a balking laugh.

"Excuse me?" I say, always ready to fight with Owen's oldest brother. How did such a nice family end up with Levi?

"Setting trends as usual," he says with another snicker. Then he pushes his way out the door.

Good riddance.

“O?”

“Coming,” he calls. He trots down the stairs, and I meet him at the end—forty-two letters on repeat in my head.

**Why don't you want to date your friend? What's wrong with him?**

**Shouldn't a life partner be your best friend?**

**I love you, Ask Annie. You deserve the best. Sounds like you've found that in your friend. Go for it!**

**Instead of your friend trying out your advice, why don't you try it? Better yet, try it out on him!**

Dozens more, and then there was this one:

**Why anyone would ask you for help is beyond me. You have what you claim to be the best man in your life, and you haven't even considered him for yourself?**

Along with more that I have yet to open. I blink up at Owen and clear my throat.

“Ah, hey,” I say—in a totally normal way. Or... not so normal.

And Owen being Owen sees right through me. His dark brows pull together, and his eyes rove over me as if he's solving a riddle. I wait for him to read in my expression that I've been reading letters, lots of letters with strong opinions on the two of us.

His hand comes up to the collar of my shirt and he gives it a little tug. “Is your shirt on backward?” His head tilts to the side. “And inside out?”

“Um.” I peer down, distracted from the letters haunting my laptop and head. And sure enough, my chin runs right into the

back of the collar of my pullover blouse. How did I not notice that?

And—yep, inside out too.

“I was in a hurry.”

Owen chuckles. “You can use my room to change.”

I hurry up the stairs and into Owen’s room. It’s dim—lighting is on his long list of to-dos. But I like the space. The ceiling is slanted, and there are exposed wooden beams lining it. When he does get the time to finish them, they’re going to be gorgeous. Books are stacked next to his bed, with another pile on top of his desk. It isn’t a tidy space, but it isn’t messy either. It’s all Owen. The pine and musk of his soap and aftershave are strongest here. It’s like the room is hugging me, giving me a big, fresh breath of Owen. Someone could carry me into this room blindfolded, and I would know where I am.

I peel off my shirt, flip it around, and put it back on—a navy silk blouse with a winged collar. I should have realized it was inside out, at the very least backward. No wonder Levi snickered at me on the way out.

There’s a full-length mirror in Owen’s closet, and now that we’re here, together, I don’t feel the urgency I did before. I take a second and peer at myself, head to toe. Navy blouse, black jeans, black heels. My red hair is straight and shiny. My freckled face stares back at me.

I’m a good human. I try to be.

Why is love so hard for some people? People like me.

Mom and Dad fit together like etched-out, personalized puzzle pieces. Kayla and Tim, while they disagree on many things, they also adore each other.

Of course women like Owen. Who wouldn’t? But he doesn’t try very hard.

So, what about me? I deserve someone, don’t I? Surely, someone in the world might think they could love me.

*Stupid Maddox Powell.*

And Owen made that man a pie.

Maybe it's not that I'm unlovable. Maybe I just like being alone.

I swallow. I stare. I think.

Yeah... that's not it.

But James Buttman wasn't right. Telling myself anything else would be a lie.

I blink down at my bow and arrow.

I tell Owen he's worth it every day. He is good and true and, oh so endearing. Why is it so easy to believe about him? But not about myself?

A relationship like Mom's, like Kayla's, is hard. But it's worth it too. Isn't it? Is it worth the risk of obliterating rejection?

There's a tap on the door, then Owen lets himself in. "Hey," he says.

"No warning, huh? You just walk right in. What if I'd been naked?" I plant one hand on my hip and give him a teasing glare.

"Naked? Why in the world would you be naked?"

"I don't know. But I could be."

He steps closer, standing in front of the mirror with me. He looks good in his dark jeans and gray button-up shirt. He drapes one arm around my shoulders. "What are you really doing?"

My mouth opens and—it's Owen—honesty just tumbles out. "I'm staring at myself in the mirror wondering if anyone could ever find me lovable."

He turns his entire body so that he's facing me while I still face myself in the glass. "Are you serious?"

I pinch my lips and blot my red gloss together. "Well. Yeah. We both know I'm not the greatest at keeping a boyfriend and—"

“And why should you be—when all of those guys were wrong for you?”

I hate how much hope his words give me. I’m supposed to be the one full of advice. I’ve never told Owen about Maddox and how one conversation destroyed my relationship confidence. He was the one guy I dated that Owen became friends with—so I kept my mouth shut. On Maddox’s twentieth birthday, all he wanted was this chocolate pie his mom used to make. So, my sweet Owen made him one.

“You think?” I say, and my throat tightens, but I need to hear him say it again.

Owen moves in front of me, one hand coming up to cup my cheek and ear. “I *know*.”

I close my eyes in a long, drawn-out blink.

“I do,” he says, hearing the doubts I haven’t voiced. “You’re smart and funny. You’re generous and loving.”

His breath warms my cheek with each word he speaks.

“You’re drop-dead gorgeous,” he whispers—as if this were a secret.

I open and roll my eyes at him—I can’t help it.

“Oh, yeah.” He nods. “Like crazy, *crazy* beautiful.”

A blush runs up the length of my neck and warms my cheeks. I swallow, and I mean to say something witty—like, *you have to say that, you’re my best friend*. But his eyes are so intense. His thumb tracks back and forth over the apple of my cheek.

“I’ve never met another woman as smart or as striking as Annie Archer.” His free hand wraps around my back, and I think for a minute he’s pulling me in for a hug to end this silly conversation. But he pauses with our bodies just centimeters apart. “Your eyes,” he whispers. “Deep as coffee beans dug from the ground. Your nose”—his finger trails between my eyes to the tip of my nose, sending small jolts of electricity through my limbs—“cute as a button. Your lips,” he says, and his eyes drop to my mouth. His thumb traces along the bottom

edge of my lip and strange, foreign sparks ignite throughout my body.

*Owen.*

My fingers, with a mind of their own, trail up to cup around his neck, pulling him another centimeter closer. I reach up—not thinking about what I’m doing or what it might cost me. All I know is I want to be worthy of loving someone as good as Owen. And I want all the beautiful things he’s said to be real. For *this* to be real.

Owen Bailey’s lips are a mere inch from mine. His words and forty-two letters tell me it would be so easy to close that minuscule gap...

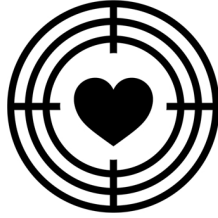
All at once, there’s a horn sounding and buzzing from my pocket. I jerk away, putting space between us.

The alarm I set in my phone—if this alarm is ringing, I know we’re already late for our double date.

But it does its job. It informs me of where I’m not. And knocks me back into reality.

I drop my forehead to Owen’s chest and sigh. “Owen.” I moan without bothering to look at him. “I’m sorry. I got wrapped up in what you were saying and these letters from work. And—*ugh*. I’m sorry.” I muster my bravery and peer up at him. “Forgive me?”

## O W E N



I can't stop bouncing my knee. I'm sitting next to DJ—but across from Annie. And I can't stop looking at Annie. She almost kissed me tonight. *SHE* almost kissed me.

No offense to the nice woman next to me, but I'm not interested. I need to revisit what happened forty minutes ago—before Annie apologized and promised me it would never ever happen again.

And I definitely need the character sitting next to her, his arm brushing hers, to back off.

“Your job is so interesting,” DJ says to Annie. “How do you get to all those letters?”

Annie clears her throat like she'd rather not talk about this. No one else would notice, but I know Annie. I also know that Annie loves her job, and she has no qualms sharing about it.

“I have some help, and we only print a fraction of them,” she says, a small twitch in her eye.

Levi's letter.

Meredith's letter.

Coco's letter.

And the rest of my family. Annie has read their letters. Six letters talking about *me*. She's read them, and they are making her stir in her seat. Are they also what made her think—even for two seconds—about kissing me?



“I love what you do,” says Adam, a friend of Annie’s from the office who was more than happy to help her out. *Yep, I don’t like him.* “It’s fascinating. And she really studies up on the topics she’s asked about.”

*Hey*, that’s my line. I’m the one who offers her praise and support and knows the ins and outs of Annie’s brain and work. *Me.*

“What is the craziest letter you’ve ever gotten?” DJ leans in, her blue eyes bright on my friend.

“Um.” She swallows, and her eyes fall on *me*.

She’s thinking of a crazy letter—and *I’m* what comes to mind?

“I had this one lady—Matchmaking in May—she asked me how to go about setting her dog up with another dog.”

DJ points at her. “I read that. You printed that one, right?”

Annie snickers, and a bit of her uneasy ice melts away. “My editor chose that one. I did so much research on breeding vs animals finding a mate. It was interesting.”

“It was!” DJ laughs. Then she reaches out and pats my upper chest—right over the ink that has marked me as Annie’s. “Well, I was pleased as punch when you picked me out of your magic hat for this date. When you read that letter asking, ‘*Why don’t you just go out with Owen yourself?*’, ignore it. It was from me, before you picked me to be his date!” She balks out a loud laugh once more.

But I am stunned. Did she really do that? Along with my brothers, sister, and mother?

Annie titters out a nervous giggle—one that isn’t natural for her.

And I can’t let the moment pass. I shift, looking at DJ for the first time all night. “Did you really send in a letter like that?”

She huffs a breathy laugh. “I did. She just kept writing all these lovely things about you, and I was curious.” She lifts one shoulder. “So, Owen, you’re a teacher?”

“You didn’t tell me about a letter asking about the two of us,” I say, looking over at Annie. DJ has given me a gift all wrapped up with a bright red bow and she doesn’t even realize it.

Annie swallows. “I don’t tell you about all of my letters.”

“But...” I droll out. “You *do*. I mean, most of them. And this one was about me. And you.”

Annie’s eyes blink, her lashes fluttering inadvertently. She peeks at Adam, then back to me. “Ah, well, I just read it.”

“Oh, I wrote that two weeks ago,” DJ says.

“Yes, well, it takes time to go through all the letters.” Annie’s words are clipped, and her neck stiff.

“My friend Bev wrote one too. She’s your biggest fan.” DJ beams. “She knew you were single and—”

“Bev wrote one too?” I say, then turn my attention back to Annie. “How many letters about the two of us did you get?” My heart is racing, thundering in my chest. I am trying to keep cool—but apparently, my students and family aren’t the only people to wonder what I’ve been wondering my entire life: *Why aren’t Annie and I together?*

“O,” Annie says, her tone almost scolding. “You’re being rude. DJ asked about your job and”—she dips her head, eyeing me—“you told me you have some questions for her too.”

I don’t say anything. I just look at her, waiting for an answer to my question.

Annie is a jittery mess. My family aren’t the only people who asked her about us. I can’t look away. I have no words.

In my peripheral, I see DJ wrinkle her nose. She whispers, though we can all hear what she says. “I think he’s wait’n for you to answer his question first. How many letters?”

Adam, DJ, and I stare at her. All of us waiting for an answer.

Pink floods Annie’s cheeks and neck as she glances from one face to the next. “I—I’m gonna use the restroom,” she

says, pushing out from beneath the table. She stands quick and clumsy, and her chair goes spilling backward, crashing to the ground until everyone in the restaurant is looking at her. “I have to go. I just—um, small bladder.” She tosses her hands up, huffs out a series of breaths, and leaves with her chair still on the ground.

## ANNIE



I've got a hand on the bathroom door—the one-stall, unisex door. I have no desire to be in a big bathroom with ten other women while I hyperventilate. But a hand on my wrists stops me.

*Owen.*

He's worried. He's kind. He just wants to make sure I'm okay.

But the words that leave his mouth aren't what I expect. "How many letters, Annie?"

I flick my gaze upward and open the bathroom door, stepping inside and leaving Owen behind me. I just need to catch my breath. I just need to pause. It's fine. I'm fine. I went through some inner turmoil today—turmoil that made me almost do something idiotic—like kiss my best friend.

All I've done is confuse us both. He just needs reassurance that I'm not going to go insane and make a pass at him. But I can't give reassurance in this second. I can't. I just need to breathe.

And then the bathroom door, the one that I neglected to lock, opens right up.

Owen dips inside, shuts it behind him, and locks the door.

"How many, Annie?"

I back up until my hip hits the porcelain sink. "What does it matter?" I try to act cool. "Believe me, I am not going to try and kiss you again. I lost my mind for a minute and—"

He steps closer, and this little room turns into a sauna.  
“How many?”

I grind my teeth. “Owen,” I say, but I have nothing. Nothing but the truth and silence. I choose silence. What will telling him help?

“More than ten?”

My neck cricks. I clamp my teeth down on my bottom lip and peer up at him. Then, I nod.

“More than twenty?” he asks, his brows pinching.

“More than twenty, less than a hundred. Okay?” I blow out a breath and muster my courage. I don’t cower in the corner. I never have.

Reaching past Owen, I breathe in the musk and pine from his body, unlatch the door, and tug it open, holding it for him to exit.

“I’m not losing it,” I tell him. “It’s not a big deal. Go ask your meaningful questions and let me pee.” When he doesn’t move, I shove him out of the room.

At the end of the longest forty-minute dinner of my life, I offer Owen up for taking DJ home and I make some lame excuse about having to babysit for my sister.

I catch an Uber out of there with barely a goodbye to Owen or my date. I end up in Post Falls, at my sister’s house. I’m not sure if I go so that I’m not completely lying to Owen or if I go to spill my guts to Kayla. Either way, I’m here.

I knock on the locked door, wishing I’d brought the spare key Kayla gave me and I could just slip right inside, undetected. Instead, I lean my forehead against the front door and wait...

Almost falling on my face with the opening of the door, I trip one step forward and peer up into the face of my brother-in-law.

“Annie?”

“I need darkness and alcohol, please.”

“Ahh...” Tim steps aside and allows me into the house. “Steve’s room is open. He and Kayla ran to the store to pick out a birthday gift for his friend.”

Perfect. There’s my dark room. “Alcohol,” I repeat, walking past him.

Tim hums, a motory sound from his throat. “Kayla got rid of all the wine bottles once Bucky made it his mission to open every closed bottle in the house. Sorry.”

I trudge past him and find my nephew’s room littered with dangerous things like Legos and plastic dinosaurs. I push my way through, not bothering to turn on a light, kick off my heels, and plop onto Steve’s bed.

A minute later, the door to Steve’s room creaks open. “I brought you some lemonade. There’s no liquor in it, but it’s strong.”

“Tim,” I say, “is Kayla your friend?”

“Um—she’s my, well, she’s my wife. But—”

“But is she also your friend? You know, like you enjoy hanging out with her?”

My incredibly uncomfortable brother-in-law clears his throat and inches toward the door. “Yes. Kayla is my friend. Is this about me taking Jerry to the game instead of her? She said she didn’t want to go.”

“Go away, Tim.”

“You bet,” he says, escaping into the hall as fast as humanly possible.

I have assured Owen that I won’t try to kiss him again—that it was some spastic, crazy thing that never should have happened. I tried not to make the letters awkward for him—though he kept making them pretty awkward for me!

I’ve done all I can. I’ve made sure my best friend knows we’re good. We’re right where we’ve always been. Right where we belong.

So, why can't I stop thinking about those letters, or about an appropriate response to them, or about that *almost* kiss?

That almost kiss might haunt me until the day I die. It's like a time machine threw me all the way back to sophomore year when I had a not-so-teensy crush on Owen. But then, I smartened up. I knew I could never ever lose Owen to a crush. He was too important. Too special. Too precious of a commodity to throw around like one of my many boyfriends.

I was right. I can't ever *ever* lose Owen.

## ANNIE



*I*wake to a comforting tickle at my feet. There's pressure on my left heel and a light softness on my right pad.

Am I getting a foot massage and didn't realize it?

Wait. Where am I?

"That's *my* foot, Steve."

There's a tug on my right foot—it's not painful, just possessive.

I open one eye to see my nephews at my feet. Steve at my left and Buck at my right. I lift up onto my elbows and blink. When did I fall asleep?

"Hey guys," I say and my voice sounds groggy. Where's that lemonade Tim brought me?

Steve yelps and frantically hides his hands behind his back. Buck is currently cleaning between my toes with a baby wipe. The softness I felt earlier.

"Uhhh, you giving Auntie Annie's toes a rub down?"

Buck nods and continues his work. I flop back onto my back and stare at the ceiling in little Steve's room—that is where I ended up, right? What time is it anyway? How long have I been in here?

I peek at my nephews again. Steve is still standing like a frozen statue, hands behind his back, eyes unblinking.



“It’s okay, Steve. You can keep on... whatever it is you were doing.” I love my nephews, even if they are a little wack-a-do at times. You would never have caught me anywhere near Aunt Babs’ feet. I shiver at the thought. But I’m sort of enjoying my little foot rub.

“Boys,” my sister says. “Did you wake up Annie?”

“Nah. We’re helping,” Buck says.

I blink my eyes open to see Kayla’s hand fly to her hip. “Steve, what are you doing?”

“She said I could!”

I sigh. “It’s true. I did.”

“You’re all loons. You know that?” She sits on the bed beside me. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Kayla, what’s wrong with me?”

“Other than the fact that you are in a deep, deep hole of denial, nothing.”

“Denial?” But I’m not. “I need to tell you something.” I dart my eyes to the tops of my nephews’ heads. “Alone.”

“Boys, take your wipes and your markers and go play in the other room, okay?”

“But this is my w-oom,” Steve says with a very six-year-old moan.

“Go,” demands my sister. “Give us ten minutes.”

It isn’t until my nephews have trudged out of the room and shut the door behind them that Kayla’s words register.

“Markers?” I say, sitting up on both elbows now. I strain my neck and take a better look at my feet. My right is as clean as a baby’s bottom. And my left—well, it’s a rainbow of color, clear to my ankle. Steve wasn’t washing my foot. He was coloring it with marker.

“It’s permanent.” She gives me a tight-lipped grin. “You had no idea, did you?”

My mouth drops open, and a small squeak escapes. “Nuh-uh.” I flop flat onto the bed. A speck of sun streams through the window, hitting me in the eye. “It’s daytime?”

“Yes, sunshine. You slept on Stevie’s bed all night long. Now, tell me about the date.”

“Ughhhh.” I groan. “It was a train wreck.”

“Talk, girl.” Kayla shakes my shoulder. “Come on, Annie. How am I supposed to live through you if you don’t give me every little detail?”

“Live through me? Why would you ever want to? You have Tim—who claims you as his best friend, by the way.”

“Of course he does. And I wouldn’t give up Tim for all the Chris Hemsworths in the world. But for ten minutes... to live the single life again. Yeah, I’d do that.”

I blink up at her.

“Don’t look at me like that. It’s not the single part that’s appealing, it’s the no responsibilities that gets me.”

“Hey, I have responsibilities. Ones I am pretty sure I’m slacking on right now. What time is it?”

“Nope. Spill your single beans, and then we’ll talk time. Start at the beginning.” She smacks my arm until I push myself up into a sitting position.

“Well.” I blow out a tired breath. “I told you about the letters.”

“Yes, all very wise people. Telling you the same thing that I have been for years.” She rolls her hands, motioning for me to keep going.

“Well, they were all just stuck in my head. And then I got to Owen’s, and I asked him about me being worthy of anyone. I mean, if I’m not worthy of Owen, am I really worthy of anyone that I’d actually want to be with?”

“Hey, hey,” she says, one of her hands picking up mine. “Who says you aren’t worthy of Owen?”

“No one.” I shake my head. “Me. I don’t know.”

“Keep going,” she says, but her brows are cinched in that motherly worrisome way they get.

“And then he...” I shut my eyes. “He just started saying all these nice things about me. But you know O—he could find kind things to say about a hog. And—” I swallow. “I might have tried to kiss him.”

“Might? Or did?”

I cover my eyes with my hand, making a slit between my pointer and middle finger to peek through. “Did, but we didn’t. Thank goodness my phone alarm went off and I caught myself. I don’t know what I was thinking or—”

“Annie,” Kayla says, tapping my arm. “What did Owen do?”

My mumbling, stressing, anxiety pauses with the question. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, *what did Owen do?* Did he lean in to kiss you back or pull away like you were crazy?”

I bite my bottom lip, my eyes circling the space around me. I haven’t thought about what Owen did. He didn’t pull away. But did he lean in? I’m not sure.

“Annie!” Kayla shoves me again.

“I don’t know! He didn’t pull away. But he didn’t lean in either.”

My sister stares down at me like some grand revelation has been revealed to the both of us. But I don’t see anything. No inklings are happening over here.

“What does that tell you?” Kayla says.

“That I shocked him. That he didn’t know what was happening. That he thought I was kidding around.” I shrug, my shoulders practically knocking myself in the ears.

“Was he laughing?”

Laughing?

No. No, he was not.

## ANNIE



My fourth article dedicated to The ONE Experiment is a little trickier. I'd meant to write about the importance of comfort, but I'd made everything uncomfortable. Had I just laughed off the letters I received, I would have been able to keep the evening progressing. But I hadn't. I'd gone defensive and confused, and I ruined Owen's date.

DJ wasn't right for him anyhow. I'm pretty sure I heard her and Adam make plans for next weekend. At least someone made a love connection.

I write a short article discussing the importance of comfort for a connection. I talk about doubling and how that can help. And then I bring in a few facts—not feelings—of how we prepared for that type of environment on this last date.

It's a stretch, but at least when DJ reads it right next to her best friend Bev, they won't be able to call me a liar.

And then, I tackle the really difficult job: I answer one of the letters asking about why Owen and I aren't dating. *Ughhhhh.*

People are so nosey.

I guess nosey people sort of keep me in business. My readers like to hear others' problems and how I've suggested they handle them. Sometimes it's because they want help themselves and sometimes they're just *nosey*.

**Dear Wondering on Wayland Street,**

**You ask a great question.**

More like a super annoying question that I'd sort of like to respond with—*none of your beeswax*.

**O and I have never had that kind of relationship. Yes—you should like spending time with your significant other. Yes—you should be friends. Yes—there should be attraction. (This, by the way, doesn't mean I don't believe my friend to be attractive. I just don't look at him with those intentions.)**

Kayla's voice sings in my head: *Liar, liar, pants on fire*.

But I channel my bow and arrow and press on because what in the world does Kayla know? She isn't the advice columnist! I'm the professional, even if I'd like to tell Mr. Wondering, and a few dozen more, to stay out of it.

**But there also has to be *intention*. I like spending time with my friend, and if I choose to think about it—sure, he's easy on the eyes, but that's not my intention with O. It never has been, and it never will be. We're just friends.**

**Thanks for asking about me.**

**Rest assured, I'm good.**

**Sincerely,**

**Ask Annie**

I don't even reread the message, I just send it over to my editor with the article and a dozen more questions answered.

I don't usually work on Sundays—it's a me day. But I need to be able to walk into work Monday morning and know that this is resolved. I've answered the question. I'm done with it. Now, let's move on to more interesting questions, like this

one: *My boyfriend moved in and now he treats me like I'm his mother. How do I make it stop?*



Margo taps a pen to the tune of jingle bells at the side of her computer. She's staring at the screen, rereading my last article. She peers up and over her red-rimmed glasses. "It's good. Not great, but good."

I swallow. I knew it wasn't great. It was survival writing, not award-winning writing.

"But you know what I'm loving? These questions about you and Owen. People are so interested. Your answer intrigued me too. Sid wants you on his YouTube channel, and I'm all for it."

"Um. Okay." I've done Sid's channel before. That's nothing new... but she's loving the questions about me and Owen? I'm trying to bypass them as quickly as possible.

"Yes, and bring Owen. People will love the two of you together! We're going to double our readership. Add your relationship to the podcast too. Less grocery list details and more steamy details."

"Steamy? There is no steam. And wait. Bring Owen? To Sid's? He... he works, and he's remodeling his house. And he's always gardening or volunteering. I don't—"

My editor's eyes don't waver from my face. Her smile never shrinks. "Figure it out. He surely isn't *always* volunteering." One of Margo's dark, manicured brows rises. "He needs to be there."

I nod once and start for the door.

Ugh. Owen is going to hate this.

"Annie," Margo says, and I pause.

"Is your—" Her brows furrow. "Do you have a rainbow on your foot?"

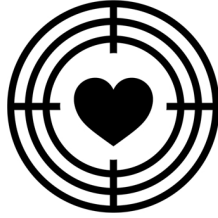
“Oh.” I peer down. I should have worn socks and tennis shoes rather than heels. I scrubbed my dumb foot in the tub for an hour—until the water turned every possible color and eventually black. I feared if I didn’t get out soon, my entire body would end up tinted blue. “Um, yes. My nephew—”

She shakes her head, cutting me off. “I don’t need to know.”

“Right. I’m going—”

“Call Sid.”

## O W E N



All eyes in this room seem to trail back to me. Mom is busy cooking. Coco's feeding her baby. Meredith and Levi are talking at the table. Miles and Coop scroll through their phones, showing one another whatever it is they've found. Jude and Alice sit at the table, a coloring book opened in front of them. But everyone's eyes end up on me.

I'm attempting to help Mom with dinner. She doesn't need it. But I can stand here, pretend to help, pretend I don't see the glances coming my way, or I can go hide in my old bedroom—the one Miles and I shared for years.

I offer to transfer Mom's dishes from the busy kitchen to the currently empty dining room. Maybe then, I'll be able to breathe. I'm assuming everyone read Annie's letter reply. They read those fatal words: *It never has been, and it never will be.*

And no one knows what to say to me.

I don't blame them. I don't know what to say to me. I've been serving, complimenting, and touching her like crazy. And I thought it was working. Annie almost kissed me. Her idea. Not mine—and yet always mine.

I linger in the dining room for a minute, maybe more. The salad is on the table, and I just stand there. Breathing. When I head back into the kitchen, the chatter comes to an abrupt halt. Well, that's one way to know your entire family is talking about you.



I'm tempted to pull Alice to the side. She'd tell me what was being said.

Instead, I snag the next bowl Mom has ready to go and charge it into the dining room. Next, I grab dishes and set the table, always ignoring the hush that comes over the room when I enter.

After two more trips, I decide I can't go back into that room. I'll just wait for everyone here. I sit down at the table and stare into the clear crystal salad bowl.

There's a tug on my shirt sleeve. "Uncle Owen?" Alice says.

"Oh, hey." I blink away from the apparently mesmerizing salad bowl to look at my niece.

"I just want you to know that even if Annie doesn't love you, I do." She pats a hand to my cheek and reaches on tiptoes to kiss my nose.

"Well, thanks."

"I always thought boys were the dumbest, but I guess it depends. Sometimes it's the girls who are the dumbest."

"Annie isn't dumb, sweetie. And she does love me."

Her lips screw up into a fat purse and twist to the side. "I think you have been given some wrong information."

"Thanks, Alice." I swallow and turn back to my salad bowl—it's more soothing than the affirmation from a seven-year-old that I'm in an unrequited love story.

My family files into the room, quieter than normal. I know they've been talking. We might as well have it out.

"Okay—say what you want to say," I tell them. "I know you all read Annie's letters and article today and you've got some opinion on the matter."

"No opinion, sweetheart," Mom says. "I'm just sorry Annie doesn't think about you that way."

"Doesn't she, though?" Coco says, and by the throaty growl escaping Levi's throat, I know this isn't the first time

she's suggested this.

"Her letter said—" Levi starts.

"Her letter is for every eye in the northwestern United States. Maybe she doesn't want them all prying in on her personal feelings." Coco stabs a slice of ham with her fork.

"He needs to move on," Levi says.

"Maybe Levi's right," Miles says. Miles—even Miles agrees with Levi? I expected something like that from Cooper, but Miles?

"But what if Coco's right?" Cooper says to Miles—making me feel like I have officially entered the Twilight Zone.

"How is he supposed to know?" Miles asks, his kind face downcast.

I sit and listen, wishing it were just me and my salad bowl again.

Alice raises her little hand in the air as if she were in school. "Why would she write *never* if she didn't mean never? That doesn't make any sense at all." And maybe she's right. *Honest and true*—it's Annie's motto.

"Alice," her dad hushes her. "This is a grown-up conversation."

"Then why are they doing it with me and Lulabelle here? If you do not want my opinion, sir, then you shouldn't ask."

"Okay. Okay," Mom says, waving her hands. She's been wrangling four rowdy boys for years now. She's got this. "That's enough. If Owen wants your opinion, he will ask. Otherwise, you need to discuss something else."

My family goes quiet as if there is absolutely nothing left in the world to talk about.

"Well, who are you gonna ask?" Alice says, not afraid to hide that she is looking right at me.

I clear my throat, knowing how persistent Alice can be. "Sure." Let's get this over with. "Well, I suppose Meredith is the only one who didn't get to voice her thoughts."

“But I’ve got real good ideas!” Alice croons.

“Alice, sweetie, eat your mac n’ cheese.” Jude taps the side of her plate, only to get the sourest seven-year-old glare I’ve ever seen.

Meredith nibbles on her bottom lip. “I do have a thought.”

Levi runs a hand over the stubble of his chin, leading me to believe he knows exactly what her thought is and he doesn’t agree.

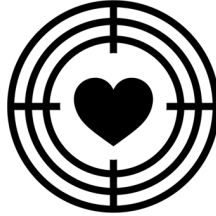
Which only makes me want to hear it.

“I don’t think she would have tried to kiss you—even accidentally—if there were zero feelings there. I think it’s time.”

I swallow, staring at my one-day sister-in-law like she is the only person in the room.

“Owen Bailey, it’s time to speak your truth.”

## O W E N



I've never had so much peace come over me—not like I did when Meredith said those words. *It's time.*

And I don't care what anyone says—I won't allow Annie to be done with me. Sure, confessing may make things awkward and difficult at first. But the warmth that washed over me when Meredith gave me that advice helped me realize that even if she never feels the same way, I need to do this.

For her.

For myself.

And if I have to—if she never reciprocates—I'll fight for normal and friendship until we are us again.

I can't keep living this insanity.

It isn't working.

I pull up Annie's email to Ready in Red once more and read over the advice she gave to him. To me.

I've complimented, I've touched her, I've made eye contact. I've served her. Things I've *always* done, just at a higher level, with different intentions.

Then, I read her last piece of advice.

It's something I have *never* done.

**Make some big grand confession  
somewhere she can't ignore you or run  
from you.**

“You are the one who suggested it,” I say to Annie—though she isn’t here to defend herself. I’m merely talking to myself.

My phone rings from my pocket, and I pull it out to see Annie’s still form smiling back at me, her name in a banner across her forehead. She’s calling. We’re meeting in fifteen minutes, but she’s calling.

“Annie?”

“Hey,” she says. “I’m walking into Sid’s recording room now. Do you need directions?”

“Nah. I have the address.” I swallow past my sandpaper tongue.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this, Owen? I’m sorry my editor pushed so hard. I can call her back and—”

“No,” I say, meaning it. “I’m okay with it. I want to do this.” And I do. This may be the first part of this experiment that I’m all in for. “I’m on my way.”



Where Annie would normally give me a quick hug hello, today she just waves three feet from me. It’s been this way ever since she tried to kiss me almost a week ago.

“This way,” she says, walking down a dead hallway. There’s no life in this office building.

“Annie.” I reach out for her, snatching hold of her long fingers. “Are you okay?”

She gives me a soft smile, a warm and gentle glow in her eyes and cheeks. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

“You are?”

She nods, but I don’t let her turn away. If she’s truly okay. If we’re going with “normal,” then I’m going to act how I normally would. I pull her close and wrap my arms around her back, hugging her tight.

She pulls in a breath and releases it into my chest.

I don't pull back. I'm in no hurry. With her head pressed to my chest, she sighs. "You have a way of making everything better. You always have."

I trace my fingers down the length of her hair and between her shoulder blades. "I do?"

"Yes. You do. It's your superpower. That, and always being happy. You are my personal sunshine." She chuckles a little before pulling back and peering at me. "That's why I stole you from Kelsey Martinez and claimed you for my best friend way back in third grade. Because you may be the sweetest. But I'm the smartest."

"Kelsey who?"

"You don't remember Kelsey Martinez? She wore yellow leggings every single day. They must have been her mom's because they were long out of style. And when she told me that she was going to make you hers. I told her that you were already mine."

My brows draw upward—I've never heard this story, but I must say it buoys my confidence.

I'm still staring at Annie—in wonder, pondering if I should just confess all my secrets here and now—when a gray-haired man in brown shorts, pink crocs, and a button-up Hawaiian shirt pokes his head from a doorway down the hall.

"Annie?"

"Yeah, Sid." Annie drops my hand with the greeting. "We're coming."

I study Annie as she goes—tight jeans, high heels, blue blazer with a three-quarter sleeve. My insides stir watching her walk away. I know—we are meant to be so much more.

And I'm about to tell her as much.

One grand gesture—one she can't ignore—coming right up.

## ANNIE



Three of us sit in a lineup, with Sid's camera pointing our direction. I'm in the middle, with Owen on my left and Sid on my right. I'm praying that Sid doesn't say or do anything to make Owen uncomfortable. He can be a bit forward at times, and Owen doesn't need that.

He's not exactly looking to stand out. He's doing this for me. I hope Sid doesn't make him regret it.

"We go live in sixty seconds," Sid says.

I swivel on my stool to glare at Sid, ready to protect Owen from my YouTubing news friend. "Wait, *live*? I thought we were recording, you'd edit, and then post later. Owen didn't agree to *live*. He—"

"It's fine," Owen says, stank face and nodding.

Sid raises both brows, unperturbed. "Margo wanted live."

"It's fine?" I can't imagine Owen really being okay with this. His students will see it. His coworkers. Possibly school board members and parents... If either of us says something regretful on a prerecorded video, Sid could edit it out. But he won't be able to stop anyone from seeing or hearing something *live*. Owen must not understand. "He won't be able to edit, you know, in case—"

"Annie," Owen says, his hand on my knee. "It's fine. I know what it means, and I'm okay with a live interview."

"He seems fine," Sid says from my other side.

“Yes,” I say, but I can’t help clenching my teeth with the word. “I suppose he does.”

Sid starts the show with his little jingle and tagline—which I am frankly too amped-up to hear. But I pull myself together for introductions.

For a *live* audience.

“You all know our renowned Ask Annie,” Sid says, motioning to me.

I plaster on a smile and wave.

Sid peeks around me at Owen. “But let’s be honest, this man is why you’re all here. You’ve been following his dating life. You’ve been asking questions. Maybe you’ve even submitted a form, requesting a date from our own Ask Annie’s best friend. It’s Owen Bailey. He’s here, live and in person, to chat with us.”

Sid holds a hand out toward Owen.

“Hello, everyone,” Owen says with a smile. He’s so adorably awkward and photogenic—somehow all at the same time.

And with Owen’s simple hello, a dozen comments pop up on the screen. I purposely ignore them all. They’ll only be a distraction.

“Let’s get to it. Annie, what gave you the idea for this series of articles you’re writing? You’re calling it The ONE Experiment, correct?”

“That’s right,” I say, forcing a chipper tone to leave my mouth. “Like all of my best ideas, this one was inspired by a reader’s question. Sad in Sandpoint asked a question we’d all like the answer to: How do you know when you’ve found “the one?” It made me think about the advice that I give every day. And how that advice helps people find someone to truly connect with and love.”

“And Owen, you were a willing participant.”

“Uh, well,” Owen says, with the smallest of chuckles. “Sort of.”



Sid's mouth stretches into a grin. "Needed a little persuasion, did ya?"

I splay my fingers on the table and look at Owen. "No. Not really. I asked and Owen agreed."

Owen tilts his head. "That's mostly true, Sid."

Sid laughs again. And I feel a small burning flame light in my chest. *Mostly true?* *It is true...* isn't it?

Owen sighs and peers at me like he's seeing me for the very first time. "I have a hard time saying no to her."

Oh. My. Gosh. Is he *trying* to discredit everything I do?

"She asked and I agreed. But I have to admit—since we're live and all—I was hesitant."

I give Owen a small glare, then school my expression, realizing everyone watching sees it too. Still—*since we're live??* Wouldn't that bit of information actually be better confessed in private? Would anyone see if I accidentally kicked him beneath this table?

Owen continues, oblivious to the fact that I'm having an inner mental breakdown over here. "Her advice is spot on, though. She knows what she's talking about. I've been out with a few women now, and in some shape or form, I've made a connection. Had they been the right girl for me, Annie's sound advice would have brought that fact to the forefront."

Okay... he's forgiven. My heart, thundering in my ears, seems to quiet.

"So, you're still on the lookout for the *one*." Sid's chest rumbles, and he points a finger from Owen to me. "Let's talk about the letters that ask about both Owen and Annie."

That Margo is a snitch!

"We've learned you've had a hoard of mail asking why you aren't dating Owen for yourself, Annie. You're single—right?"

I grit my teeth and bare them in a grin. "I *am* single. Thanks for reminding me. Yes, we have received a few—"

“Quite a few letters, if I heard correctly.”

I clear my throat, skimming my gaze past Owen to Sid. “Yes,” I say. Maybe I’ll kick Sid instead of Owen. “We’ve had some mail about Owen and me. But I’ve answered that question. If you need it again, go read my column.” I laugh like I am the funniest, most clever woman alive. Rather than what I am—a big, fat chicken.

“Owen, can you tell us what piece of advice from Annie felt the most compelling?” *Hallelujah*, Sid can take a hint.

“Actually, can we go back to that last question?” Owen asks. He peers at Sid with a calmness I never thought I’d see—not with a live camera pointed at his head.

“Ah—” Sid squints.

“I realize Annie’s answered the question about us, but I haven’t.”

I press my lips together, nerves bouncing around inside of me. But maybe this will be good. Maybe if readers hear Owen explain that we’re just friends, they’ll stop emailing me. That folder has more letters than any other; the pile keeps growing, and I’ve been avoiding it like the plague. I’ve answered that question—therefore, I do not need to read all those new letters.

“By all means, enlighten us.” Sid nods at Owen.

“Ah,” Owen says, blinking, “that other question too.”

“You’ve got the floor, man,” Sid says, and he looks thoroughly amused. Apparently, Owen is making this live worth it.

“Owen?” I whisper, but he keeps his focus on Sid.

“You asked if I was a willing participant—I said I was hesitant. To be clear, not because of Annie’s advice, but I was indeed hesitant.” Owen clears his throat—but he isn’t nervous—he’s the coolest cucumber down the produce aisle. “You also said I was still looking for my one right person. That’s incorrect though.”

“O?” My brows pull together—I am utterly confused and sooo tempted to hit the END STREAM button on Sid’s iPad. Owen does not have a secret girlfriend. He doesn’t. I would know if he did. I’d know!

*Holy crap*—what if Owen has a secret girlfriend??

“Set us straight, man.” Sid crosses his arms, leaning into the tabletop, his eyes glued to Owen.

“The fact is—all those emails asking why Annie and I aren’t dating, well, I’ve been asking myself the same thing.”

“Wait. What?” Confused. My brain does not compute.

“She’s my one, Sid.” Owen’s glassy blue eyes find mine—they smolder, they burn, they could light this room up. “I’m in love with Annie Archer. And I have been for the majority of my life.”

I stare at Owen, not able to blink. Not able to think. “Holy —”

“Whoa—family show,” Sid spouts, cutting me off.

“Annie.” Owen turns his whole body toward me, and if I could talk, I’d have a whole lot to say.

“When Ready in Red emailed you and asked for specifics on what he should do to show his best friend he loved her, you gave great tips.”

I did. I gave him some tried-and-true suggestions—privately. Not in a column, but in an email.

“And I took every one of your suggestions.”

How does Owen even—and then the light bulb turns on. “You’re Ready in Red.”

He nods, then reaches out, picking up my hand and slipping his fingers through mine. “I am. And here’s my grand gesture, Annie. I love you. I always have, and I always will. So, maybe the next date you set me up on could be with you?” He grins like all of this is a game. “Just a thought.”

This time, I do curse—Sid is too slow to interrupt me. I tug my fingers from Owen’s and lunge for the iPad, smacking my

finger to END STREAM.

“Annie! In the middle of a show? *Dude.*”

“Sorry, Sid,” I bark, leaping from my swivel stool and charging for the hall.

“Annie,” Owen calls after me. “Annie, wait!”

The dim hallway has me squinting, and I slip in my heels on the tiled floor. My body jerks to a halt when Owen’s hand snatches hold of my arm.

“Annie, talk to me.”

“I—I—I don’t know what happened in there.” My phone buzzes in my pocket, and on instinct, I pull it out. Kayla is calling me. I hide the thing away. I can’t talk to her right now. I can’t talk to anyone.

“Then let me explain,” he says, his hands cupping my cheeks.

“This isn’t happening,” I chant. I can’t lose Owen—just like every other man I’ve dated. I can’t.

“This *is* happening,” he says, his tone low and earnest. “All because a girl with great advice told me that I might want to make a grand gesture.”

I flick my eyes up to his. “You did not do this because of my advice.”

“Annie, I did this because I love you, and it’s time I told you.”

“Owen.” I moan. Does he even know what he’s saying? What he’s doing? What he’s changing? We both know my history. I puff out a breath, my heart racing so fast it may drop dead altogether. I just need to cool down. I need to simmer things. I need some humor. “Owen, you can’t love me. Grammy already told me I have to leave you alone or marry you.”

The right side of his mouth quirks up in a grin. *A grin.* Not a laugh, not a scoff, not—*just kidding, Annie, GOTCHA.* But a sweet, sincere, tender smile takes over Owen’s face.

“Good night nurse, Owen!” I yell, pushing away from him and his embrace. “Don’t tell me you want to marry me! That’s insane!”

“But I do want to marry you. The only insane part of my life has been doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I thought if I could be the best friend ever—”

“You are!” My chest shudders with the words.

“Yes, but I thought one day you’d *see* how much I love you. For years, I’ve done the same thing again and again without anything changing. It’s time for me to speak up, to be honest. I love you, Annie.”

“*Please*, Owen.” My heels click on the hard ground as I walk toward him. I rest my forearms overtop of his, grasping onto him. “Please stop saying that.”

“Hey, guys. Killer show. I did not expect that kind of drama.” Sid exits his office and puffs out a breath like he’s been working out. He walks past us toward the exit, a lilt in each of his steps.

I stare up at Owen, and he stares back. I can see it in his eyes: he won’t be taking anything back.

## ANNIE



an we talk?” Owen follows me out to my Volkswagen.

“I need to think.” I rest my hand on Owen’s chest, keeping a foot of space between the two of us. Peering up, I meet the most earnest ocean-blue eyes I’ve ever seen. The chances of him coming out with a *GOTCHA* are not high. “I don’t want to hurt you, Owen.” And selfishly, I don’t want to be hurt. Men lose interest in me, at least romantically—this we know. I don’t want to lose him.

He’s changing everything.

“I don’t think you will.” He covers my fingers with his, keeping his body at a distance. He holds my hand with all the warmth and tenderness of a man actually and truly in love. Is that how he held my hand earlier today?

My head is a merry-go-round. I can’t think straight.

I swallow and remind him, “But that’s what I do. My own grammy has warned you to stay away from me.”

“I mean, there was another option.”

“Owen.” I shake my hand out of his and moan. “I have to go. I need a minute. Okay?”

“That’s fair,” he says, but I can already see the hurt on his face. It’s already happening. I’m already doing what I do best—next to giving great advice. I’m driving him away with all the charm and sincerity of an unlovable oaf.

I slip into my car and painfully take my eyes off his to start the engine. I’m ready to run from this parking lot, from this

whole situation.

My phone, sitting on the passenger seat, begins to jingle once more.

*Kayla.*

Whew. Thank the heavens above my grammy doesn't do YouTube.

I answer the call and listen to Kayla's voice ring through the speakers of my car.

I'm not sure what I expect—an *I told you so*. Or maybe something less mean but equally dramatic.

I don't say hello, and surprisingly, my sister isn't loud or crass.

"Annie," she says, her tone gentle, "are you okay, honey?"

"I—" There are tears on my cheeks. When did I start crying? "I'm not sure."

"Do you want to come over?"

Without even realizing it, I'm already on the highway for the twelve-minute drive to Post Falls. I'm headed to my sister's as we speak. "Yeah," I say, sounding so small, so futile.

Minutes later, I'm pulling up to Kayla's ranch-style home. I shift my car into park and stare. My phone jingles, and Margo's name drops down in a banner across the screen.

"No. No. No," I murmur. Margo will have listened to the show, and she'll be livid. I can hear her now. *Your article is a service to the community, it's not the dating game for personal use*. It'll be her way of reminding me that I am not Dr. Love. I can't ignore the call, though. She's my editor. She's the reason I have this job. And I need my job. I swat a stray tear from my cheek and pick up the phone, holding the device to my ear. "Hello?" I say, mustering all the courage and confidence I can find.

"Annie, your email is blowing up."

"My email?"

“Yes, since Sid’s livestream.”

“But we just aired,” I say. “We just—”

“Holy moly, girl.” She laughs, but before she can add the lecture, I interrupt her.

“I’m so sorry, Margo. I had no idea what Owen had planned. I’ll drop The ONE Experiment and get everything back on track. I promise. I’ll—”

“Drop the experiment? Absolutely not. Annie, we have doubled our online views for the week in the last thirty minutes alone. Your livestream is set to go viral. We’re rolling with this. You’re adding yourself to that experiment. Pronto.”

“Pronto? Wait.” I pull in a breath, trying not to hyperventilate. I put Margo on speaker and drop my phone into my lap, then grab the steering wheel with both hands, squeezing until my fingers are stark white, the tips pink and full of blood. “What do you mean rolling with this?”

“You and Owen. Together, you can try out all of your advice—firsthand is better anyway—and then report on it.”

My mouth has dropped, and a strange hum escapes it, but I’m not sure how to make it stop. I’m not even sure I’ll ever be able to close it up or speak again.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Margo says, ending the call for both of us.

Kayla stands on the sidewalk, a shawl draped around her shoulders, her head dipped so that she can see into the vehicle. Once I make eye contact, she walks around to my driver’s side door.

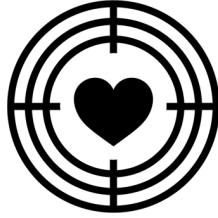
I open the door, and the cool evening air washes over my face—waking me up and reminding me that this isn’t a dream.

“That was my editor,” I say to Kayla—she was going to ask anyhow. My brows raise. “She *loved* the live stream. She can’t wait for Owen and me to practice all of my advice.” I swallow past the painful lump in my throat.



Kayla's eyes are slits; she doesn't know what to say any more than I know what I want to hear. She lets out the breath she's been holding and nods. "Come inside, sweetie."

## O W E N



*S*tand on Miles' doorstep. "Did you listen? Did you hear?"

His hazel eyes resemble UFO saucers at the moment—good reaction, right? "Uh, yep."

"How was it? Was it good? Was it romantic? How'd she sound?"

The saucers blink. "Ah...how did she sound to you?" Miles runs a hand through the curls of his short brown hair.

"Confused. Unsure." I puff out a breath. "Miles, did I screw everything up?" For the first time since making the decision to announce myself live on the internet, I'm feeling unsure.

"Sit," says my brother, moving to the side to let me in.

I step inside the tiny living quarters attached to Miles' studio—the man lives directly above the gallery that sells his watercolors. He's living his dream every second of the day.

I clench my jaw and bounce on my toes—not sitting.

Miles is just a month shy of being two years my elder. But his sober, quiet ways have always made him feel much more my senior. "Your truth is out there," he says. "Are you glad?"

"I think so." I pace back and forth over the hardwood floor of his living space. "It felt really good to tell her."

"Good. Focus on that." He shoves his hands into his pockets, his eyes glossy on the ground. "I wouldn't know. I've

never felt that way about a woman. But I think living a lie would be painful.”

“A lie?” I’ve never felt like I was lying. But then, I have been keeping this big truth to myself for so long.

“Do you need a drink?” he says, walking into the section of his tiny apartment that he refers to as the kitchen. He snags two sodas from the mini refrigerator and sets one in front of me.

“What do I do now, Miles? I can’t force her to go out with me. I can’t make her marry me.”

“Marriage?” The saucers are back. Maybe they aren’t a sign of approval. “Whoa. Kind of jumping the gun, aren’t we?”

“It might have come up.”

“Owen,” he says. “Are you kidding? *Marriage*—like forever, ‘I dos’, holy vows?”

“She’s the one who brought it up. I just said I wouldn’t be opposed to marrying her.”

Miles runs a hand over his eyes. He sits across from me and leans his head back against the back of his recliner. “Maybe just ask her out. Go on a date first.”

“And if she says no?”

“You’ve waited a long time for this, Owen. I’d say don’t give up so easily. If she says no, then wait a week and ask again. If she isn’t right for you, make her prove it.”

I breathe out a little laugh. It isn’t what I expected him to say.

Miles—always sensible, always smart, always serving. He’s telling me to jump in blindly and go for it. I suppose I’ve already leapt. I just need to keep swimming.



o... maybe I’m getting *looks* in the teacher’s lounge. And maybe I can hear every single staff member whispering as I



‘ pass by. Clearly, a few people—or *all* the people—heard about Sid’s show.

So, why it surprises me when my seventh graders are extra quiet and ten hands are in the air before I’ve even taken roll, I’ll never know. They know. They *all* know. Only, the seventh graders don’t whisper amongst themselves. Nope, they aren’t afraid of asking questions.

I exhaust a breath from my lungs, my entire body clenching. I know what’s coming. I clear my throat—and pretend I don’t. “Yes, Rylee?”

“I knew it! I called it! You love her!”

No question warrants no answer. So, I point at Sam—who is actually raising his hand today. “Sam?”

“So, you’re like a thing with that lady who was here before, right?”

“Ask Annie,” Rylee tells him.

I clear my throat. “Not exactly. I’ve just given her some information... that she didn’t have before.” That’s it. The end.

Only with my answer, three more hands shoot into the air.

I spend the next fifteen minutes answering a few questions and completely ignoring others.

And then come my teenage matchmakers.

“Buy her flowers,” Rylee suggests.

“Those will die,” Brynn says. “Get her something that’ll last, like books.”

“Because that’s romantic,” says Stacey, her face cringing to show just how *romantic* she thinks Brynn’s suggestion is.

“Lame,” Aven says, flipping through his science book. “All that junk is lame. If she’s really someone worth spending time with, make her play Call of Duty with you.”

“*Ew*,” Rylee croons. “*You’re lame.*”

“It’s better than flowers. Who wants stupid plants in their house anyway?”

“I do,” Rylee says, crossing her arms over her chest.

Brynn turns away from both of them and mutters in sing-song under her breath, “Books don’t die.”

“Okay—time to science!” I point at Rylee, then Brynn. “Flowers. Books. I like it. Great suggestions, ladies.” I give Aven a sad half-grin. “Sorry dude, no Call of Duty this time.” Then I clap my hands together and call up my teacher voice. “Now tell me, which planet is closest to the sun. Anyone?”

Slowly, I get my students back on track—with only a few more Annie interruptions. I get it. I can’t get her off of my mind either.



I sit on the porch steps of Annie’s apartment complex, flowers in one hand and an Addison Adam’s novel in the other. I know Annie. I know her favorite author, and I know her favorite flower—yellow roses, which she likes even more if there are sprigs of baby’s breath throughout.

“Hey,” I say, standing up to greet her.

“Hey, O.” She swallows, her eyes glancing down at the gifts in my hands.

“These are for you.” I hold both gifts out to her.

She nods. “Thanks.” A shaky breath leaves her throat.

“Can I come up?”

She nods again, taking the flowers and the novel from my hands.

I stand in the small living room, watching as Annie puts away her laptop and finds a vase for the flowers I brought her. She leans close to the flowers and breathes in their sweet scent before setting the vase in the center of her table.

“My favorite,” she says.

“I know.” I step closer to her, and she doesn’t step away. We’ve been so easy together for so many years, and I don’t want that to disappear. “Annie, I’m not asking for a

commitment. But how about a date?” I lift one shoulder. I can’t help but smile when I see her—even if she’s a little unnerved.

“That isn’t fair,” she says, pointing at my face.

“What?” I peer around as if I’ve missed something.

“That Owen grin. It’s something I can never say no to.”

Which only makes me smile more. “Is that a yes?”

She plunks down onto her couch and covers her eyes with her hands. “I don’t know, Owen.” She groans, and I sit next to her. “That would make Margo happy.”

“Your editor?” It’s not exactly what I’m going for. I want to make Annie happy.

“Yes.”

“Margo?” I say again—utterly confused. “Margo wants us to date?”

“Oh, yes.” She pulls her hands down and peers over at me. “Apparently, we make for a great story. Our readership has doubled since last night. Since—” She doesn’t finish. But she doesn’t have to. I know what happened last night. I was very present at my livestream confessional.

“But you don’t want to?” I say, my mouth dry.

She blinks, her head leaning against the couch and her eyes on me. “I don’t want to lose you, Owen. You’re my best friend.”

Lose me? That, I can work with. “You won’t,” I assure her, my body instinctively moving closer to hers.

“But you have these feelings, and what if I can’t reciprocate? And we both know—” She shakes her head and moves on. “Things just won’t ever be the same now that... that everything is out.” She covers her eyes again and sighs. “Not that I wanted you bottling up the truth.”

“What do we both know?” I didn’t miss how she started, stopped, and then skipped over the sentence completely. I know Annie—there is something more.

Her long lashes, frosted in black mascara, flutter as she peers my direction. She blows a raspberry through her lips, and I slink down until I'm right next to her. Eye level. In best-friend-Owen mode. This is what I would have done a week ago. This is me. This is her. And this is what I want—just at a different level. I slip my fingers through hers.

Annie peers down at our knotted hands. “This,” she says, lifting our fingers up, “feels a little more complicated now.”

I press my lips together and shake my head. “But it isn't. My feelings haven't changed in any way. Now finish. We both know what?”

Tears well in her eyes. My strong, feisty Annie is—*crying*? Ah—crap.

“We both know”—she sniffs—“that I'm bad at love.”

“Bad?”

“Yes, Owen. What's the longest I've kept a boyfriend?”

I don't have to think—I know. “Well—”

“Exactly. If I'm lucky—two months, and then I don't see them again.” One of the tears blurring her vision falls onto her cheek. “What happens when it ends?”

“Who says it's going to end?”

She scoffs, small and harsh. “*History*. That's who.”

I cup her cheek and breathe in the orange blossoms. “Annie,” I say, my eyes dropping to her lips. “The future and the past aren't one. You can make sure of that.”

“But what if I can't?” she asks, and her eyes find my lips too. I see it. I feel it.

I lean a little closer, giving her every opportunity to push me away, to tell me no. But she doesn't. Annie Archer is a smart girl. She knows what's about to happen, and she doesn't push me back.

Her breath warms my lips and fuels my beating heart. My lips meet her lips, and for as long as we've known one another, this is an entirely new introduction.

Annie tips her head, her hands at my waist, and I pull her closer. My forefinger strokes the soft skin at her neck and she melts into me, her mouth parting. Annie tastes so much sweeter than I've ever imagined. And I've spent a lot of time imagining.

This is not a one-sided kiss. No, this kiss tells me that she's wondered too.

She pulls back for air, and as much as I want to, don't return for more. I've been a dying man in the desert all these years, and I've just reached my saving oasis.

I press my forehead to hers, my thumb tracing her right cheekbone. "I promise you," I tell her, "I'm not going anywhere. Even if you decide you don't want me, not like this, I'll still be your best friend, Annie. I'm not that easy to get rid of."



## ANNIE



*S*type out answers to questions that I've spent two days studying. Questions about husbands forgetting anniversaries. Questions about teenagers who refuse to talk to their parents. And questions about what I'm going to do about Owen—as if there's a textbook for those, as if it's any of these people's business. I tell them all to wait for my next article. Because Margo is insisting on it. And Owen, well, Owen insists that our friendship is indestructible. Not even my train wreck history with men can kill what we have.

A text from my sister comes through, and while I'd love to ignore it... I know she'll just keep right on messaging if I don't give her some attention.

I haven't told her about that kiss. I should. I will. But she'll read into it. And I'm still trying to figure it out myself.

I bite my lip, which only makes me remember the sensation of Owen's lips on mine. I have never in my twenty-four years of life been kissed like that before. Owen's kiss was cherishing and devastating all at once. A lifetime of love and vulnerability bloomed in that beautiful, brief kiss.

I glance down at my phone and open Kayla's text.

**Kayla:** So, are you going to go out with him?

"Yes," I say aloud—to no one. I am. Because that's what Margo wants. And because that's what Owen wants. And if

I'm being completely honest, because that was one killer kiss. I swallow, years of fear and skepticism filling up my insides.

**Me:** Owen has promised that when things go south, he'll still be my best friend.

**Kayla:** Maybe things won't go south. Did you ever think of that? Maybe you are North Pole-bound.

**Me:** History tends to repeat itself.

I turn back to my keyboard when another text comes through.

**Kayla:** Are you going to try?

Heat rises in my cheeks and, rather than text her back, I hit call—but not just any call. I am FaceTiming her so she can say that to my face.

Kayla's hair is pulled back in a ponytail and she's make-up-free. The boys are at school, so the house is eerily quiet.

“So?” she says, looking me right in the face and apparently having zero qualms about accusing me of not trying.

“You think I won't try?”

“I think you're scared. I think you're haunted.” To my sister's credit, she doesn't say Maddox's name. “And I think that when it comes to falling in love, you are full of great advice. For *others*. You're all talk, Annie. Where's your action?”

“Hey.” I moan. “I got plenty of action the other night!” I clamp my mouth closed, slapping my hand over top of my big mouth. *Whoops*.

“Excuse me? Are you saying something happened—*already*? Between you and Owen?”

“If you must know—” I say.

“I must,” she interrupts.

I prop my phone up against my opened laptop and cross my arms over my chest. “Just a kiss. Nothing to get all worked up over.”

“You kissed? You kissed Owen? Are you sure he didn’t kiss you and you just happened to show up to that party? Because last I heard, you were the queen of *almost*.”

I sit up a little straighter, leaning so that my glare is front and center in this camera phone. “Mean. Kayla. When did you become so mean?”

“I’m sorry!” She’s walking and talking and bending and—are those Captain Jack Sparrow Underroos in her hand? She’s all over the place. “But I like Owen. He’s my pick.”

“He’s always been your pick.”

“Yeppers!”

Yeppers? Really? The girl has got to get out. She hangs out with six-year-olds too much.

“And I was right, and you were wrong. So, don’t mess this up, Annie.” Apparently, the part where I cry and she holds me, telling me it’s all going to be okay, is over. What happened to my sister who took me home and tucked me in bed and coddled me? “Leave that idiot Maddox in the dust and move on, girl.”

So much for leaving Maddox Powell out of it.



Maybe Kayla’s right. Maybe I am afraid to try. Because I have never, in fifteen years, ever been nervous about Owen coming over—and yet, I am shaking like a leaf. He’s coming to talk.

As a boy.

Who likes me.

Who *like* likes me.

I press down on my knee—attempting to stop the nervous rhythm there.

The knock on my door sends a tremor throughout my entire body. But then—he’s pushing open the door, like always, rather than waiting for me to answer. He ducks his head inside, slips off his shoes, and peers up with a smile.

It’s Owen.

He’s *still* Owen.

And sure, he confessed a few feelings.

And yes, he sort of floored me with a more than passionate kiss... but he’s still my bestie. He’s still the dork who dressed up like an Oompa Loompa with me in the sixth grade.

“Hey,” he says, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Man, he’s cute. And I’ve always known it, but it’s suddenly more apparent.

“Here’s the thing,” I say before I order our pizza or tell him to take a seat. Nope—no pretenses, let’s just get to the truth of the matter. “We both know my history. It’s not great. I can’t—I’ve never been able to stay with someone long. We both know—” My hands shake in the air, and my mouth goes dry with my rambling words.

“Hey,” he says, beelining for me. Owen snatches both of my trembling hands in his. “I’m not worried about any of that, okay?”

“How can you not be?” I say, and my throat clenches as if close to tears.

“I’m just not. So, you can’t be either. Okay? This is my idea. I’ve already made you a promise. So, don’t stress about anything else.”

I blow out a slow, trembling breath. I’m not sure that’s possible. But he seems normal and that helps. “I don’t know how to do this.”

“I know. But I have an idea. It could benefit the article too.”

“Wait.” I huff, my shoulders slumping. “Let me order the pizza, and then we’ll talk.”

It takes me less than two minutes to place the order online. Owen and I always do pizza on Thursdays, and it's always the same order: extra cheese, mushrooms, and sausage.

I sit next to him—but not too close, bring my right leg up and turn so that I face him. “All right. What's your plan?”

“You get letters on relationship advice all the time, right?” he says, and I appreciate that he doesn't move closer. He's giving me space. And I need it.

“Every day.”

“So, what if I wrote you once a week?” He isn't finished, but I can't help myself—

“Ready in Red?” I ask.

“Sort of. But you wouldn't know it's me. I'll use a different email, make a plan, and ask for advice. You'll give it your best shot, and then we'll follow your advice. Your advice, my plan.”

It would work for the column... but would it work for me? For Owen? I can't help but feel like we are sculpting our own statue only to smash it to pieces later.

“Can you really do that, Owen? Follow love advice for you and me?” The whole thing sounds insane.

“Honestly?”

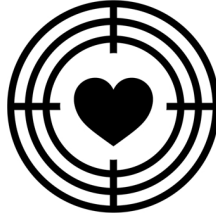
“Of course. I always want you to be honest.” But then, honesty has changed everything between us.

“I *can* do it,” he says. “And I'm hoping you'll be willing to try.”

That's what Kayla said to me. Are they in cahoots?

I nod. “Okay,” I say, but my voice is small. This is Owen—not Mr. Buttman—and that makes the risk so much greater.

## OWEN



Annie's little apartment is immersed in the aroma of sausage and mushroom. She sits a purposeful two feet away from me. I itch to move closer, to reenact that kiss. It wasn't planned, but it was perfect.

So, let's try that again.

I know Annie felt something too. And with that fuel, I have become a man on a mission.

"So," she says, looking up from her half-eaten slice. "How long?"

I don't have to ask. I know what she refers to. "How long have I loved you?" I'm not afraid of the words anymore.

Annie clears her throat. "Let's refer to it as Owen's secret feelings."

I chuckle. Even on edge, she's still Annie.

"Okay. Well, I've had my *secret feelings* since the day you moved into town. Third grade, Miss Lloyd's class," I say matter-of-factly, then dive in for another bite.

Annie tosses a throw pillow at me—lucky for me, my forearm is up and ready to block.

"Not true. Come on, Owen. When?"

It sort of feels like I'm opening up a forbidden black box. But the release is welcoming. "The third grade isn't far off. You brought in a collection of shark teeth for show-and-tell, and I knew then that you were someone special."

Annie snickers. “It was my dad’s collection, I was just trying to impress.”

“It worked.”

“I remember that’s the day you asked to sit by me at lunch,” she says, her dark eyes searching my face.

“Yep.”

“Owen—” She moans. It’s not answer enough for her.

“Okay.” I huff out an airy chuckle and think. I’ve loved Annie for so long, it’s hard to pinpoint one specific moment. “I did look at you like I’d never looked at another girl that day. And then again, in seventh grade.”

“Seventh?” She cringes.

I knew she would. To Annie, it’s the year of buck teeth and Marla Thompson. For some reason, Annie’s two front teeth seemed to grow a lot that year. She grew into them—eventually, but in seventh grade, she resembled a beaver. Her words, not mine.

It was also the year that Marla Thompson pantsed Annie in the middle of gym class.

All twenty-six members of our class saw and laughed. Her face turned the color of a cherry tomato and she barely got her pants up before tripping her way out of the gymnasium. Then came Marla’s nicknames to make sure everyone remembered what had happened. She called her Annie Panties, Potty Pants Archer, and a slew more I’ve tried to forget over the years. She called Annie names until the day she moved away in eighth grade. I witnessed Annie’s tears more than once because of Marla’s cruelty.

However, it was weeks after the de-pantsing incident, the moment Marla tried to do the same thing to Ellie Stauffer, that made me love Annie.

Before Marla could snag ahold of Ellie’s gym shorts, Annie charged at her. She hit her hard, like a running bull, right in the shoulder and side, knocking Marla—double her size—to the ground.

That hit got Annie a black eye and a lot more name-calling for the next year. But Annie was almost proud of her shiner. She didn't flinch or cry again after that. She decided then and there Marla wouldn't win.

We were all afraid of Marla—first female wrestler for Lincoln Middle School. But Annie had stood up to her. She had saved Ellie from suffering the same fate as herself, and it changed everything.

For Annie.

But for me too.

Annie stood for doing the right thing, no matter the cost. She was the bravest person I knew. She was my best friend. And from that moment on, she had a piece of my heart.

It only grew with time.

She knows the story, so I simply say, “You saved Ellie Stauffer—no matter the cost to yourself. I decided that day that my best friend was a hero.”

Her eyes water a little with my words. “You’ve always been soft for the underdog.”

“I have. But this was different.” I inch closer and take her hand—like I would have had it been any other day. There’s a tremor in her fingers, but I ignore it. “I couldn’t help but fall in love with you.”

“I’m gonna need you to stop using that word, Owen.”

I knit my brows and tease. “Love?”

She swallows. “Yes. That one.”

“Annie? Are you afraid of falling in love?”



## ANNIE



*I* clear my throat and grip Owen's hand like a lifeline. That's a complicated question. I'm not afraid of loving someone else. But I honestly don't know if anyone can love me for the long haul.

I've demanded honesty from my friend. Does that mean I have to give it?

"No." My mouth goes dry. "I'm not afraid of falling in love."

"Really? Because..." he says, his nose scrunching with words he doesn't want to say. "You seem a little afraid."

I narrow my gaze. I could slug him. I might slug him. I flex my fist, and my skin tightens over my knuckles.

I'm still pondering when my phone, sitting on the table next to a half-empty pizza box, jingles.

It's a FaceTime call on my cell.

From Levi Bailey.

A chalky taste fills my mouth just thinking about Owen's bull-headed grouch of a brother.

"Why is Levi calling you?"

"I don't know. You don't know?" I look at Owen as if he's accused me of some horrendous crime. "Butt dial?"

Owen shrugs, reaches for my phone, and swipes right to open the call.

“*Hey*,” I whisper. I would have happily ignored that.

“Owen,” Levi says through this four-inch screen.

“Hey, Levi. Did you call Annie on purpose?” He glances at me, a smile on his lips. Somehow, Owen adores his grouchy older brother.

“I did. But you aren’t her.”

Owen smirks. “Nope.”

I slide over the couch cushion, until I’m flush next to my friend and barge into the camera view. “Why are you calling me, *Levi Bailey*?”

Levi’s name is my favorite curse word. I drop a weight on my toe—*dang it, Levi!* I burn the lasagna I spent an hour assembling—*Levi!*

“Because we need to chat, Archer.”

“I have never needed to chat with you.” I clench my jaw and remind myself to be a little nicer—for Owen’s sake.

Levi gives a grimacing smile. “And I’ve always appreciated that. But if you guys are really going to do this, I have something to say.”

Since when is anything I do any of Levi Bailey’s business? “Do what?” I have completely moved in on Owen’s space now. He is half seen in this call and I am in full view.

Levi’s brows raise in annoyance, and his eyes dart from me to Owen.

And then—Meredith is next to him. “What Levi is trying to say is that if you guys have decided to date, he’d like to clear the air with Annie. And be friends.” The little blonde beams—like this is a sweet and easy task.

Levi’s head tilts so that he’s looking at Meredith. “That’s not exactly right.” Even as he’s disagreeing, his eyes soften upon her. Huh. Who knew Levi could be so whipped?

“Then what is it, Levi?”

“Owen, don’t hate me, but she needs to know.”

I scoff—so easily annoyed with Levi. “Owen and I do not keep secrets from one another.”

The call goes quiet.

Owen’s quiet. I’m quiet. Levi and Meredith are quiet. Because that isn’t true, now is it? Owen has kept a very big secret from me for a very long time, and we all know it.

Maybe I am missing something else.

I clear my throat. “Okay—with *everything else* Owen and I are transparent.” I peer at him for confirmation, and he nods in agreement. *Whew*. “Moving on.”

“Fine,” Levi barks. “Then neither of you have anything to worry about.” He tips his chin up, his eyes on his brother. “Owen, tell Annie what you think of the Dallas Cowboys.”

“Owen loves the Cowboys. I bought him that jersey back in high school, and he still wears it when they play.” I’m staring at Levi, but he isn’t looking at me. He’s looking at Owen.

And Owen isn’t talking.

“Owen?” I say, flashing back to that purple shirt episode. For the first time I doubt my confidence on the topic.

His thick brows lower. “Uh, well, they might not be my favorite.”

“Okay, but—”

“If you’re going to make something of this, Owen, you have to be honest,” Levi says, talking over me.

Owen swallows. “You’re right,” he says in a low voice, more to himself than to me. “Annie, I don’t like the Cowboys. At all. In fact, I think they’re overrated and uncreative when it comes to defense.”

My mouth falls open. I can’t stop my jaw from dropping. It’s like the hinges have broken, and my mouth is left an open gaping tunnel. My heart thunders in my chest. “Overrated?” I squeak. “But you wear that jersey—”

“I wear the jersey because you spent a month’s worth of tip money on it back in twelfth grade. And every time they play, you tell me to bust out the jersey.” His head dips to meet my eyes. “I’m sorry. It was such a thoughtful gift, I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

I lift my head to meet his eyes straight on. “What else?”

His brows furrow as if he doesn’t understand.

I find strength and use my full voice. “How else have you not wanted to disappoint me?”

“French fries,” Levi spouts.

“*Levi*,” Owen growls—it’s a rare thing to hear Owen Bailey speak so ill-tempered to anyone. And normally, I would have adored hearing him talk to Levi that way.

“You don’t like French fries?” I ask. We share French fries all the time.

“No, I like French fries,” Owen says, his eyes back on me.

Levi lets out a sigh. “Well, my work here is done. See you guys later.” With a salute, he ends the call.

“What a jack—”

“I completely agree. He’s an idiot,” Owen says. “I’m sorry, Annie. I never meant to be dishonest with you. That was never my intention. I enjoy watching the Cowboys play with you—because *you* like them so much. And I mean, come on, it’s still football.”

“Get back to French fries.”

Owen clears his throat, his eyes dropping to the floor for a second. “Uh, the whole head of the fry, butt of the fry—to me, it makes no difference.”

“But we did an experiment back in ninth grade! You agreed with me. The head of the fry is so much better than the butt of the fry.” My eyes are wide, and for a second, I’m wondering if I even know this man.

“They taste the same. And how do you decide which end is the butt and which is the head? That makes no sense.”

I stand, hands on hips, and pace in front of my coffee table. “So... so... so... you just agree with me? Like some spoiled child who always needs to get their way. Am I a spoiled child?” I stop and stare, blinking Owen in and out of view.

“No,” he says, standing up. “You are not a spoiled child. Those were my mistakes, not yours. I should have been honest.”

“Why weren’t you? Am I so difficult?”

Owen scoops a warm hand beneath my hair and to the side of my cheek, holding me there. His sea blue eyes peer into mine. “No. You aren’t difficult. If anything, it’s the opposite. You get so excited, so enthusiastic about things.” He smiles, his eyes sturdy on mine. “And I love that. I don’t want to burst that bubble simply because we don’t agree.”

I glare, unconvinced and unimpressed.

“But I’ll burst it from now on if that’s what you want. One hundred percent honesty from now on. You have my word. And while I’m bursting, I have to tell you, I don’t like rap music—”

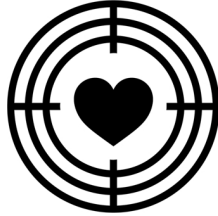
I squeak. I bought him those tickets to see Eminem two years ago. What a lousy birthday gift.

“I don’t like purple at all—which you knew. I did tell you that, sort of. I know you’ve been planning a bungee jumping trip for us, and while I’m not opposed to trying new things, it isn’t something I’ve ever wanted to do.” He breathes out like he’s just unloaded a fifty-pound weight from his back. But he isn’t done. “Oh, and I think that Elsie’s waffles are a million times better than her pancakes.”

I can’t help the shrill breath I pull in with his last confession. “*No!* We agreed. We stood up to Coop and Miles! We used a Google slide presentation telling them why her pancakes are superior!”

“Yes. We did. Because I love you, Annie Archer. And I’d pretty much follow you to the ends of the earth. Even if you’re wrong about Elsie’s waffles.”

## O W E N



It takes an hour to convince Annie those are the only things I've been overly agreeable on. And then another hour to convince her that my idea—to ask her advice and follow it—would be completely different than disagreeing while saying I agree.

“But,” she says, “if I give you advice and you don't feel like it's for you—then you can't follow it. Here's the thing with advice: sometimes we need an idea or some clarity, but we shouldn't follow it unless it sits well with us. Do you understand, Owen?” She pokes me in the stomach.

“Yes, Annie. I understand. I will be true to my feelings from here on out. I promise you that.”

“Because I'd like to know who my best friend actually is!” She huffs and paces back and forth with each word.

“You do. I'm still me. I'm just an Owen who isn't a Cowboys fan.”

She shuts her eyes and breathes out a tired sigh. We've been at this a while, we're both tired. “Fine. What now?”

“Now, I'll send in a letter.”

Another sigh. “Okay.”

I gather my things and start for the door. It's late, and we both have to work tomorrow. I've given her a lot to process.

“Owen,” she says, following me to the exit. “Is this why Levi never liked me?”

My eyes narrow, thinking. I've never known why Levi doesn't like Annie—not specifically. How could anyone not like Annie? But then—

“Maybe. I think it might be. I know he felt like I changed for you.” I swallow. I want her to hear the whole truth, though, not just that tiny part. That one part of the story will shatter an hour's worth of discussion and work. “But I never did. Who I am is a person who finds great happiness in making the ones he loves happy. That's all I was trying to do. I'm still me.”

“Yeah,” she says, tugging on the front of my button-up shirt. “I can see that. Still, I can see why he was always a little hostile with me now. I think I would have been too.” She blinks, her long lashes fanning outward. “Don't change for me, okay, Owen? You're exactly who you need to be. That's why you're my best friend. Don't change for anyone.”

I nod. “I won't.”

“Anything else—before you go? Anything you need to get off your chest?”

My lip turns up in half a grin, and my eyes drop for only a second to her pretty pink lips. “I'd like to try that kiss again.”

With both hands on my chest, Annie shoves me out the door. “Kissing is a second date event. You haven't taken me on one.”



Hold six-month-old Lulabelle while Coco and Meredith stand at the kitchen counter picking over my newest letter to Annie.

“I don't like that line,” Coco says, pointing it out for Meredith.

“I think if you just changed the word ‘my’ to ‘this,’ it would sound better. ‘My’ sounds like it's a done deal.”

Coco points at Meredith. “Right—and we're still trying to woo her.”

*We're?? As in we?*

Meredith giggles. “*Woo*. I’ve never heard anyone use that word in the real world before.”

I bounce Lula on my knees, holding her little body firmly so as not to let her jostle too much. But if you give her even the smallest of bounces—

A bubbly giggle sounds from my little niece, her chubby cheeks swelling with the sound.

Coco and Meredith lift their heads to peer at us. Meredith grins and Coco beams.

“I heard that!” calls a commanding seven-year-old voice down the hall. Alice comes skipping out, only to halt right in front of where I sit with her little sister. “Did somebody make you laugh?” she says to Lula, her already youthful tone in full baby-talk mode. “Somebody made you laugh!” she bellows at her sister. And while I’d like to plug one ear, Lula screeches out with a joyful glee.

Alice sets a hand on my shoulder and gives me a consoling pat. She tilts her head, her lips pursed in a half frown. “Don’t feel bad, Uncle Owen. I am her favorite person in the whole wide world. Feel free to keep trying.”

And then, like a rocket, she takes off back down the hall to her bedroom.

I got a laugh too—sure, it wasn’t the jolly wail that Alice produced, but I got one. “What does she know?” I ask Lulabelle—and sure, I might be trying to mimic Alice’s baby-talk tone. I am rewarded with a sweet, toothless smile. Apparently, the shrieking glee is reserved for her big sister.

“She isn’t wrong,” Coco says. “Lula sees Alice and it’s like her own personal entourage of entertainment has walked into the room.”

Meredith’s head is down, peering at the letter on my laptop. “Look again,” she says to Coco. “I think it’s ready.”

Coco turns back to the computer and reads aloud.

**Dear Ask Annie,**



I want to take out this girl. We've been out before. But I want to do something different, something special. Any ideas for going the extra mile?

### Waiting and Willing

"I know you haven't dated each other before," Coco says. "But I added that line—we've been out before—because the two of you do everything together. If you want this date to feel different than your normal friendship day-to-day stuff, you have to do something different."

"I agree," I say, though I don't want to lose our normal day-to-day things. Those are the best parts of my day.

I don't know if Annie will have any idea that this email is mine—and Coco and Meredith's. I don't know what other letters she's answering. If they're all about teenage sons or husbands who forget to put the toilet seat down, then it will be easy to weed me out.

I'm rewarded with an answer just two days later. I know Annie. I know her system with her assistant and how quickly she answers letters. And I'm attempting to make certain I don't have to wait long.

I'm sitting in fourth-period science when my phone winks with a response. My students are testing, and while I should be grading, I can see the Ask Annie logo in my banner. How can I resist peeking at her answer?

Dear Waiting and Willing,

I'm not really an event planner. I give researched advice, not party ideas. With that said, my advice to you is to try something new. Something neither of you has done before. There's scientific proof that new experiences increase endorphins and help people experience joy. Give her a night she won't forget. That doesn't

mean you have to take her skydiving.  
That means you try something new for  
the first time together.

Good luck.

Sincerely,

Ask Annie

I spend the rest of my grading time, as well as most of my prep, researching. Then I send Annie a text.

**Me:** Can I take you out Saturday night?

**Annie:** Through a text? Owen, you're asking me out through a text? Come on, man.

**Me:** I can't call, I'm in class.

**Annie:** I can't answer, I'm in a meeting.

I laugh, unperturbed by her non-answer.

**Me:** Okay. I will ask you later. In person. But for reservation purposes... are you free Saturday night?

**Annie:** For reservation purposes—I am.

That's a resounding yes—isn't it?

Resounding or not, I'll take it. I set my phone to the side and return to my laptop where I book two tickets on the Kootenai cruise ship. A two-hour dinner cruise on the lake and Snake River. And we won't even have to leave town.

Annie hasn't done this. I haven't done this. We would have told the other about it. Maybe it's a little touristy. But then, maybe we'll be tourists in our own city for the night.

## ANNIE



There are flowers and a box wrapped in brown paper outside my apartment door when I arrive home from work.

There's a card attached, and before I open it up to read, I'm certain—Owen. I can't remember anyone bringing me flowers, and now Owen has twice in one week.

My heart flutters in my chest, and I tell it to calm down. It's just Owen. My crazy, goofball, waffle-loving Owen.

I toss my laptop bag over my head, crossing it over my chest, and gather up the yellow roses and mystery box. I lug everything inside and spread my haul across the table.

I puff out a tired breath and nibble on my bottom lip. I lift the card attached to my flowers and read:

**My Dearest Annie,**

**Spend an evening trying something new with me. You won't regret it.**

**Love,**

**Owen**

My breath turns heavy, and my heart acts as though it may be running for its life. Maybe it is. "Waiting and Willing," I say to no one but myself. My lips purse at his creativity and how he took my words to heart.

With trembling hands, I pull out my phone, smacking my finger to my sister's pinned face. Before Kayla can talk, I'm

speaking.

“Tell me I’m not going to regret this.”

I read her the note and tell her about the advice I gave him.

“You won’t regret this,” she says.

“But Kayla. We both know...” I trail off, not wanting to say the words out loud.

“You’ve had some bad luck in the past. That’s over.”

“Is it? Or is it just how I am?”

There’s a pause on Kayla’s end. She doesn’t have a witty retort for me? “What’s in the box, Annie?”

I peer down at the unopened box wrapped in brown paper. My fingers tremble as they run over the smooth top. “I—I don’t know.”

“Well, open it up, silly goose.” Her tone doesn’t match her words. She’s calm and kind and gentle. No wonder my sister is such a good boy mom—tough when she needs to be, soft when she knows it counts.

“Now?”

“Why not?”

I blow out a shaky breath and run my hand beneath the tape keeping the two halves of the brown paper together. It unlatches easy enough, and the paper comes off in one solid, hefty piece. There is no way Owen wrapped that. He must have had his mom do it for him.

“Well?” Kayla says.

But I haven’t lifted the lid yet. I ignore her plea and pull the top off of the white box—it’s giving me zero clues. I toss away the white tissue paper and chuckle when I pull out a four-inch cream heel that looks as if it’s been hand-painted with yellow-and-pink roses. Even the heel is glossed with a green stem.

“Annie?” Kayla says. “Switch to FaceTime!”

I pull out the other and hold them together, another giggle escaping my lips. “Size eight.” How does Owen know my shoe size?

“Annie!”

With my cell still sitting on my tabletop, I hit the camera.

“I’m looking at the ceiling. Annie?”

Huffing out a breath, I set down the prettiest shoes I’ve ever seen. I prop my phone against the gift box.

“Flowers,” I say, holding up the vase of yellow roses. “And”—my mouth quirks with a grin I can’t hold back—“shoes.” I hold up the hand-painted heels for Kayla to see.

“Wow. Someone knows you.”

I swallow. “Yes, he does.” Knows me and *loves* me.

“Well, don’t just stand there gawking at your shoes. Text the man. Accept his date.” There’s a small crash in the background, and all at once, Kayla is gone from my view. When she returns, I see only her forehead. “Gotta go! Let me know what he says.”

“I’ve already agreed to do this,” I say to myself. “And Owen promised me we’d still be friends in the end. Owen always keeps his promises. *Always*.” My heart pounds—it’s a falling heart. A lost cause. I can feel it. Then, I pull up Owen’s name and message him.

**Me:** I accept your invitation.

He responds mega quick.

**Owen:** Through a text message? My favorite advice columnist taught me that this is unacceptable. Try again.

I can’t help but laugh. I bite my inner cheek and attempt to forget that I am a little bit cursed when it comes to love and relationships.

**Me:** Meet me at Elsie's for breakfast?



**I** sit with a plate of pancakes in front of me and a waffle for Owen across from me. He isn't here yet, but he will be.

"Why are you so nervous?" Grammy says. She reaches out and smooths down my hair—my hair that does not need to be smoothed.

"I'm not nervous." But I am. Why did I suggest Elsie's? Grammy is the one who told me to leave Owen alone or to marry him. And Owen hopped on board the marriage train way too fast.

How could he say that?

"Is Owen dating again? You found him a nice girl?" My five-foot-one grandmother waits for the gossip. But she won't read the paper, not even my column. She says the news is all a conspiracy. Still, she wants the down-low on what I'm doing for Owen. Because, like Kayla, she likes him.

Of course, they do. Who wouldn't like Owen?

I like Owen.

That isn't the problem.

The problem is he's fallen—which might make me fall—and then we all know I'll end up doing something to make him... *unfall*.

"Ahh." My brows knit, thinking over Grammy's question. I'm a nice girl—right? "Yeah. I think so."

Grammy wets her finger with her tongue and attempts to return to my hair. But I duck and scoot as far back in this booth as I possibly can.

"I'm good," I tell her.

"You've got one hair. One hair that wants to stand on end." She reaches out, leaning over the length of the booth, but

thankfully my grandmother is a tiny little woman. She can't reach me, not from back here.

I finger the top of my head, snag the hair, and pull it from my scalp. "There. Got it."

Grammy stands straight, hands on hips. "No. You missed. Wrong hair."

Grammy's front door jingles, and Owen walks in thirty minutes before the opened sign will turn over.

"Owen," I yip, hoping to redirect my grandmother's attention.

"Aww. Owen," Grammy says, her arms out wide. But Grammy doesn't hug, she pats until you're bruised and you know through those wounds that she loves you.

My friend—who should absolutely know better—goes in for an embrace, but Grammy wraps one arm about his back, patting until it's sure to leave a mark.

Owen coughs a little, a hand on his chest.

"Are you getting sick?" she asks him, and I can't help but smile at the two of them.

"No. Not sick. Just—" Owen trails off, shaking his head and looking at me for help.

"He's fine, Grammy. Let him sit before his waffle gets cold."

"Bah. *Waffle*. Waffles are for syrup hoarders. Pancakes are for real breakfast men."

Owen lifts one shoulder. "I guess I'm a syrup hoarder."

My lips twitch with his honest answer for me and Grammy. I never wanted Owen to agree with me blindly. I'm glad he's over that fifteen-year bad habit.

"No butter syrup for you," she tells him with a wag of her finger.

"Understandable," he says.

“You’d hoard every last bit of it, and butter syrup does not grow on trees!”

“Grammy, he says he understands. Can you give us a minute?”

Grammy scoffs and throws her hands in the air before marching through her swinging door back into the kitchen.

I breathe out. Willing myself to be true to my feelings and not to my fears. “Thank you for the flowers and the shoes.”

Owen grins. “Did you like them? Miles painted them for me.”

“Miles.” I grin. “I should have known.” I swallow and peer up, finding Owen’s pretty blue eyes. “So, here is my in-person acceptance. Yes, Owen, I’ll go with you.”

“Perfect. Friday at six? Wear your shoes.”

“Where are we going?”

Owen reaches out and picks up my hand. It’s not like I haven’t held Owen’s hand before. I have—many times. But now, jolts of electricity might as well be running through my body each and every time he touches me. “I might keep that a surprise. If you don’t mind.”

I sigh and shake my head. “This is strange, O.”

“Good strange or bad strange?”

I swallow. As I might be cursed to never fall in love, I’d have to say bad, even if it feels so very good at this moment. “I’m not sure yet.”

“Bah!” Grammy barks from the kitchen doorway. “No.” She shakes her little gray head, one hand on her hip and one finger pointed out accusatory at Owen and me.

Owen blinks over at my grandma.

“No!” She storms over and slaps Owen’s hand that holds onto mine. Then, glaring at me, she says, “I told you, marry the boy or leave him be.”



“Well, she can’t leave me be,” Owen says—to *my* *grammy!*

I twist my hand in his, then pinch at the tender skin between his thumb and pointer finger. Owen yanks away from me, his knees knocking into the bottom of the table.

“Ow,” he says, shaking out his hand. I’m not sure if he’s laughing or in pain—maybe both.

“He’s just being silly, Grammy.” I shoot a glare at Owen, but he’s too busy chuckling to see my killer stare down.

## ANNIE



Friday afternoon, I take my work home—or, more exactly, I take it to Kayla’s.

“Why does it matter what you wear if you’re so sure this isn’t going to work?” My sister sits cross-legged on her bed while I raid her closet.

“Because. Because...” I say—yep, that’s me, the writer who has zero words.

“And why isn’t it going to work again?”

I huff and yank a yellow sweater from Kayla’s closet. “Because,” I say. Now that we’re clear as mud, can she please move on?

“And your plan is to prove that it won’t work and end things tonight?”

“Yes.” I give one enthusiastic nod. That is the plan. Quick and painless—like ripping off a band-aid.

“So, you’re going to purposely spoil the evening?”

“No. I won’t need to. Owen and I as besties works. Owen and I as a couple will flop. He’ll see. One date. That’s it.” I turn back to the closet, looking for that navy tube skirt I gave to Kayla last year for her birthday.

“And yet your kiss was... *electric*.”

I lick my lips. I’ve thought about this too. “It was a shock. That’s all.”

“I’d like to be shocked like that more often. If Tim tried to shock me with a kiss, he’d probably get distracted and trip over a foot-tall plastic T-Rex and bust his ankle.” She stares out, seeing nothing as if she’s imagining the whole scene. “No, we have to coordinate our kisses. Safe spaces.”

I smirk. “So romantic.”

She lifts one shoulder. “It is. Just a new kind of romance. One that involves little boys and plastic dinosaurs. Believe me, there is nothing more romantic than your husband doing the dishes or staying up all night with your sick child.” There’s a wistful look in her eyes before she blinks back to reality. “I still think you’re the one who is going to be shocked tonight.”

I lick my lips and plop myself onto the bed next to her. “Where’s your navy tube skirt?”

She gives an apologetic grin and hisses through her front teeth. “Steve cut it up to use as a backdrop for one of his Lego scenes.”

I gulp. “Cut it up?” That skirt was a Chen Go. It cost me a couple of Benjamin Franklins. I breathe out a sigh. “That’s okay. I’ll just stop at Target on my way home.”

“Sweetie. Forget the skirt. I want you to repeat these words: I, Annie Archer...”

Kayla waits, and so I do as she says—as silly as I may feel. “I, Annie Archer...”

“Am worthy,” she says.

I roll my eyes. “Am worthy.”

“To be loved.”

I swallow, her words tumbling to my gut like stones. “To be loved,” I speak just above a whisper. You should never give so much power to one person—and yet Maddox was so believable. Even Owen liked him. And apparently, Owen loved me way back then.

Besides, I’ve dated a lot of guys. A lot of nice, good human beings. I’ve never loved any of them. They never loved me.

The weird and strange thing is—I already know I love Owen. But I’ve always thought of that love as a buddy love.

Kayla’s still watching me, willing those words into my soul. She wraps one arm around my shoulders and leans her head next to mine. “Now you just need to believe it.”



Target is my hero. I pair a navy, knee-length pencil skirt from the store with Kayla’s center seam crew neck sweater. It’s a golden yellow and pairs so sweetly with the shoes Owen gave me.

I curl my straight hair into waves and add a hint of red to my already full, pink lips. No one can say I’m not trying. The fact that I tried is going to be the most proving thing of all when I convince Owen that this isn’t going to work and we need to go back to the perfect relationship of besties. The kind of relationship where no one’s heart gets broken.

I am ninety-nine percent ready when Owen rings the bell. He doesn’t just walk inside, and I think this must be a change with the title of our outing—DATE.

I open the door, and my best friend beams down at me.

“Hey,” I say, gulping out the word.

I can’t help but examine him—with his tight button-up shirt and his dark blue slacks. Owen is built well—*very well*. His blond hair still holds a few streaks where the sun shone down on it just a couple months ago, and his eyes are bright with anticipation.

*Crap.* My best friend is kind of hot.

I swallow again, and suddenly I am looking at the sky directly behind him. There’s a moon out there somewhere, I’ll find it. I don’t need to study Owen’s charming smile or strong forearms or chiseled jaw. I can’t escape the musky pine that radiates from him. Has he always smelled like the sweetest Christmas tree on the planet? Or is this new?

Sometime in the few seconds of me searching for the moon, Owen tangles his arms about my waist, my arms

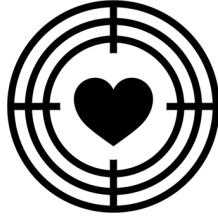
naturally rising and looping over his neck. He pulls me close and hugs me. In my heels, I'm able to rest my head on his shoulder.

This doesn't feel like a best-friend hug.

And it doesn't feel like something that's about to flop.

I close my eyes, breathe him in, and pretend it's all going to be okay.

## O W E N



I know that I shouldn't be so presumptuous—but I feel as if Annie is already mine.

In a way, she's always been mine. So, it's really not that difficult for my head to conjure a reality where we are more than we've always been.

She feels right in my arms. Right and perfect, as if my arms were sculpted for exactly her shape. She belongs with me—not with James or Aiden or Paxton. Or any of the others. But right here with me. I know it.

I bury my face into her neck and submerge myself in orange blossoms. Pulling back, it feels natural to leave her with a kiss. This is right—she feels it too, right?

But when my eyes fall to her mouth and I move an inch closer, Annie steps back.

“Owen—I never knew you moved so fast.” She chuckles under her breath, her stretched-out palm keeping me at a distance. “Second date, remember?”

My lips quirk upward. “I guess it doesn't feel fast for me. I've been in lo—”

Annie stops my word with two fingers to my lips. “We aren't using the L word, remember?”

“Right,” I say, through her fingers. “I've had *secret feelings* for years. So, it doesn't feel quick to me.”

“True.” One of her brows quirks up. “But then, I haven't known that long.”

“True,” I say, moving an inch closer—but then her hand is still keeping me at bay.

She drops it to my chest and her eyes follow. Her brows cinch and her head tilts at something she sees there. “What is that?”

I peer down, wondering if I’ve been in this shirt an entire thirty minutes and I’ve already spilled on myself. But nope—I missed a button. Rather than keeping the top two buttons of my dress shirt undone, there are three loose –and with that third unlatched, Annie is seeing the edge of my new addition. My one-beer, depressed-state, bullseye tattoo.

I actually don’t mind the thing anymore—but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to show it to Annie.

“Is that a tattoo?”

I lean away from the girl of my dreams and button up that pesky third button.

“Owen!”

“What? It’s nothing.”

One of her pretty manicured brows hikes up on her head. “It’s definitely not nothing. Show me.” She reaches for my shirt, but I pull back.

“Owen Gray Bailey,” she whines. And strangely it’s a sound that’s hard for me to resist. She starts again for the button that I’ve now done up.

“Trying to undress me already?” I say and then I wait.

Annie’s neck and cheeks turn a pretty pink and my nerves calm with the color. “I–” She blinks, hands falling to her sides.

“Should we go?” I say, certain I am James Bond, dodging bullets.

She nods, her lips folded in on one another.

I reach for the door just as Annie slips in front of me. Lightening fast, she yanks on my blue button-up and pops that

third button clean off the shirt. It flies to the ground—never to be seen again. James Bond is dead.

“Hey!” I bark, but I’m too late. Annie’s got my shirt opened to the side and showcasing my new ink. I clear my throat—fairly certain that my face is every bit as pink as hers now.

She drops her hand from my shirt, her brown eyes blinking up at me. “A bullseye?”

I nod.

“You tattooed a bullseye to your chest?”

It’s not as if I can deny the fact, she’s seen it. “I did. Over my heart.”

She doesn’t ask why and she doesn’t peer back at the thing. With stiff shoulders, she squares herself for the exit. “I’m ready to go now.”



**P**ne trees surround us on either side as I pull into the parking area. There’s a cruise boat in view just a few feet out into the water.

“The lake cruises? Are we going on a boat?”

“We are.” I peer over at her, feeling warmer simply because she’s near me. She’s near me, she knows my truth, heck she’s even seen my tattoo.

How is it that by simply telling her the truth, I love her even more?

Who knew that being honest would be so empowering? Meredith Porter is a genius.

“You’ve never been, right?” I ask.

“No.” Her gaze turns from the water to me. Her eyes search mine for a second. “You?”

“I haven’t.” I shrug. We never had money or time for boat rides as a kid.



“How is it that we’ve both lived here the majority of our lives and we’ve never done this before?”

I grin, open the door to my red Buick and step out into the cool night. I grab my suit coat from the back and slip it on, hoping the air won’t cool down much more.

I walk around to Annie’s side and tug on the collar of her brown coat. “Are you going to be warm enough?”

“I am. Plenty warm. In fact, my shoes match my sweater so perfectly I’m not keeping this coat on.”

My fingers on the collar of her jacket trail down to the zipper at the bottom, I pull it up. “You better keep it on, at least until we get inside.”

We board the boat along with a few dozen other patrons. It’s a good-sized boat, but not nearly as big as the one next to it. I made that choice on purpose—fewer people. If I could, I’d buy every ticket for this boat and make Annie and I the only paying customers aboard. But I can’t—so we’re here along with fifty strangers.

There are two levels with an inner heated space where we’ll eat. Twinkle lights trim every ledge and railing, making this old boat sparkle.

The captain gives us a short speech and then leads us to the dining room. We enter the covered dining area and walk into a wall of warmth with sweet and savory aromas. There’s a buffet of food against the long wall of this inner part of the ship. We stand in line and serve ourselves before finding a seat at one of the large community tables.

Not only are we on this ship with a few dozen other people, we’ll have to sit at a table with six strangers.

Annie seems to have the same idea that I have. She leads us to a table with eight empty chairs, and for the moment, we are left to ourselves.

She slips her coat from her arms and hangs it on the back of her chair. She sits, hands in her lap—paying zero attention to her food—and looks right at me.

“Want to play a game?” she says.

## ANNIE



Owen and I are like two big kids playing house. It's fun, but it's not real. The sooner he realizes that, the better. So, I've formed a genius plan in my head. One to prove that he and I—as a coupling couple—are more game than reality.

Owen watches me back, and I wait for his answer.

“A game?” he says. “What did you have in mind?”

“This table is about to fill up with strangers. Sweet older women who will want to know how long we've been together, and their kind husbands who will ask if I've started bugging you about children yet. So—let's play.” I bounce my brows at him. Will he take my bait? If we play imaginary Annie and Owen, he'll see that's all it is: imaginary.

He'll realize that bullseye on his chest doesn't represent me. It's just one of those funny coincidences, where we accidentally match, one that we never tell another soul about.

“So, you want to pretend that we've been together a long time?”

“I say we go all the way. Let's pretend we're *married*.”

His eyes turn to slits. “What's your angle, Archer?”

He knows me too well. “To have fun,” I lie, although this could be a good laugh.

“All right.” Owen leans toward me, his breath tickling my chin and cheek. “I'm game.” His face drops closer, and he lays a chaste kiss on the corner of my lips. “*Wife*.”

My heart decides that is the perfect moment to plummet into my toes. I am a goner. There may be no recovery.

Oh boy.

“Hellllo,” sings an older woman. She’s twice the size of the man who follows her, and she’s wearing more sequins than I’ve ever seen in one place at one time. Her feet shuffle, and when her belly hits the edge of the table, she drops her plate with a clunk. “I’m Carol.” She holds out a hand, and I blink at the speck of gravy between her first two knuckles.

Owen—like a good husband—takes Carol’s hand and shakes it while I give her a mega-grin. “Nice to meet you.”

“And you are?” Carol asks, looking right at me.

“Oh,” I say. “I’m Annie, and this is Owen.”

“Y’all from around here?” Carol asks.

We never did come up with a storyline... there was no time.

I think for only a second, and then Owen answers.

“We live back East. Just visiting, ah... for work.” The nicest man alive just lied to this stranger. That’s not very nice, Owen. But then, I guess I’d already talked him into lying with the whole married couple bit.

“Back East?” says the slim man still settling in next to Carol. “Where about?”

“Ah—” Owen starts.

I decide to help by claiming, “Virginia.”

Just as Owen announces, “Rhode Island.”

Owen’s brows lower. “Um, Virginia, Rhode Island. It’s a small town. I’m guessing you’ve never heard of it.”

“My, Stanley and I have only been as far as Nebraska.” Carol peers at Stanley, who I assume to be her husband. “You are far from home.”

“Quite far,” Stanley adds. “I need to get on the Internet and do a Google of ahh—” Stanley circles a finger toward Owen.

“That place.”

I scoff. “Gosh, it’s so small, it probably wouldn’t even come up!” I titter out a laugh, and Owen, playing his part, wraps one arm around my back.

His finger and thumb find a patch of skin at the nape of my neck, circling the skin there and sending shoots of bottle rockets into my stomach.

Those bottle rockets feel awfully real for my very fake husband.

Another couple sits, but Carol remains ever-focused on Owen and me.

“You’re newlyweds, aren’t you?” Her rosy cheeks flare pink with her grin. “I get feels about these things.” She sets both her hands on the table and leans in, still on her feet.

Stanley wraps an arm around her rump but nods at us. “She gets the feels.”

I swallow down my laugh and turn to peer at Owen. “The *feels*,” I say.

“She’s not wrong,” cool-as-a-cucumber Owen says. “We are newlyweds.”

“How long have you been married?”

“Two years,” I say. That’s still newlywed—right?

The only problem is right as I speak, so does Owen. “Six months,” he blabs.

“Two years and six months!” I bark, my eyes wide and unblinking.

Carol sits, sighs contentedly, and starts in on her meal.

Owen squeezes my shoulders, playing into the charade.

I wait for Carol and Stan to focus on the newcomers, but they are happy to stick with Owen and me.

“Any children yet?” Carol asks. “Two years is plenty long. Stan and I have four of our own.”

I give Owen a wry grin. I told him this was coming. Man, I love being right.

“Ah, no,” I say. “Not yet.”

“*Yet* being the key word,” Stanley chortles. “You just wait, Owen. She’ll be asking you for a baby soon.”

“Well, it might be the other way around, Stan.” Owen laughs as if he’s talking to an old friend.

When did my friend become so skilled at pretending? Oh yeah... years of hiding his feelings for me honed that skill.

Stanley laughs. “Is that so? What line of work are you in?”

This time, Owen sticks to the truth. “Education.”

Carol gives a shifty smile. “A *small* family then.”

“I work too,” I say, for some reason needing to defend my best friend and fake husband’s chosen profession to these strangers. “We do fine with both salaries, and Owen’s the best middle school teacher in all of C—” I knit my brows and think. “Rhode Island,” I finally decide on.

While Owen offers, “Virginia.”

I swallow. “Yep.” Shoot, where are we from again? Rhode Island, Virginia or Virginia, Rhode Island?

We dig into our meal, keeping up our ruse. Owen is surprisingly good at the fake husband game. The entire time, he drapes an arm around my back or presses a hand to my knee—Carol and Stan can’t even see my knee.

After the staff clears our meal, I rest my hand on the tabletop, and as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Owen laces his fingers through mine.

I suppose it isn’t all that unnatural. We’ve held hands before. *As friends*... Friends who might love each other, pretend to be married, and have matching tattoos.

“You two,” Carol says, lasering in on Owen and me. “You’re just madly in love, aren’t you?” Carol stands and points a finger at Owen and then me.

“You know it. Carol’s *feels* are never wrong.” Owen’s eyes fall from Carol to me.

There’s too much in that look, too much in those eyes. There is heat behind Owen’s stare, and I realize that I am playing a dangerous game.

We excuse ourselves and go outside, onto the boat deck. We lean against the twinkle light railing, staring out at the water with the moon shining down. I’d be lying through my teeth if I didn’t say this was romantic. It’s romantic as heck.

I shiver in the cool air—with my coat still hanging on the back of a chair in the dining room.

I’m starting to wonder if Owen is Tom Hanks and I’m Meg Ryan, because just like a film, he slips out of his suit coat and wraps his jacket around my shoulders.

“Thanks,” I say, sliding a glance his way before I gaze back out at the water.

“So,” Owen says, leaning his arms against the railing and turning his head to peer at me. “Did your plan work?”

“My plan?” I gulp. Has Owen become a secret mind reader?

“Yeah, you know. The one where you tell me we’ll play imaginary relationship, and then we see that it would never work?”

I clamp down on my full bottom lip. Scooping back a lock of hair, I break away from his hold and look out at the calm water. “Oh. *That* plan.”

Standing straight, Owen’s fingers feather at the side of my face, down my cheek and jaw to my neck. I swallow and twist a couple inches to peer up at him. “I’m not going anywhere, Annie. I know you. Every inch of you,” he says, and his eyes fall upon my lips.

I clear my throat. “Not every inch.”

His hand cups my neck, and I erupt in goosebumps and electricity. My fingers grapple at his shirt front. As if he were

a magnetic force giving me no other choice, I blink up to meet his ocean eyes head-on.

Owen's face inches closer to mine, closer, closer, closer. Until—I cram my eyes shut and hiss, freezing him in his tracks. “Second date. First kiss is a second date thing.”

“We've already had our first kiss.”

I dare to peek out at him with one eye. “Yes, but that was cheating.”

“Cheating?” He snickers. His breath warms my cool cheek, and his lips hover just inches from mine.

“Yes,” I say, my heart pattering so loudly there isn't even a possibility that Owen doesn't hear it. “No more cheating, Owen,” I tell him—and I'm banking on him listening. If he goes in for the kill, I'm a dead woman. I won't have the strength to stop him.

“Fine,” he says. “Second date.” He raises a couple inches and closes the gap, pressing a soft, chaste kiss to my forehead.

There's a low giggle, and then, “Oh, Stan. Remember those days.”

*Carol.* Carol is here, watching us. How long has Carol been privy to this private conversation?

“Photo time,” she sings.

I dart my eyes to the left, taking in her full form and frame. She's holding out her cell—not even mine or Owens.

“Come on, you two. I'm taking a picture of you. Line up!”

Owen straightens up, wraps one arm around me, and I slide mine easily about his waist. The strange thing about dating your best friend is that nothing is new, and yet *everything* is new. We've stood side by side a hundred times. Owen's wrapped his arm around me before. And yet, never like this. This pose means so much more.

Carol snaps a couple pictures, and then she smacks Stan on the arm. “Selfie, Stan. Where's the stick?”





Kayla is ready for a full report by the time I get home. So, I give it to her. I need to tell someone, and why not her? I need to process what just happened. She's my other best friend and my sister. Besides, I can't exactly give Owen the four-one-one on the night.

"Send me the pic!" She squeals.

"I can't," I say, secretly thankful that Carol took the photo—that she didn't ask to use mine or Owen's phone. "It's on Carol's phone."

"That's ridiculous. How will you ever see it?" Kayla mumbles.

"I won't. And that's fine. It would only complicate things."

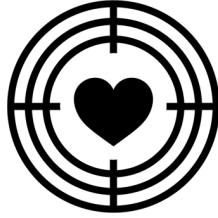
"The man has a bullseye tattoo on his chest, Annie. You have surpassed complicated. Embrace it."

I shake my head as I slip into my sweats. "I'm not sure I know how to embrace it. Besides, that tattoo doesn't mean anything." It's a lie.

"It means everything. And you know it," she says, refusing to be fooled. "Let go, girl. Let go of Maddox's words. Let go of your own personal judgments. Let go and embrace."

But those sound like very conflicting instructions.

## O W E N



*M*y brothers get to watch the game while I am being grilled by my sister, my mother, my sort of sister-in-law, and a seven-year-old who knows waaaay too much.

“And then what?” Coco asks, waving me on.

“Then we went out to the bow of the boat.”

Meredith sighs. “Romantic.”

“It was.” I swallow, almost choking on the words.

Alice stands on a stool, propping herself up onto the kitchen counter so that she’s the same height as the rest of us. She will not be left out of this conversation. “Come on, man! Did you leave her with a smack-o-roo?” Dramatically, she brings her arms out wide, and then her hands whack just before she taps her fingertips together.

“A what?” My brows lower, trying to make sense of what she’s said.

“A kiss,” Coco explains. “She wants to know if you kissed her.”

“I think it’s a valid question,” Meredith says.

Mom nods. “I agree.”

All four sets of eyes are on me, glued to my face like seventh graders watching a fight in the hallway. “Ah—” A breathy squeak leaves my throat.

“Hey, fam!” Coop says from the doorway. He smirks a little at the scene in front of him. “We just needed more chips out there. How’s Owen’s interrogation going?”

“We aren’t interrogating him,” Mom says.

“We’re helping,” Coco tells him.

“Take me with you,” I whisper to Coop as he slips past us, snagging another bag of Doritos from the cupboard.

My traitorous little brother just sneers and walks from the room, one hand stuffed into the Cool Ranch family-sized bag.

“Owen.” Coco moans, tugging on my shirt.

“I—” I clear my throat. “Maybe this is private.”

“Nothing is private, son.” Mom shakes her head. Not even my own mother will defend me. “Annie’s writing about it all for the world to read. So come on. How did that romantic boat ride end?”

“Without a kiss,” I say, just to stop all the gawking. Geez, do they have nothing else to do?

“Ahhh.” Alice jumps from the counter with a whiny moan, then takes off for the living room. Apparently, I did not give her an ending worth sticking around for.

“I’m with Alice,” Coco says.

Mom scratches at her jawline. “It’s okay if you’re nervous, sweetheart.”

I don’t need kissing lessons, dating tips, or a sex talk from my personalized *View* committee. Instead of Whoopi Goldberg and Barbara Walters, I get Lucy Bailey—mother of the smitten; Coco Taylor, all-knowing veterinary sister; Meredith Porter, quirky friend; and Alice Taylor, opinionated seven-year-old.

“It’s not okay. *Owen*, you cannot be nervous with Annie.” Coco groans.

Meredith tilts her head. Her drawn brow says she does not agree. “You’d deny someone’s feelings, Coco. If he—”

I hold up both hands. “I’m not denying my feelings. I’m respecting hers.”

“Oh, that’s good too.” Meredith points to me.

Coco crosses her arms—still not appeased. “But she kissed you back last week.”

“Wait one second,” Mom says. “Last week?” She huffs, a little disgruntled. “I am so out of the loop.”

I give Coco a small glare—something that isn’t easy for me—and she winces.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t make me regret sharing with you.”

Coco slaps a hand over her mouth while my mother continues to stare at me—just like she did when I was eight years old and she wanted an explanation for the one missing slice of Grandma Bailey’s birthday cake. The woman can wait like no other.

I swallow. “Yes. I kissed her last week. It was... unexpected.”

“And she kissed you back?”

I dart a small glance at Coco, who I am determined to be mad at. “Yes. But she’s still unsure.”

“But she’s coming to Thanksgiving,” Mom says as if it’s fact rather than a question. She breaks from our huddle and snatches a bottle of water from the fridge. “We can fit one more—”

“Mom, her sister lives here. I’m sure she’s spending Thanksgiving with Kayla. She might even be going to Boise to see her parents.”

“You don’t know?” Meredith asks.

I mean, normally I would know. But Annie and I have been a little distracted with other things lately. We haven’t talked about the holiday. “Uh. No. I don’t.”

“Well, text her, silly.” Coco’s hands shoo me on.

“If it’s easier, honey, tell her that I wanted to invite her.” Mom tilts her head and gives me one of her sweet, winning smiles.

But I don’t feel won over. I feel bombarded. Still, I keep my tone kind when I protest. “I’m not ten, Mom. I don’t need you to help me out of a sticky situation anymore.”

She gives a small head shake. “Whatever you say, honey.”

Still, their eyes won’t leave me. But then, maybe they’ve given me an out. “I’ll text her,” I say, and with the words, I head down the hall to the bathroom. I lock myself safely inside and pull out my phone.

**Me:** Hey, Tuesday is my last day of school. Want to come over for dinner?

**Annie:** Sure, are you cooking?

That was quick. But then, Annie loves it when I cook for her. Maybe I need to clarify—

**Me:** For you? For date #2? Of course, I’m cooking.

Then sheepishly, and a little cowardly—apparently, I only have so much bravery today—ten-year-old me adds:

**Me:** And Mom wanted to invite you over for Thanksgiving—if you don’t have plans.

## ANNIE



*A* *date*. I should have realized that's what he meant.

"You agreed to this, Annie," Kayla says over my shoulder.

I hug my phone to my chest. "I know that, Kayla. I don't need you to remind me."

"So," she says, "stop fretting. I can see your fretting lines. Just embrace it. He's asked you on a date. Go. *Happily*." She gives me one stern nod. "But you're coming to my house for Thanksgiving." She waves a hand at me. "Tell him."

**Me:** I'm spending the holiday with Kayla's family.

That's an easy text. But then, for some reason, as if someone else has possessed my typing fingers, I add:

**Me:** I'm guessing I could make it over in time for pie.

"Acceptable," Kayla says from behind me.

"Hey! I told you to stop reading over my shoulder."

"Someone has to make sure you don't spoil things with Owen." She walks across the room to where her basket of folded laundry sits. She hoists it up and starts for the hall that leads to the boys' bedrooms.

"Why weren't you this annoying with James?"

“Because James wasn’t right for you. Owen is.”



My sister’s words are like a bad tattoo, one that isn’t inked to my behind but across my forehead. Every time I look in the mirror, it’s there. I can’t get rid of it.

Or maybe it’s a bullseye, marked on Owen’s chest. Hidden away—but taunting me just the same.

Kayla’s *Owen rooting* has doubled since he confessed. Margo isn’t much better. She ate up the short article about Owen’s letter and our boat ride. I even added our ruse about being married. And she thought it was—and I quote—*adorable*. I have never in my life heard Margo use that word before.

So, here I am, bagged coffee grounds in hand—because I was not going to bring alcohol and inhibit my senses to this shin-dig—standing on Owen’s front porch.

How many times have I walked into this house without warning? But tonight? I stand on the porch, staring at the wooden door—which needs sanding—*not* going in.

I swallow and peer down at my painted heels, the ones Owen gave me. I can’t help but smile when I see them. They make me think of my friend. My thoughtful, loving friend.

“This is O.” I pull in a breath and push it out, then set my fist to the door.

Just like the shoes, I can’t help but smile when I see Owen.

He smirks. “You knocked.”

I lift one shoulder. “I don’t know the rules to dating you, Owen, just the ones to being your bestie.”

With a hand on each side of the entrance, he leans his head outside, his cheek and beard bristles brushing faintly against my jaw. “They’re the same rules,” he whispers in my ear as if he’s telling me a secret.

My heart races and my head shifts—without permission. The corner of my lips brush Owen’s stubble. I swallow and rein back the urge to kiss the man I’ve called best friend for fifteen years.

But he’s making it difficult.

Thankfully, Owen pulls back, standing straight and moving to the side to let me in.

Instead, I choose to make things extra awkward and bring up kissing—in a roundabout way. Yep, that’s me, Annie the Awkward. The girl skilled at ending all relationships quickly. “Your letter was pretty obvious this week, Owen. You’re losing your touch.”

“Was it?”

I play the words over in my mind, certain he wrote them. He used my own words, how could it not be Owen?

**Dear Ask Annie,**

**Second date means first kiss. Any pointers?**

**Sincerely,**

**Where’s The Kiss Cam**

“I wasn’t sure I’d get a reply,” he says with a chuckle.

“Not one that I’ll be printing, that’s for sure.” I did write him back—just this morning. I didn’t know what to say to him. It took me some time. I was so sure that after date number one, he’d be past all this. But instead, he’s more certain than ever, and I am a bumbling, confused idiot. In my defense, when I assured him that the first kiss was a second date occurrence, I didn’t think we’d be going on one.

Owen walks through his semi-bare living room and into the galley kitchen. He lifts the lid to a bubbling pot and stirs with a wooden spoon.

“I thought you gave stout advice.”

I hug the bag of Mountain Grove coffee grounds to my chest and hope he keeps the advice in his head.



He doesn't.

Because my favorite person in all the world has decided now is a great time to torture Annie.

"As long as the mood is right, kiss away," he says, quoting my letter. My letter that clearly stated pay attention to the mood—to *her* mood, to his mood.

I don't plan to be in a kissing mood tonight.

I clear my throat. "Here," I say, not caring that Owen is stirring his pot of homemade red sauce. "I brought this for you."

He grunts as I push the bag of gourmet coffee grounds into his chest. I set my hands to my hips, feeling as if my jeans are a tad too tight. I need to breathe. I should have worn stretchy pants. And maybe not eaten that entire bag of Chips Ahoy.

"Ah, thanks."

"You bet. Can I help?" I open up his cupboard—I know where the paper plates are hidden in this house.

He pauses, nodding to where the galley opens up to an eating area. There are plates—real ones—already on the table, along with wine goblets, actual metal silverware, and long white candle sticks, already lit.

"Oh." I scratch behind one ear. He's written the book of Genesis on creating the right mood.

*Owen Bailey!*

"Can you turn on some music?" He nods toward his cell and speaker on the end of the counter.

"Music?" I smile. *Perfect*. Nothing kills candlelight like a little Weird Al. "You bet."

I pick up Owen's cell, tapping in his security code—realizing for the first time it's his birthday month and day—and then mine. I gulp, my eyes darting up to where Owen is pulling breaded chicken from the oven. And then I search through his music app in the artist's section. I pass by Cold Play and Taylor, and since Weird Al isn't an option, I skip

right over to Queen. I start with a classic. Who could complain? *We Will Rock You* booms from the small but powerful speaker that sits on Owen's window seal.

His head swivels my way, one brow quirked.

Okay, maybe Owen could complain.

But then, he grins and shakes his head.

I nod my head to the beat, walking around Owen's carefully laid table. When Freddie belts the chorus, I blow out one of the candles, then join in on the singing.

I'm so busy singing and nodding and not feeling swooned that I don't even notice when Owen walks up behind me, lighter in hand. He lights back up the one smoking candle. Then he sets a hand on my back, leading me to one of the two empty chairs at this candlelit table. There's a platter of chicken parmesan in front of me and one sitting across from me for Owen.

"Oh," I yip. "We're ready."

"Yes," Owen says. "We are." He pulls my chair out, and when I just stand there giving Freddie two more nods, he stands in front of me. Owen cups my cheeks and I blink, looking up into his big ocean eyes. "Time to sit," he says, slipping both hands into mine.

And then I plop hard into the chair. He hasn't even poured the wine yet, and I'm already tipsy, despite Freddie belting his rock anthem.

Owen moves to sit across from me just as Freddie betrays me. His rocking song has ended, and now he's singing *Love of My Life*.

Stupid Freddie.

I peer down at my plate, and my heart thumps. Everything is so beautiful, and the food smells divine. My mouth started watering the second I walked into this kitchen. So much time. So much effort. And he's done all this for me.

"Are you ready for my three meaningful questions and one personal fact?"

My fork hovers with the perfect bite of chicken, noodle, and sauce. My mouth simultaneously drops and pulls up in a grin. “You can’t use the meaningful questions and personal fact on me.”

“Of course I can. That’s what we’re doing here. Following your advice.” He smirks. “Remember?”

“But O, I know everything about you, and you know everything about me.”

“You think?”

“I know,” I say.

“Challenge accepted.” He winks at me. Owen *winks*. At *me*. I force down my one bite and attempt to not choke.

“Fine,” I say, trying so hard for cool—but I do not feel cool right now. “Go for it.”

Owen cuts into his meat, swirling his fork until there are noodles twirled around the teeth of the utensil. “In tenth grade,” he begins, and I squirm a tiny bit in my seat, suddenly not as confident as I was ten seconds ago. “I got an anonymous note from a girl.”

“That isn’t a question,” I mumble and shove a King-Kong-sized bite of chicken into my mouth.

Owen chuckles. Still, he hasn’t taken a bite yet. “I know. I’m getting there.” Another wink. I may have to jab a fork in his beautiful blue eyeball tonight if he doesn’t stop doing that. “Do you know who wrote it?”

“Tha—coul—ha—been—” I say through my chipmunk cheek mouth full. I swallow down the bite making me speak like a toddler and summon my confidence. “*Anyone*.” I shake my head and shrug my shoulders all at the same time. Because I don’t know—maybe lots of girls put notes in Owen’s locker that year, not just me. “Besides, why would I remember some random note that was shoved into your locker almost a decade ago?” I say each word speedy as if I’m an auctioneer.

“I never said it was shoved into my locker.”

I scoop another bite into my mouth and say, through food and teeth and chewing, “I assumed—”

“Wow, you’re good Annie. You assumed right.”

Of course I assumed right. Tenth grade is the year that I thought I had a thing for my bestie. I quickly sobered up—something I keep waiting for Owen to do. But before I came to my senses, I wrote that kid the sappiest love letter known to man—a *poem*—folded it up, and shimmied it through the vent of his locker.

It’s only by the grace of all things good in this world that I have blocked out the majority of the words of that rhyming catastrophe.

“I could grab it. I thought I recognized the handwriting all those years ago, so I held onto it—”

“You did not!” I roar. I don’t bark. I don’t yip. I don’t growl. I scream the words as if there is an intruder with a gun about to force me into performing *Sweating to the Oldies* with Richard Simmons. I shiver. My grammy made me work out to that video with her once, and I have never been the same.

Owen shifts to the left, and I leap. My knees smack into the table, and our drinks jostle, sloshing water and wine onto Owen’s crisp white tablecloth, but I catch his hand—his left with my right.

He’s not going anywhere.

“Annie,” he says, his fingers turning my palm upward. “Honest and true, right?” His thumb traces over the black lines of my bow-and-arrow tattoo. My eyes lock on his heart—where I know that inked bullseye hides. And my whole body floods with warmth.

Curse that thing.

I narrow my gaze on him. “*Fine*. I wrote the letter.”

“I always wondered.” He gives me a lop-sided grin, and if it weren’t so devilishly handsome, I would smack it right off his face. “O is for optimistic, W is for warmhearted—”

“Stop! I remember, I remember!”

His fingers hold to mine, his thumb tracing lines over my wrist. “Why didn’t you ever confess?”

My lips, gums, and inner cheeks pull together as if I have been sucking on a sour War Head. “Why didn’t you?”

“Fair,” he says.

“And that’s two questions—you’ve got one left and then something personal.” I swallow and blink away from his eye contact.

“Okay—one more.” He threads his fingers through mine, entwining our digits one by one. “When did your feelings for me go away?”

The fact is, I don’t know. I don’t know when—or honestly—if they ever faded. I just know that one day, I woke up and I knew that I never wanted a day without Owen. I couldn’t lose him like I’d lost half a dozen boyfriends before him.

## ANNIE



'm honestly not sure.”

“*I* most merciful, forgiving grin any man has ever worn. I should be able to answer this one question for him. But I don't know how to, and Owen is the kind of man to give me grace.

It's no wonder that Lucy Bailey was blessed with four sons. She knows what she's doing in raising them.

“One personal fact about me—” Owen starts.

“I know you, Owen. And the biggest secret of all is out there now. That, and a few baby secrets. I still can't believe you don't like the Cowboys.”

His fingers squeeze around mine. “I know. I'm sorry about that.”

“Don't be. I will laugh every time the Cowboys kick—wait, who is your favorite then?”

“The—”

“Bengals,” I finish for him.

Owen nods.

“Yeah, I saw you eyeing Logan Wilson last week.” I roll my eyes and give a small scoff, carefully retrieving my hand from Owen's. “The Bengals. Fine. I will laugh at you every time the Cowboys beat the Bengals.”

“Deal,” Owen says, his full lips still sprouting a grin. He’s making it so hard to look away. If only that smile would falter.

“There—your one personal.” I blink, breaking my gaze with Owen’s lips, and return my attention back to the meal he made. The next twenty minutes are filled with fairly normal chatter and eating. Just me and Owen—like always.

Somehow the babble of nothingness gives me hope that we will be normal again one day. *One day*—when our time is up. When fate decides to tell Owen he’s over me, we’ll go back to being us.

“Annie,” he says when there isn’t anything left for either of us to eat. His hand reaches for mine once more.

I stand, though, clutching my fingers at the edges of my dinner plate. “I’ll do the dishes.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Owen says, standing with me. “I have a movie set up in the living room and—”

Yeah, I saw that living room—dim lights, more candles, and some old Julia Roberts romcom in the cue.

I will be washing every last dish.

“I made key lime pie and—”

“Owen,” I yip. “*Dishes.*” Key lime pie? It’s like he knows my every weakness... mostly because he does.

Key lime pie might as well be my own personal aphrodisiac. My only hope is that he burnt the crust and used artificial lime flavoring.

I swallow, but my mouth has gone dry. I’m happy to see a load of dishes stacked from Owen’s cooking today. Sure, our plates and glasses can go into his near-empty dishwasher, but the rest of this, I will be washing by hand. It may take hours. And by the time the last dish gets scrubbed, I’ll be exhausted and need to go home.

*Perfect.*

Nothing kills the mood like caked-on grease and grime.

Surprisingly, Owen doesn't argue. He sets up his speaker, switching the music to something slow and low, and turns the water to hot, filling the sink.

"Hey, I'm doing that," I say. He isn't going to ruin my plan and rush through this process. "You know where everything goes, so I'll wash. You dry and put dishes away."

I don't miss the small sigh that falls from Owen's chest. "Whatever you want, Annie."

I pause, but only for a second, then turn back to my saving grace—the sink full of dirty dishes. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Give in to me. You always give me what I want, O."

Owen runs a hand over his hair, his smile lop-sided. Dang that smile. "Is that really a problem?"

I smack the water off and turn to face him, hands on my hips. "Yes, it's a problem. *Cowboys*." I groan. "*Rap* music. And *butt* fries!"

"Okay, in my defense, the butt fry thing is ridiculous, and I was certain you'd grow out of it." He leans against the counter, moving inches away from me. It wouldn't take much for me to jump up and chest bump him this very minute.

Still, my lips twitch with his words; they want to betray me with a smile and a laugh, but I won't let them. Instead, I say, "That's no defense. You know how childish I am."

"I know you're brilliant."

"Ha." I roll my eyes—proving yet again that I'm not brilliant but childish. "Butt fries are brilliant?"

"No." He shakes his head. "But that paper you wrote on ethics and journalism back in college—*that* was brilliant."

I clamp my top teeth onto my bottom lip. "That was pretty good."

Owen beams down at me. "It was. And that time you set up the secret Santa for the Glover family—*that* was pretty brilliant."



I swallow. Only Owen and my sister knew about that. I didn't want to risk the family finding out who was behind the secret gifts.

“The love, effort, and work you put into your advice each week—*brilliant*.”

I wet my dry lips and blink up at him.

“If you didn't want me to fall in love with you, Annie, you should have stopped being so wonderful.”

I gulp, heart pounding. This isn't dish doing. This isn't up to our elbows in grease and grime. This is stupidly classic Owen—*sweet as ever*. “Yeah?” is all I can say. I don't even mean to speak, but the word escapes before I can stop it.

“Yeah,” he says, leaning ever closer. His lips beckon mine. Like a lost ship out to sea, they want the lighthouse, they search for it their whole entire sailing lives. And now they have found it. It's not my fault that Owen's lighthouse lips are calling to mine.

The music changes to a faster beat, and it wakes me from this Owen trance.

I set both palms on Owen's upper chest, stopping him just as his lips flutter near mine. I can almost feel them. *Almost*. “Dishes,” I whisper, using every ounce of energy left inside of me to turn back to the kitchen sink.

I start with the big sauce pot. This one dish alone will take me twenty minutes to scrub.

Owen waits for me, peering at me while I sweat through my shirt and study this pot. “Any interesting letters this week?” he asks.

*Work*. Yep. This, I can talk about. I think for a second. “This one girl wrote in asking how to help her mom realize that she's the mom, not one of her girlfriends.”

“That's a little sad.”

“Not really. She's not wrong—there needs to be boundaries. Yes, your mother can—” I pause my words and my scrubbing. Owen's fingers trail at my neck, moving my

hair to the side and sending small exploding sparks down my back and into my head.

“Your mother can what?” he says, but the soft touches and trailing fingers don’t stop.

“Your—your mother—um, well, your mother can be your best—” I pull in a breath as Owen’s lips find the base of my skull. “Your mother—” I start again, but another kiss, and then a third trail over the back of my neck.

“Your mother,” he says, with another kiss. He’s marking a path, adjusting my wide collar to kiss at the bare skin over my neck and right shoulder.

“Owen...” I puff and gulp and try very hard not to pee my pants. I haven’t decided—am I going to pee myself, or am I going to turn around and smother him? Nope. Neither. Neither is happening. “O, stop.”

He lifts his head and immediately the warmth of his skin and breath are gone. They’re gone. And with them, my self-control.

I huff out a breath, keeping my focus forward—on my dirty pot, my lifeline pot. “Okay, *go*. Go.”

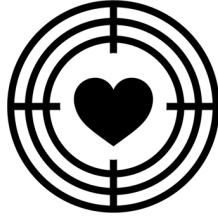
Owen’s hand snakes around me, flattening over my stomach. He holds me close, my back to his chest, while leaning in, pressing kiss after kiss over the bare skin of my neck and shoulder.

I am a goner.

Who knew Owen had all *this* in him?

Not me.

## O W E N



I'm pretty sure I'm a drowning man who's just come up for air. Or a starving man who's just been given his first meal. I've been living inside of a box—one that hid my feelings and desires from Annie. The lid is off, and there's no fitting it back on.

I can't help myself.

I mean, I can. When she asked me to stop, I did. Painfully. But I did it. I'm not an animal. But when she gave me the go-ahead, I happily obliged.

After kissing every inch of Annie's neck, she releases a small moan. I'm pretty sure it's accidental, but I'm also sure this is code for *I'm done with the dishes*.

I whirl her around to face me. Annie's arms snake up to my neck without any encouragement at all. Then she rises on tiptoes, her mouth finding mine.

I can't pull her close enough. She can't hug me tight enough. I lift her up, and while her hips and bottom rest on the thin counter edge right in front of the sink, her legs wrap around my waist.

I trail kisses along Annie's jaw to her right earlobe and make my way back again. Every touch, every kiss, every sigh she unintentionally makes feels more and more right.

I know Annie almost better than I know myself. This is a piece of her I've always wanted to explore. The piece that titles us more than just friends. The part that makes me hers and her mine.

“Owen,” she says my name in a gasp of air, her hands tangled in my hair. “We should slow down.”

I am a genie, and she is my master. I may not want to slow down. But I will. For her. Only, Annie’s lips find mine just then, parting and exploring and contradicting every word she just forced herself to mutter.

Because I know that too.

Annie doesn’t trust herself when it comes to relationships, and she *is* forcing herself to speak this minute. Still, I let her lead, and she guides me right into another bout of kissing. The window above my sink, the one directly behind Annie, is starting to fog up, and I’m not sure if it’s from the sink of hot water or Annie and me.

It’s warm in here.

At least it is, until—

“Uncle Owen!” There is a shriek just inside the kitchen entrance. “You’re eating her face right off!”

I jolt, releasing Annie.

Alice is watching and wailing... and I pray I haven’t scarred the girl for life. In my haste, Annie slips right into the tub of warm water behind her.

“Alice?” I say as Annie yips behind me. I take hold of her waist and lift her from the sink, helping her to the ground. “What are you—”

“Alice Jasmine. Did you knock? I told you to knock before—” Coco pauses mid-sentence, her eyes drifting from Alice’s horrified expression to a wet Annie and a disheveled me.

“He was eating her!” Alice bellows.

“No,” Annie says with a quick head shake.

“I wasn’t.” I swallow and pull in a breath through my nostrils. “I wasn’t eating her, Alice.”

Coco’s eyes flutter closed, and she adjusts Lula on her hip. “I’m so sorry, Owen. I thought your date was tomorrow night, and I thought we’d help with—” She crams her eyes closed,

then peeks them open. “Annie, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry! We’re going. We’re going!”

“Somebody better start explaining things down here,” Alice says. She stomps her foot and crosses her arms over her pink glittery T-shirt.

“Ah, we were kissing, Alice. I was kissing her.”

“I have never seen Daddy kiss Mama that way. You are doing it wrong, man.”

My heart is pounding, and I’m trying to decide how to respond to that when Annie beside me bursts with a bubble of laughter.

She slaps a hand over her mouth. “I’m going to go change,” she says, moving her wet backside past Coco, Alice, and Lulabelle. We hear her jog up the wooden staircase as she goes to scour my room for something dry to wear.

“Owen.” Coco sighs. “I cannot apologize enough! I really thought—”

“It’s fine.” My eyes drop to Alice. At least, I think it’s fine.

“You, young lady, must remember to knock before entering,” Coco scolds.

“You don’t knock,” Alice says with a mic-drop one-shoulder shrug. And she isn’t wrong. Coco and my brothers rarely knock before they enter my house. Before tonight, it never once bothered me.

“You’re right. But I did tell you to. And we will start knocking. Immediately.”

Alice sighs. “I don’t know. I think we got here just in time. Annie might have been meat for the wolves!”

My seven-year-old niece is making me second-guess my kissing skills.

“Alice.” Coco moans. “Come on, we’re going.”

“But I wanna say goodbye to Annie.”

Lula holds a chubby little fist my way, giving me a little wave or possibly telling me she'd like to stay too. *Oof*, those girls are hard to say no to.

"If she—" I start, but I'm secretly grateful when Coco gives me a look to shut me up.

"Let's go see Uncle Miles."

"Yes!" Alice pumps her fist. "M&Ms!"

I walk over to the trio, ready to walk them to the door. Coco gives me a side hug, and Lula latches onto my shirt collar.

"Come on, sweetie." Coco hushes the babe. But Lula fusses, and like a sucker, I take the baby at her command.

"I'm sorry, Owen."

"Stop," I tell her. "I'm never sad to see my two favorite nieces."

"When you and Annie get married, will you have more nieces? Because I will not appreciate the competition." Alice spins on my kitchen tile, in her own world. "When Marky's brother got married, he suddenly had another little sister, and Marky does not like that one bit."

I chuckle. "Annie's sister only has sons."

"Whew," she breathes out with another spin.

Then she taps me on the leg, and I squat down with Lula so we're both eye level with Alice.

"I am here to help you out, Uncle Owen." Alice pecks my cheeks. "That's how you kiss, okay? Don't scare the woman."

I squint, studying the little girl who is getting way too big. "Great advice. Thank you."

"Maybe I'll write in the paper just like Annie, and I'll teach everyone how to kiss without eating faces off."

I stand and blink, thinking about my brother-in-law. "Is Jude going to kill me?"

“It’s not your fault. She walked into your house without warning.” Still, Coco grimaces. “He’ll be fine.”

There’s a noise upstairs—my bedroom door closing.

“That’s our cue, girls. Time to go.” Coco reaches for Lula, who reluctantly allows her mother to take her. We are best buds, after all.

Before Annie can reach the landing, my sister and her daughters are out the door.

## ANNIE



Thanksgiving with Grammy is always entertaining. But Grammy plus keeping my Owen secret—it's like I'm experiencing my own mission impossible.

“Look at your sister,” Grammy says, smacking Kayla on the back.

My sister's eyes bulge a little with the loving pat.

“Husband, sons. When is it your time, my Annie?”

I swallow. “Let me clear the table, Kayla! You cooked—I'm doing the dishes!”

“I see you running away, young lady. You must stop breaking every heart you come in contact with.” Grammy stands, though you can hardly tell, she's such a shorty.

“Here, Gram,” Kayla says, filling her goblet up to the brim with wine.

“I'm a small woman, Kayla. I've had my fill.” But she scoops up the glass and sips from its contents.

Kayla has not successfully distracted her, though. The boys run past and into the hall, where their rooms full of toys await. Grammy's head follows them until they are out of sight—and for just a moment, I think I'm in the clear.

“I'm helping,” Grammy says, following after me into the kitchen.

Kayla shuffles after the two of us. Her job is to keep me from spilling all my Owen beans. So far—so good.



“Why are you leaving for pie? You don’t like my lemon butter pie?” Grammy sets one hand on her hip.

I bustle at the sink, not facing her. My eyes go wide, staring down at the dishes.

While Kayla jumps in to rescue me. “Owen’s mom invited her, Gram.”

“Owen—nice boy.” She hums and then, in the same breath, barks, “Why?”

I clear my throat and fill the sink with suds. “Because she likes me.”

Grammy grunts. “I think that Owen likes you.”

“You disapprove?” Kayla asks, which is not at all distracting her from the Owen topic.

“No. I like him. I don’t like Annie breaking his heart.”

“Grammy.” Kayla moans and I see her studying me, even if she thinks I don’t. “Annie doesn’t break hearts. She’s just looking for the right person.”

Grammy huffs out a breath, then, charging over, she rips out the paper I shoved into my pocket this morning, before I left my apartment. I just wanted Kayla to look at the article. “What are you carrying around?”

She begins to unfold it, but I am too fast for her. I brought that to get Kayla’s opinion, not to show Grammy. I tear it from her grasp, ripping off one of the corners of the copy paper.

“What is that?” Grammy asks.

“Nothing. Just an article. It needs an edit, that’s all. You can read it in the paper later,” I tell her, knowing that she won’t. For the first time ever, I’m grateful my Grammy doesn’t read my letters or my articles. She’d be reading about me, about Owen. And she’d have plenty to say on the topic.

I leave the water in the sink and jog out of sight into Kayla’s living room, where my coat hangs on a hook.

“Annie?”

I whip around to my sister.

“Sweetie—you okay?”

I sigh, the breath shaky in my chest. “Yeah.”

“What is it?”

I shake my head and hold the paper out for her. She reads in her head the article I wrote explaining exactly why Owen and I would never work.

Kayla’s brows knit. “I thought things were going well.”

I lick my lips, my eyes glued to the paper in her hands. “They are. But how long will that last? You know me.”

Kayla sets a loving hand on my shoulder. “I do know you, Annie. You’re my baby sister. And I know that you’re pretty wonderful with Owen.” Her eyes go back to the page, and her brow is so furrowed, I’m afraid she’s going to be left with permanent wrinkles there. “Are you really printing this?”

I shrug. “Not yet. I don’t know.” I pull in a breath. “I mean, maybe. Eventually.”

“Annie,” she says, and her tone is pitying.

I snatch the article from her hand and stuff the thing into the pocket of my coat. “It’s just a first draft. It isn’t for sure.”

“Give yourself a chance, little sister.”

The knot in my throat grows. I’m not sure how to do that. I can’t speak. So, I merely nod.

“Come on,” she says, looping her arm through mine. “You know Grammy is going to make you eat a slice of that lemon pie before you go. You might as well work off those calories with a little dish duty.”

After a wonderful dinner and time with family, I am *sorrowful*. I shouldn’t be. But I am. I’m pretty sure the only person who can fix it is waiting for me back in Coeur d’Alene.

So, that’s where I go—back to Coeur d’Alene to let my Owen sun mend my heart. At least for now. At least for the moment. Until everything falls apart.

And then, who is going to fix me?

## ANNIE



Three weeks pass and Owen writes me three more letters. We go on three more dates. My best friend is a saint. Each date ends the same exact way, with a myriad of confusing feelings and a thousand kisses. And yet, Owen keeps his hands respectable and his lips above my neck. My reproductive system may disagree, but I appreciate it.

I pull in a deep breath and do something I never, in my twenty-four years of life and fifteen years of knowing Levi Bailey, thought I would do. I open the door to Levi's bike shop—here to purposely speak to the man.

To his credit, he doesn't cringe when he sees me walk through the door. But then—he doesn't smile either.

"Hey, Levi," I say, feeling much less angsty than usual. Normally, Levi produces an irritable emotion inside of me—one that says, *leave no survivors*.

"Annie." His eyes turn to slits. "You need a bike? I'm not sure those shoes are conducive to riding."

I glance down at my four-inch heels and shove one hand into my denim pants pocket. "Uhh—no. No bike. Just a *friendly* chat."

"Friendly? I didn't think that was in your vocabulary."

I swallow and bite back the comeback on the tip of my tongue. "Levi, I know we haven't always gotten along."

His brows raise, and I get the feeling he's holding back too. It's pretty natural for both of us to want to rip the other's head off.

But when he doesn't verbally attack me, I keep going. "But I'm here for a truce."

"Oh really?"

"Yes." I swallow and lift my eyes to meet his. "I don't think I would have liked me very much either had I thought Owen was always changing who he was for me." I shake my head, wondering if anything I've said makes sense. "I mean, if I were you, thinking about me. But I am me, and I didn't know what Owen was doing. So—"

"Annie," he says, walking out from behind the checkout counter. "Before you confuse us both, let's just call it good."

"Good?"

"Yeah. Owen told me how mad you were when he fessed up. He's an idiot."

"Such an idiot," I agree. And strangely, it feels really great to agree with Levi. "My opinion of Owen isn't based on the way he eats French fries—"

"Because that whole theory is ludicrous," he says, interrupting me.

But we're here to make amends, so I ignore his insult and keep going. "Or that he doesn't like the same team as me."

"Because the Cowboys suck."

"Hey!" I bark, all thoughts of a truce lost. "The Bengals suck."

But Levi only shrugs. Apparently, Owen and Levi do not share the same team either.

"Okay... well, whoever you cheer for, they suck."

Levi smirks. "I actually don't mind the Cowboys."

The ranting inside of my body pauses. "Wait. Really?"

“No. They suck.” Levi laughs, and it sounds strangely natural. “But I do appreciate your passion.” He folds his arms over his chest and leans his back against the counter. “Listen, Annie. I don’t dislike you. I never have. I just always hated Owen feeling like he had to change himself for someone—*anyone*. But apparently, you dislike that idea as well.”

My fire fizzles. “I do. I really do.”

“And you like my brother.”

I love his brother. The thought slams into me like a sledgehammer—I have said and thought those words a million times. I love Owen. But in this second, for the very first time, they hold a different meaning.

Because dang it all—I *love* Owen.

Like, *love* love.

I love his hands and his lips and his dumb secret tattoo. I love the way he says, “us” and the way that he looks at me. Somehow it’s the same as it always was with a new shiny aww glossing over his eyes.

I don’t answer Levi. But then, I don’t think he was asking a question.

“I’m taking Meredith away for the weekend. You and Owen should come.”

“Wait. What? Really?” My stupor is temporarily awakened with his invitation. Did Levi Bailey just invite me somewhere?

“Yeah.” He gives a small one-shoulder shrug. “Mer would love it. And I’m sort of all about making her happy.”

My turn to smirk. “I’ve noticed. You’ve gone soft, Levi.”

“Don’t ruin things, Annie. We were just starting to become friends.”



*I*fiddle with the pen in my hand, sitting at my desk, staring at my phone, opened and on speaker. “But we don’t have to go,” I say after a super speedy explanation of where Levi’s invited us.

Peaceful Valley—a small town in Washington that turns itself into a Christmas village this time of year. Only six hours away with the weekend forecasting good weather.

“I thought you already accepted,” Owen says.

“I did, but I was totally thrown off by Levi treating me like a real live human being.”

Owen chuckles, and the sound eases my nerves a bit.

“It’s your fault he hated me all those years, you know.”

“My girlfriend, ladies and gentlemen,” he says, “isn’t she the sweetest?”

And then I choke—on nothing but the spit in my mouth. *Girlfriend*. Did Owen Bailey just refer to me as his... girlfriend?

“Hey,” he says after another ten seconds of me hacking. “Do I need to send in the troops? I can come save you.”

“No.” I wheeze. “Just swallowed my pineapple wrong.” Pineapple? I haven’t eaten pineapple since August.

“Well, I love the idea—that is, if you really want to go.”

“I—” I draw out the word.

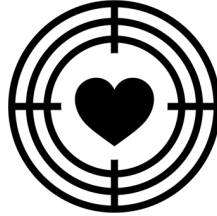
“How about I ask Annie, and we follow her advice?”

Oh Owen, will you forever be wonderful? Things are destined to go downhill, right? It’s the natural progression of Annie Archer’s love life.

“Sure,” I tell him through another cough.

“Oof, here comes fifth period. Drink some water, okay, Archer? No more pineapple for you.”

## OWEN



Coco sits at my desk chair, no Lula or Alice to distract her. “This sounds serious. A weekend away? I mean, that’s something, Owen.”

“Well—” I turn from my dresser to my closet, packing up a bag for my trip come morning. “It *is* serious. This is the real deal. And having Annie for a girlfriend is honestly everything I thought it would be. I love her.”

Coco’s eyes narrow, and I turn away from them. Nothing good can come from eyes that look like that. “Are you sure that—”

“That what?”

“That she feels the same? I know that you love her, Owen. I don’t doubt that. But are you sure about her feelings?”

“I thought you were all for this?”

“I am,” she says, sitting up straighter.

“But has Annie said those words? Love?”

I furrow my brows, feeling stress swirl in my head. “No. But I never expected her to—not yet anyway. We’ve only been at this a month. She’ll get there.”

“It’s just—” She clamps down on her bottom lip and pushes up her black-rimmed glasses with the back of her hand. “She’s still writing about your dates as if they were an experiment.”



“They are. Err, they were.” I dip my head, lose her eye contact, and go back to packing. “That’s just her job.”

“Right.” Coco nods and stands, walking over to me. “I’m sorry. I’m just a big sister—and I worry.”

I pinch her chin between my fingers and wobble her head in a dashboard bobblehead shake. “Well, stop it.”

“You’re right. I’m sure you’re right.” But she doesn’t sound sure. I love my sister, but I don’t need her clouding my judgment, not when it comes to Annie. This is what I’ve always wanted. This is right. Every single fiber of my being tells me so.

But then, Coco didn’t say it wasn’t right. She asked if I knew how Annie felt. It’s a valid point, and maybe it’s time to ask her.



As much as I love that Annie and Levi are getting along—and I do love it—and as much as I appreciate Levi and Meredith inviting us on this trip, I wish that we could have taken our own vehicle. If we had six hours alone, we’d have a whole lot of time to discuss things like *feelings*.

Levi would put me in a headlock just for thinking those words... it’s a good thing my oldest brother can’t read minds. The thing is, I don’t care if my thought isn’t the typical masculine ideal. Annie and I need to talk. Coco made me realize that I’m assuming a whole lot of things. I’m reading what I want to read through our physical contact and fun outings. But the fact remains, Annie hasn’t stated how she feels.

I’m thinking, not listening to my brother as he explains this little town to Meredith. I hear bits and pieces—lights, shops, something about magic—when Annie’s soft touch commands my attention. Her slender fingers slip into mine, tangling our limbs. I study our hands, my blocky fingers entwined with Annie’s slim ones. Her nails are painted a shiny black that stands out against her fair skin. I gaze over her green jacket

and up to her face, her plump pink lips, her freckled cheeks, and her eyes as rich as freshly ground coffee. Her auburn brows pull together.

“Okay?” she mouths to me.

My cosmic, thoughtful state hasn’t gone over her head. She sees me every bit as much as I see her.

Which only gives me confidence.

I give her a slight nod. Annie brushes back a strand of her straight red hair, her eyes never leaving mine.

Her fingers squeeze our knotted hands and I lean the short distance separating us to place one chaste kiss on her lips. A blush warms her cheeks, and those pretty lips turn up at the edges, rewarding me with a grin.

“Whoa. Owen. Dude, not in my truck. I don’t need to see that.”

I choke out a laugh. “Sorry, Levi. It will most likely happen again.”

Levi groans with my joke. But Annie laughs, angelic and sweet. Yep—most definitely going to happen again. At least he can’t say I didn’t warn him.

## ANNIE



Levi pulls up in front of a charming two-story brick home. It's older and lined with Christmas lights. I can only imagine how they'll twinkle tonight. The sign out front reads—*The New Forest Bed*.

“Aw, we didn't want to assume anything...”

I look from Owen to Levi, not following.

He clears his throat. I never noticed until this moment what a Nervous Nelly Levi can be. “We got two rooms. One for Annie and Meredith, one for me and Owen.” His nose wrinkles with the mention of Owen's name, as if bunking with his brother is as fun as a sliver beneath his skin. I'm guessing that isn't how Levi had planned to spend the weekend—but he's being accommodating—for us.

I appreciate that ol' grump even more. All these years I've gone on loathing the man. And really he was a giant teddy bear all along. Who knew?

“That's perfect,” I say, and Meredith gives me a grin. She doesn't seem to mind rooming with me one bit.

“We'll settle in,” Levi says, nodding toward the Bed and Breakfast. “Then, we'll explore the town a bit before the light show tonight.”

“Sounds good,” I say, a nervous pattering in my chest.

Owen and I are on a trip—*together*. A trip where he is referring to me as his *girlfriend*. My tongue has turned to sandpaper. How long until he decides I'm not worth this?

*The New Forest Bed* is something out of a storybook. Is that how this entire town is going to be? I'm starting to believe it is. Even the gray-haired clerk, Verna, looks as if she walked out of my favorite Hallmark movie.

She hands Levi two actual keys, old ones that look like they should be unlocking a castle, then walks us to our side-by-side rooms.

"I'll let you look around," Verna says, her round cheeks swelling with a grin. She returns down the hallway, but not before looking back to see us once more.

"Do you want to choose?" Levi says, holding the keys up for Meredith.

"Surprise me," she says.

Levi hands one of his keys over to Meredith, then looks down at the number scribbled into his key. "This one is ours," he says to Owen, pointing to the door at his right. He slips the key into the lock and turns.

Meredith doesn't go to unlock our door—and I am just as curious as she is. I want to see Levi and Owen's room too.

It does not disappoint. Did Verna know what she was doing? This room is *pink*.

Pinker than the first newborn girl in a generation of Bailey boys. Pink walls. Pink carpet. Pink bedding. Pink curtains. Even that homemade lace doily on the end table is pink.

Levi peers back at Meredith, who hugs our key to her chest. "Nope," she tells him, though he's made no request.

He gives her a playful glare, then raises both of his brows—brows that Meredith referred to as fantastic earlier today. "Fine, let's see your room."

Meredith unlocks the door, and I wait for the bombardment of color. But there isn't one. Honestly, our room is pretty normal. Normal and sweet for this B&B. The walls are peach, but the bedding and curtains are a creamy white and a pale blue. Just like the guys' room, there isn't a television, and the space is pretty quaint. Like *one bed*-quaint. Are Owen and

Levi sharing a bed? While they may be brothers, and they've probably shared a bed multiple times throughout their lives, they are enormous—boulder shoulders and massive thighs... and this bed is possibly a double.

Levi crosses his arms and leans against the peach-colored wallpaper. "I am happy to keep the pink room."

"Oh yeah?" Meredith says.

"You guys didn't walk in far enough. Our bed is a king."

I laugh and pat Owen's chest. "I think you'll need it."

His arm snakes around me and he hugs me close. While my brain tells me it would be wise to resist, my body screams to stay put. I fit here, in Owen's arms, like I have never fit anywhere before. No man has ever held me like he does. Not James. Not Ian before him. Certainly not Maddox.

I'm happy to stay in my fairytale, at least for the weekend.

We rest from our long drive for a bit, but soon Levi is ready to adventure. We aren't driving, we're walking from here on out. It's a good thing I brought my heavy winter coat and some tennis shoes.

Owen slips his gloved hand into mine, and while I can't feel the tingling warmth of his skin on mine, even the pressure of my hand snug in his sends sparks shooting up my arm and into my chest. Did that happen before? I can't remember feeling so electric at Owen's touch a month ago.

After an hour of window shopping, we stop at a small bakery, Honey Dayz. My mouth is watering just spying the baked goods behind the counter. Meredith leaves Levi with her order and heads back to the restroom. And I am left with the Bailey boys all to myself.

"Do you want to share?" Owen asks me, reading my mind. You can't be best friends with a man for fifteen years and not share certain qualities.

"Of course I do," I say. "The almond turnover and—"

"The pumpkin banana bread," he finishes.

I give him half a grin, my heart pounding. I've never found Owen finishing my sentences sexy before—but it is.

“Exactly,” I say, my eyes never leaving his.

He wraps one arm around my shoulders, and I tangle one about his waist. He kisses my temple, and I wish so very much that it were my lips. I long for it.

Is this how Owen felt for years?

Is this how I'm going to still feel when he moves on?

“Oof.” Levi grunts. “You two are more annoying now than you were before.” His lip curls. “I'm going to check on Mer. She seemed a little tired. Just order me two of whatever you're getting. Meredith wanted that bread too.” And then he's gone.

“Wait, are we ordering him two turnovers and two pumpkin breads... or three pumpkin breads, one for Meredith and two for Levi?” I squint, a carefree laugh on the tip of my tongue.

“We better order three just in case.”

We order, sit, and wait. But half our food is gone before Levi returns *without* Meredith. In fact, I was starting to eye a slice of Levi's bread. Maybe he only meant two and he'd never notice if I ate the third.

I shove my innocent hands beneath the table—*nothing to see here*. “Where's Meredith?” I ask.

Levi's brow is in a permanent scowl. “Sick. I think she's got a stomach bug. I've called an Uber. I'm taking her back to the B&B.”

“I'll get a bag,” Owen says, gesturing to Levi's pastries.

“Don't bother. You two might as well enjoy the day.”

“Can I help?” I ask, standing. Poor Meredith. She was a little quiet on the ride.

“Nah. I've got her.”

Five minutes later, Levi walks a semi-greenish Meredith outside and puts her into a car. They drive off, leaving me

alone with Owen. It's not as if we haven't been alone. We have—plenty. Before and after we started dating.

But here, in Peaceful Valley, there's no sisters with expectations, there's no paper waiting for a story, there's no horrid dating history to haunt me. There isn't even Levi and Meredith to watch us.

It's just me. And Owen.

And something about all that drives me. I press a hand to Owen's cheek, looking into his eyes without thinking about what a mistake this all might be. I lean toward him, pressing my lips to his. My body warms from head to toe as I tease his lips open. For once, kissing him without the little devil on my shoulder reminding me that this will end one day.

When my lips, swollen and wet, break from his, I let out a shaky breath. Owen leans his forehead to mine.

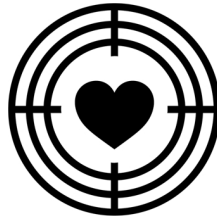
“What was that for?” he asks.

“Just a thank you.” I owe him thanks. Someone as good as Owen loves me. Even if it can't last, that he loved me at all is pretty beautiful.

His mouth turns up in a grin, and his blue eyes sparkle like the sun shining on the sea. “I didn't do anything. I didn't even buy you that pastry. You beat me to it.”

I lick my lips. “That's true. I'm going to eat Levi's bread now, okay?”

## O W E N



We stand on the side of the street in the dark with more people than this little town has in population and wait... For what? I'm not really sure. But Annie's hand is tucked into mine, and the chill in the air is moving her closer and closer to my side, so I'm willing to wait.

"Do you know what's happening?" Annie asks in a forced whisper. "I can't feel my toes."

"I'm not sure." I wrap one arm around her and hug her close, though I'm not sure my embrace is doing anything for her feet.

Then, all at once, the street lamps go out, and it's more than dark. It's one black night, and I wonder if we'll be able to find our way back to *The New Forest Bed*. I hug Annie a little tighter to my side.

Before either of us can say anything, the entire street turns on—every building and fixture is lined with lights, and this street is twinkling.

Annie bubbles with a laugh, and I can't help but join her.

"Is this for real?" she says.

I pull out my phone and snap a few photos of the street.

Annie grins at me. "This is crazy," she says, but she's beaming. Auburn hairs wisp into her eyes, and I tuck a strand behind her ear. "O, look!" She points, and a man with a beard



as real as Merlin's comes jaunting down the street in a Santa suit. He's passing out candy canes to every patron he passes.

"One more," I say, holding out my phone and taking a new photo of the street—one where Santa will be at the center.

She shakes her head, smiling like I'm a kid who's never seen Christmas lights or Santa Claus before. And in my defense, I haven't—at least, not like this.

"These are for Meredith. I feel so bad she's missing this."

"Of course you would think of that. Can you get any better, Owen?"

I smirk and stuff my cell back into my pocket. "Excuse me?"

"You know—you're the most thoughtful person alive. How do you do that?"

I bow my head to the ground—somehow this praise coming from her means so much more. "It's just a picture."

"One she'll be grateful for." Annie snakes her arms around my middle and peers up at me. "This is why I love you, Owen."

It's something she's said a million times.

I bring pizza by without any warning—*This is why I love you, O*. I call in a favor to get Annie's car detailed without sitting on a waitlist—*Exactly why I love you, Owen*. I visit my friend Hank at the old folks' home; Annie doesn't even know Hank, but when I give her an update on his next-room-neighbor crush—*This is why I love you, Owen*.

But this time, I can't help it. I can't even stop it. I hug her close and peer down into the prettiest brown eyes I have ever seen. "I love you too, Annie."

Pink floods her cheeks, a few of her freckles camouflaging with the color. But she doesn't pull away. Instead, she rests her head on my chest, still wrapped in my embrace, hiding her gaze from mine.

The walk back to *The New Forest Bed* is a quiet one. There are lights to look at, people to watch, and so many things to think about.

I know Annie's still hesitant. But I also know that the past five weeks have been magical for more than just me. She feels it. I see it in her face and feel it in her touch. Her kisses hold as much longing as mine.

We stand in front of our bed and breakfast doors—keyless. I tap on mine and Levi's door, then again a little louder, but no one answers.

"I'll try mine," she whispers. Neither of us wants to disturb Meredith.

Annie fists her small hand and taps on the door right next to mine.

Levi is quick to answer—he doesn't want us disturbing Meredith either. "You're back," he says.

"I took pictures for Meredith."

My brother nods, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Listen, I'm not trying to make either of you uncomfortable—but I'm staying in here tonight with Meredith. She's sleeping now, but she's been sick all day." Levi holds out the key to the pink room, and I take it. "Hopefully she'll be better in the morning."

"Yeah," I say. "No problem."

Only when I turn back to Annie, she looks like she might have a problem.

"You'll be fine, Archer. My brother is a perfect gentleman. At least when he isn't trying to eat your face." And with that, Levi is gone.

Annie squeaks—no intelligible words leave her mouth.

I attempt a smile, but I'm pretty sure I'm just showing her all of my teeth—even the ones in the back that no one should ever see. "Alice and Levi like to gossip."

"I got that."

“This isn’t a big deal, Annie. You’ve fallen asleep on my couch a dozen times.”

“I know, Owen,” she says, and my name sounds a little forced.

“We’ve known each other forever.”

“I know that.”

“It’s not like I’m going to—”

“Owen!” She flaps her hands at her side. “Shut up. It’s fine.”

## ANNIE



This is so *not* fine!

I am falling fast and hard and irrevocably for my best friend, and now I have to spend the night in this tiny room with one bed while the color pink is shoved down my throat.

Owen walks into the room, stopping right in front of that Pepto-Bismol bed. “At least it’s a king.”

I stare at Owen’s stupidly handsome face. His rugged, dark blond hair and his blue eyes, they’ve always reminded me a little of ocean waves. I want to smack him on his bearded cheek.

The thing is, I’m not worried about Owen’s actions. Levi’s right. He is a perfect gentleman.

I’m worried about mine.

“I’m going to take a shower!” I yell because in this small room, and with Owen an entire two feet away from me, I need to make sure he can hear me... right?

“O—” he starts, and just as I slam the bathroom door closed, I hear, “*kay*.”

I turn the water to hot, strip, and step inside. I wash my hair—twice. I let my face sit in the stream of the steaming water for a solid ten minutes, and then I turn to my legs. I’ve got one three-quarters of the way shaved when I gasp. “What am I doing? Hairy legs are key to a girl behaving herself!”

Leaving the water on, I hop from the tub, and with wet, slippery fingers, I grapple for my cell.

**Me:** I'm in the shower, and Owen's in our room, and I just shaved one leg.

My sister is probably cooking dinner, cleaning magic marker from her walls, and teaching Steve to read all at this very moment—but she sends me an answer, anyway.

**Kayla:** I thought you said you had different rooms.

**Me:** We did. Until Meredith got sick and stupid Levi had to be a stupid hero and take care of her.

**Kayla:** Wait—I thought we liked Levi now...

**Me:** We do!!!! Keep up!! He can still be stupid.

**Kayla:** Right. And taking care of his girlfriend is stupid because...

**Me:** Kayla!!! Will you focus, please? I have to sleep in a room with only one bed with Owen, and I've shaved one of my legs. What do I do?

**Kayla:** Shave the other?

**Me:** KAYLA.

**Kayla:** Glue the shaved hairs back onto your leg?

**Me:** I don't have any glue.

**Kayla:** I was kidding. DORK. If you are that stressed, keep the other leg a hairy monster. Besides, you know Owen. He would never do anything to make you uncomfortable.

I reread her text three times. Before—

**Kayla:** Unless... you aren't worried about him.

You're worried about controlling yourself, aren't you? Huh. When did you become such a hussy?

**Me:** I'm not a hussy.

But I do like my best friend. A lot. More every single second.

**Me:** And I'm not worried about myself.

I'm actually terrified of myself. There's a difference.

**Kayla:** You can't hide in the bathroom all night. Just go out, put on those flannel pants you love so much—they are not appealing in any way—and watch a movie.

**Me:** This place doesn't have a television.

**Kayla:** Then play a game. Something dumb and silly and something that won't make you want to shave your other leg.

A game. Sure. I can do that. Monopoly never made me want to make out.

Sometime between multiple hair washings and shaving one leg, Owen brought in my bag. I didn't even hear him.

The saint.

Had he not, I would have had to go out there in nothing but a towel to retrieve it. Man, he really is decent.

I can do this. I can go out into that room, in my jammies, and play a game. Then, I will fall asleep beneath the covers, and Owen can sleep over top of that pink comforter. We can do this.

With those sober vibes coursing through my veins, I burst from the bathroom door, only one shaved leg down—and hey,

it's concealed with flannel. "How about a game?" I say so loudly that I fear Levi will come over to shush me.

## ANNIE



Owen sits on our joint bed, his feet crossed at the ankles. His brows are raised high on his head as he stares at the sight of me. It's not like he hasn't seen my favorite flannel before—still, he's staring.

“What do you think?” I ask.

His brows fall into a furrow. “Um. About a game? Sure.”

“Monopoly?”

Owen chuckles. “Did you bring Monopoly?”

Oh. Dang. Nope. I didn't bring any board games. “Did you bring anything?” I ask with stupid, naïve hope.

He shakes his head.

“Truth or dare!” I bellow. I can dare him to stay on the other side of the room or even to sleep on the floor. While I only offer up truths, Owen should know everything about me anyway. Although—that kind of thinking has bit me in the butt more than once this month.

He straightens up on the bed. “Are you okay, Annie?”

“Yes. Of course. I'm just—I'm ready to play.”

He gives one curt nod that means *I don't believe you*. But he's Owen, so he says, “Okay. Do you want to go first?”

With no other seats in this small room, I sit on the opposite side of the bed. He's in the top right corner, so I take the bottom left. I cross my legs, revealing one shaved ankle. I



yank down on the cuff of my flannel pants like I am Jane Bennet and this is totally scandalous. “No, you go first.”

“Okay. Dare.”

I swallow. “I dare you,” I say, sounding a whole like my thirteen-year-old self, “to...” I look around the room, my mind blank. “To dance like a chicken.”

One of his brows quirks upward as if he cannot believe that this is what we’re doing with our alone time.

We’ve been alone—a lot over the last five weeks. But none of those evenings included a bed.

Still, Owen stands. He walks around the bed so that he’s standing right in front of me. With his hands beneath his arms, he flaps his elbows, lifts his knees, and pecks with his head.

He’s ridiculous. And I’m gone.

Owen Bailey is winning over my heart with a chicken dance.

I giggle and then burst with a laugh as his jerking head pecks right in my face. “Okay. Okay!” I laugh, holding out both hands. “You’re done. I can’t look at that anymore.”

“You asked for it,” he says, tossing himself back onto the bed with a bounce. He leans back, hands behind his head, pleased with himself. His biceps contract and I can’t look away. I am hypnotized. “Your turn.”

“Huh?” I mumble, lifting my eyes to his face.

“Your turn,” he tells me.

“Right.” I lick my lips, pretending to think, but I know what I’m picking. “Truth.”

He stares at me as if I haven’t fooled him for a minute. “Why are you so afraid to fall in love?”

Oof, right out of the gate? Where’s the *who was your biggest crush?* Or *how old were you when you had your first kiss?* Then again, Owen knows those things. But this—this is a question that hits to my core. I was sure I’d never kept a thing

from Owen, but this question is proving me wrong. So, of course it's the question Owen would ask me.

"The truth, Annie, or I get a free dare. And I already know exactly what it is." His brows raise, and somehow *Owen*—my Owen—looks menacing.

I huff out a breath. "Fine. Maddox."

"Maddox?" He thinks. But he knows my ex. "Like six years ago, Maddox from college?"

Yep, Owen always liked Maddox. He even baked him that dumb pie. If he's loved me all this time, why didn't he hate the man? But then, I don't think Owen hates. And he's only ever wanted me to be happy.

"Is that why you broke up with him?" He shakes his head. "I'm confused."

I bite my inner cheek, wishing that a single name could be answer enough for him. "I didn't break up with him, Owen." I press my lips together. "I know you assumed, and I let you believe that. But he dumped me." I swallow—why does that feel so shameful? People break up every day. And if someone wrote me about shame and a breakup, I would tell them to *let go*, to move on, to not allow shame to shape their future.

"So... you still like him?"

"What?" I shake my head. "No. I'm not still hung up on Maddox Powell. I don't have feelings for him. I wasn't even that hurt when he broke up with me."

"So, what is it?" His hands are in his lap now, his back straight and tall, and his tone all too serious for this *game*.

"When I didn't cry, he told me that I was false. He called me fake." My head drops, and I glance down at the bow-and-arrow inked on my wrist. *Straight and true*. "He told me he couldn't be with anyone as unlovable as I was. That no one could be." I swallow again. "I've spent the last few years proving that I'm true. But how do you prove you're lovable, Owen?" I shake my head. "I never figured that one out. I always just believed him. And my dating history continued to prove him right, year after year. Man after man."

A curse falls from my angelic best friend's lips. "I baked that joker a pie. I *liked* him."

My lips bubble with a delirious laugh. "You did. Too bad it wasn't filled with X-lax."

He lifts his gaze to me. "Annie—"

I shake my head. I wanted to play, to make things easy and comfortable. I haven't. "It's your turn, Owen. Truth or dare?"

He pulls in a deep breath and rubs at his brow. "Sure. Dare."

Over the next sixty minutes, I proceed to make Owen jump on the bed like a monkey, call for room service, asking for black jelly beans only, mime out teaching a lesson to his class, and write Levi a loving, sappy poem to be delivered tomorrow.

And he has performed award-winning routines, all while giving me easy-peasy truths after telling him about Maddox, that is. Until now—

"How badly do you want to kiss me right now?"

It's payback—I should never have made him write that sonnet.

"Gha—" is the only sound that leaves my mouth.

Owen raises one finger to his ear, folding his lobe out toward me as if trying to hear me better.

"Fine!" I bark. "Dare. I pick dare." I am not afraid of Owen Bailey.

"Okay." He nods and pats the space beside him. "I dare you to come sit up here."

I huff out a breath. "Fine." I move to the head of the bed, but not right beside him.

Owen hisses as if I've almost completed the task correctly, but not quite. "I dare you to move a little closer." Again, he pats the spot right next to him.

I listen as if I have to. Don't I? I mean, I already wimped out on my truth.

“Good,” he says, and though his turn is long over, he keeps going. “I dare you to kiss me. Here,” he says, tapping his finger to his lips, making sure this time there is no confusion over location.

It is a dare. The nerves pulsing through my body won't allow me to back down. Besides, I kissed him earlier today. I can forget about the bed and do something I have now done a hundred times.

I lift my chin, my jaw brushing the edge of his shoulder. Owen lowers his lips to mine, pecking my mouth softly at first before going back for more.

*Honest and true*—I am very much a willing participant.

I'm not sure when Owen stopped kissing me, but sunlight now streams through the sheer pink curtains in this room. Sometime between a thousand kisses and silently assuring me that I am *very* lovable, I fell asleep in Owen's arms.

It's not exactly a terrible place to sleep—in the crook of Owen's arm, my head on his chest, my ear pressed to the target over his heart. That tattoo whispers for me to stay. It tells me to never leave, to rest exactly where I am, in Owen's embrace, forever.

That is, until I realize that I have some major morning breath.

Owen's chest rises and falls with sleep, but I can't rest any longer. And I can't sit here with unbrushed teeth for another second. So, I shimmy out of his arms—it's a gold medal maneuver—and roll over the remaining four feet of this bed, sticking my landing on the pink rug.

I blow out a puff. *Whew*. I am good.

I am also sweaty and puffy, and my lips are officially the strongest muscle on my body.

I peer back at Owen, still sleeping in that king-sized bed. We only used two feet across the thing. It turns out when

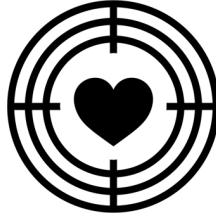
you're wrapped in someone's arms, you don't need that much space.

I nibble on my bottom lip and smile at the thought.

I can't remember if he told me that he loves me a million times or just showed me. Either way, I'm becoming a believer.

At least when it comes to Owen.

## O W E N



ow's Kayla?" I ask as we sit in the back of Levi's truck. Annie is on her phone once more, and I'm just  
"Assuming it's her sister."

She blinks up from her smart screen, her body angled toward mine. "Oh. Um. She's good." Annie swallows. "Just wondering about Peaceful Valley."

"I can't believe I missed the whole trip." Meredith moans. Her face is still pale, but at least she's upright and keeping food down.

I'm not gonna lie—I'm not sorry she and Annie couldn't share a room. But I am sorry she got sick.

"Owen took a picture of the lights for you," Levi tells Meredith. "And I'm willing to come again—next weekend. Just the two of us? If Jose can't work," he says, talking about his one employee at the shop, "then Miles will do it."

"I don't want to take advantage of Miles," she says while Annie and I listen in.

"We aren't. Miles is content with his painting and his teaching and his lack of a social life."

I smirk. "Levi isn't wrong."

"See?" he says to her, but she only gives him a tired smile.

"Hey," I say, my tone a hush. We are very much not alone in this vehicle. But I've been wanting to ask Annie about Christmas, and it seems like a safe time to do so—while Levi

and Meredith are in their own conversation. “What are you doing on Christmas?”

Every other year she goes to Boise to spend the holiday with her parents. Some years they travel. I’m pretty sure this is a traveling year. Which means she’ll be with Kayla. Post Falls is a mere fifteen-minute drive. So, I’m hoping that I can get Annie for part of the day—just like Thanksgiving.

Her eyes bat, her lashes fluttering as she looks over at me. “Um, I’ll be with Kayla, Tim, and the boys. I’m spending the night there because Kayla insists that I need to see her children’s eyes the minute they wake up on Christmas morning. She says it’s magical.”

“So, do you dislike all kids or just your nephews?” Levi says from the front of the car.

Okay—so maybe they aren’t distracted with their own conversation.

“Levi,” I scold. “She doesn’t dislike her nephews.”

But Annie gives a small chuckle. “I don’t. Owen’s right. I don’t dislike kids as much as I feel discomfort around them.”

“Really?” Meredith says, surprised by this.

“Yeah—you know, they just say whatever they want, no filter. They’re kind of like an animal in the wild. I like monkeys, they’re cool. I could even see myself playing with one—maybe. But they could also go completely rogue, and I’d have no idea what to do with them.”

Levi has a humorous smirk on his face. He is going to use this against her one day. “So, at what age do you decide they aren’t going to be painfully honest and rebel on you?”

Annie isn’t offended. “Maybe fifteen?”

“Fifteen?” Levi laughs. “Don’t you give advice to women about their children?”

“Not without hours of research. I know my limitations. When I don’t have an honest, legit answer, I research one.”

“Hmm,” Levi says without any dispute, grunts, or side remarks.

I think Levi likes Annie. He isn’t just tolerating her, he respects her. He might even refer to her as friend.

“Meredith,” I say, ready to get back on track, “did you tell Levi about that Shakespeare exhibit coming to Boise?”

“Ooo, I didn’t.” And she begins.

Annie is listening, but I tap her arm, her skin sweet and smooth beneath my touch, reminding me of an entire night of holding her in my arms. I’ve always been a believer—I’ve known for years that I’ve loved Annie. But last night made me realize it’s not just a want—I need her.

“So, Christmas,” I say, and Annie blinks her attention back to me. “Do you think we could have a couple hours together?”

“Yeah. I do.” She breathes out and I don’t miss the shakiness in her exhale. “Do you want to come by Kayla’s? And then we could go back to your mom’s.”

The heart beating in my chest is given new life every time Annie speaks about the two of us as one. The word “we” has an entirely new meaning. “Yes,” I say. “That’s perfect.”



r. Bailey?” Rylee says, standing at the front of my desk. She can’t see the screen of my computer, the photos of Annie and me in Peaceful Valley. I am working on having one printed and framed for her.

I blink up at the girl. I did teach a full thirty-two-minute lesson. And now my students are working on a worksheet as partners. I’m not shirking my teacher duties. I’m not—but then I’m pretty defensive to... no one.

“Ah—yes? Did you have a question?”

She sighs, brushing long brown hair from her shoulder. “I do.”

I look for her worksheet, but I don’t see anything. Sam sits at his desk—her partner for this task, just waiting. He watches



us, listening for my answer as well.

“Sure. Grab your worksheet.”

“No. I’m wondering if you’re still dating Ask Annie.”

“Oh.” I clear my throat. “Ah, yes, I am.” I cannot have a repeat of a few weeks ago.

“Because she didn’t write about you this week.”

Sam stares around her, listening to my answer. A few others pause their work and listen too.

“Yeah, my mom said that too,” Sam says.

The air exits my lungs with a gust. “Yes, well, she can’t write about us forever.”

“But things are going well?” Rylee asks, not budging from the head of my desk.

“Rylee—*science*. Go back to your desk, please, and finish your worksheet.”

“Oh, we’re done,” Sam says, holding up their completed sheet.

“He’s right. We’re all done, and I won’t be able to sleep tonight if I don’t know.” Rylee gives me a small shoulder shrug as if my love life is common knowledge for the world. Then again, I guess it is. But I’m ready for that chapter to close. I’m happy Annie didn’t write about us this week.

This is more than a story. This is our lives.

I’m ready to send Rylee back to her seat once more... but then, I really could use someone else’s opinion. I clear my throat and say in a hushed voice, “Ah, Rylee, what do you think about this photo?”

I tap my computer screen and she walks around my desk to see the pictures. She studies the photo my finger is on but then peers at the other three showing on the screen.

“I like this one. She still has that big smile on her face, but you can see the lights behind you better.”

She's right. That's the one. Annie and I on the streets of Peaceful Valley with the lights of a life-size nativity shining in the background behind us.

I scratch at my bearded chin. "Thanks," I tell her before waving her back to her seat.

Before class ends, I've sent the photo Rylee chose to the print shop. It'll be printed and framed and on my doorstep in less than a week. Now for part two of Annie's Christmas gift...

## ANNIE



Roll out the dough my sister mixed up. I'm going to attempt to be friendlier with my nephews. Levi wasn't even sure I liked my own family. Clearly, I need to learn to conquer my fear of children and step it up as Aunt Annie.

"Hey, Buck, come help me with this," I say, and he and Kayla both give me a curious side-eye. "What?" I say to my sister. "Just trying to get in the holiday spirit."

Kayla pours more flour into her butter and sugar mixture. Why we need to make six dozen sugar cookies, I will never know. "What are you getting Owen for Christmas?"

This I do know. I've had a plan for a couple weeks—one I'm pretty proud of. "I bought him a Logan Wilson jersey."

Kayla's brows pull together.

"You know, from the Cincinnati Bengals."

"I don't know. That's football, right?"

I laugh out a small groan. "Yes. Football." I glance over at Bucky, who hasn't moved yet. "Buck, do you want to punch the dough?"

He sits up, interested in my invitation.

"I'm just saying, not very romantic," Kayla says, ignoring my conversation with her son. She keeps her eyes on her mixing bowl while my kneading has been officially set to pause.

“Romantic?” I say, just as my eight-year-old nephew skips over.

“Is it time for a taste test?” Bucky asks.

“You think I should get him something romantic?”

Buck wrinkles his nose. “Yuck. Nu-uh. No way.”

“You don’t even know who we’re talking about,” Kayla says to him. Man, that girl has that mother glare down.

“I know he’s a boy,” Buck says. “That’s all I need to know.”

“Right.” I point to my nephew. “I’m with him. Besides, what constitutes romance for a man or any person anyway?”

“You mean, Ask Annie doesn’t know?” Kayla smirks and returns to her mixing bowl.

“Here, Bucky, beat up this dough for a minute.” I set one hand to my hip and turn full force on Kayla. She may be older and wiser, but I am confident in my skills.

“Uh-uh-uh,” Kayla says, rounding on her son. “Wash your hands first—and then you can beat up the dough.”

Bucky looks pretty pleased to be given permission to beat anything up, so he doesn’t argue. He hops over to the sink and turns on the water.

I wait for Kayla’s attention to return to me. “I do know. I just answered it. What constitutes romance for one person doesn’t for another. I think Owen will find this gift a romantic gesture.”

“Huh. Does that mean you have finally given up trying to find an out in this relationship?”

I swallow. “*Maybe.*” It’s difficult to lay in Owen Bailey’s arms all night long and then want an out. Everything in my body wants to stay put.

“Really?” Kayla’s eyes find mine. “So, you’re done dwelling on that idiot Maddox?”

“Hush,” I grumble. But other than Owen, she is the only person I’ve repeated Maddox’s words to. She, more than anyone, knows how they’ve affected me, even if I don’t always say as much.

I don’t say more than that. How do you let go of years of belief?



Two weeks later, I’m sleeping on Kayla’s lumpy couch. I’m pretty sure there is a Froot Loop stuck to the back of my head. Still, I’m here, ready to see her boys come Christmas morning.

And whoa, does it come. Early.

The sky is black, and I can’t read the clock on the wall in the dim light when the chatter of little voices wakes me up. I was there when Kayla told them that the clock must read six before they got out of bed.

But it can’t be six....

I hold up my phone, tapping the screen and cringing with the bright light. “One thirty-two in the morning?” What in the world is happening? If this is what it means to have children, I’ll be happy to be nothing more than an aunt the rest of my life.

Two gasps sound at the brightness of my light. And I hear Bucky whisper, “Abort!”

Two little figures race around the Christmas tree, hiding between the tree and the picture window.

“Uh, guys? I can see you.” I point my phone light toward the darkened tree.

A whimper sounds from their hiding spot, and I am up, tripping over gifts to get to them.

“Steve, is that you?”

“Nu-uh,” he cries.

“Hey,” I say, feeling a little like the Grinch. His heart grew toward children on Christmas day too. “Don’t cry. I’m not

going to tell your mom.”

“You’re not?” Bucky says, peeking at me from around the tree.

“No, I am not.” I reach for little Steve’s hand and pull him from his hiding spot. “Come here. Tell me what’s happening.”

Bucky plops himself onto the blankets that were making up my bed just five minutes ago. “We do it every year.”

“Every year?” I mutter. “You were a baby not that long ago.”

Bucky ignores me. “Mom says we can’t wake up until six. We have to watch the clock in my room. But we can’t even go to sleep, so we definitely can’t wake up. So, after Santa comes —”

“I always hear him,” Steve says with a snuffle. I wrap one arm around him, feeling oh-so maternal with the embrace.

“After he comes,” Bucky continues. “And we’re sure Mom and Dad are in bed, we come out to see what he brought.” He beams in the dim light—as if he’s just reported a great accomplishment. “Wanna play with us?” My nephew’s brows waggle, and his eyes look like little twinkling Christmas lights.

Who could resist that?

After an hour of playing with Steve’s remote control King Kong and Bucky’s Marvel mini-figures, I am very much awake. It’s two-thirty in the morning and we are *doing* Christmas!

I sit cross-legged on the floor, giving my nephews space to do their own thing. I was certain these boys had one volume level—ear-splitting loud. But they are quiet as church mice, ensuring they do not wake their mother.

“You’re pretty awesome, Aunt Annie,” Bucky says, digging in his stocking. Then he holds out his hand. “This is for you.” A plastic ring with a 3D Spiderman on the front sits in his palm.

Awesome? I've never in my life been called "awesome" by a child. "For me?"

"Yeah. He brings me one every year."

I reach out and kiss my nephew on the head, then tuck his gift in my flannel pants pocket.

There is a strange swirling warmth inside of my chest, and for a hot minute, I think I'm having a heart attack—but then I remember feeling this before, when Owen walked me onto that boat and told Stan and Carol that we were married. I'm not dying, I'm feeling the sweet sensation of love. Funny that the two are easily mixed up for me.

*Love.*

Without thinking or stressing, I pull out my phone and send a text to my favorite adult male on the planet.

**Me:** GOOD MORNING! Merry Christmas, sleepy head.

**Me:** Owen? Wake up, Owen! It's Christmas.

I give him thirty more seconds, set my fingers to my phone—and then, Owen does not disappoint.

**Owen:** Annie?

**Me:** No. Kris Kringle has stolen my phone and he's sending out prank texts.

**Owen:** You sound awfully awake.

**Me:** That's because I am. The boys and I have been secretly playing with their Santa gifts for more than an hour.

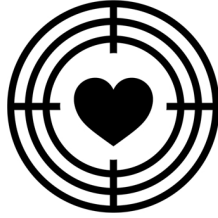
**Me:** Come play.

**Owen:** Come play?

**Owen:** It's the middle of the night.

**Me:** Wrong. It's Christmas morning.

## O W E N



ome play?” I rub my eyes and reread her last message.  
 “Who are you and what have you done with the woman  
 “*E* I love?” I say to no one but my empty home.

**Annie:** Are you in your car yet? Do you have pants  
 on? Let’s go!

Oh, there she is.

I tug on a T-shirt, slip into some shoes, and snag Annie’s  
 Christmas gifts. After a quick brush of my teeth, I’m off—at  
 two fifty-one in the morning.

I reach Annie’s sister’s house a little after three. I can see  
 her figure in the window, waiting for me.

She cracks the front door open, her auburn hair falling over  
 her freckled cheek. “We aren’t waking the parents,” she  
 whispers.

Bucky gives me an excited wave while Steve yawns,  
 holding what looks like a giant plastic monkey to his chest.

“You came!” Annie whispers, her dark eyes, glassy and  
 joyous, glisten up at me.

“Of course I came.”

She lifts up on her bare toes and presses a soft kiss to the  
 corner of my mouth. I cup my hand around her neck, peering  
 into the eyes of the girl I’ve always loved. I place another kiss  
 firmly to her lips—it’s quick, as we have an audience. Alice



has traumatized me when it comes to kissing in front of others. Not that I'd make out in front of Annie's nephews. But I may have let that kiss last longer than 1.2 seconds.

Annie laces her fingers through mine, and we walk through the maze of gifts and toys. We sit on the floor next to one another, the boys, and the lit tree. I stare into the lights a moment—there is something magical about this dim space and that bright, beautiful tree filled with Iron Man and popsicle stick ornaments.

“I had to convince them the tree lights wouldn't wake their parents,” Annie says.

Little Steve snuggles down on the floor, his monkey still wrapped in his embrace, his back to the tree, and then his eyes flutter closed.

Bucky shows me each and every one of his dozen Marvel men—and I have to admit, I am enjoying all the toys that Alice would never touch. But then, even Buck yawns and sprawls himself out onto the floor. Soon, his breaths are heavy, and both boys are asleep before five a.m.

Annie and I sit on the floor with a boy on either side of us and the lit tree in front of us.

“Do you want to open your gifts?”

“Yes!” she says, very much above a whisper, then slaps a hand over her opened mouth. “Shoot.”

They don't even stir, and I don't hear Kayla storming out to see what's going on. “I think you're in the clear,” I tell her.

She brushes her fingers across her brow in dramatic fashion. “*Whew.*” Then she smacks my thigh. “You open yours first!”

She rolls onto her knees, stretching out between the boys to grab a box just beneath the tree.

“Here,” she says, shoving the thing into my hands.

I grin—Annie and I have always exchanged gifts, but this year it's different. This year I get to give her a gift and tell her exactly what it means—how much she means to me.

I rip the paper from the box, trying to keep the sound to a minimum, and lift the lid. An orange shirt with black stripes on the shoulders and the number fifty-five on the chest sits inside. A Logan Wilson jersey.

“I bought the ugliest one they had.” She smirks, the beaming grin never leaving her face. “Just to show how I support whoever you support.” She nods, her smile folding in on itself.

“I love it,” I say, holding it up to look at it better. I drop the jersey into my lap and lean towards her. It’s still fairly aweing that she doesn’t pull away. “Thank you,” I say before placing a kiss on her lips and lingering there. For the most part, we are alone now.

“You like it?” she says, and I never thought I’d see Annie this giddy about anything Bengals-related.

“I do.” I raise my brows. “Now, your turn.”

I hand over the first, a small box that I suddenly realize looks very much like a ring box. “They’re earrings,” I say before she’s even torn the paper.

Her shoulders relax, but still, she smacks my arm. “You aren’t supposed to tell me!” She tears through the snowflake wrapping paper and opens up the lid of the little box. Her breath catches. “Owen—”

“They’re small.”

“They’re *diamonds*.”

“Small ones,” I say again, watching her reaction, reading her face in the glow of the tree lights.

“They’re perfect. They’re too much.”

“They aren’t. I’ve wanted to give you something for so long. Something that says how I feel—”

“And diamonds are how you feel?”

More than she knows. If I didn’t think she’d black out on me, there would be a ring inside that box. “Yes. Diamonds are how I feel.” I swallow. “I love you, Annie.”

She blinks, her makeup-less, tired eyes finding mine. “You might have mentioned that.” She grins.

“One more,” I tell her, handing her the wrapped framed photo.

Annie undoes the paper, glancing up at me once or twice while she does so. Her eyes blink and water when she looks down at the photo of the two of us. We look so right together—she sees that, doesn’t she?

“This is...” She shakes her head. “Really sweet, Owen.”

A light in the kitchen comes on behind us before I can really gauge her thoughts.

Kayla stands in her robe, her brown hair tousled. She sighs. “Every single year,” she says, staring at her sleeping sons beneath the tree.

“Every year? They were babies just a couple years ago.”

“Well, that’s true,” she says, walking over with a mug in her hands. She doesn’t even seem fazed to see me at her house at five thirty in the morning. “Here.” She hands me a warm mug of black coffee and then heads back for another.

“Thanks again, O.”

“Thanks?” Kayla says. She holds two mugs this time and passes one off to Annie.

“You know, you could have warned me that they get up in the night. They scared me to death.”

“And spoil the fun? No way.” She lifts her chin. “Thanks for what?”

Annie clears her throat, fingering back a lock of her hair. “Um, my Christmas gift.”

“Oh, yeah? Tim always gets me a new kitchen gadget. You know—so I can cook for him. If I didn’t love that man so darn much, I’d give it right back to him as his own gift.” She sighs. “He means well.”

“I’m sure he does,” I say, unsure how to respond.

“So, let’s see it.” Kayla waves her free hand toward Annie.

Annie lifts the small pink box and says loudly, “Earrings!”

Little Steve stirs on the ground beside me.

“And this.” She hands Kayla the framed photo.

Kayla’s brows arch. “Sweet. I knew you were a keeper, Owen.”

Annie blinks ten times too many at her sister’s comment.

“I’ve been telling Annie that for years.”

“Kayla.” Annie growls.

“What? He bought you diamonds, Annie. I’m getting a pasta-making attachment for my mixer.” She lifts one shoulder. “I peeked.”

“I thought about waiting for our two-month anniversary, but I couldn’t wait any longer.”

“Two months already?” Kayla says, and maybe I’m imagining things, but Annie’s face seems to pale.

“In two weeks,” I answer Kayla, one eye on Annie.

“Wow.” Kayla shakes her head and sips from her mug. She lets out a tired but content breath, looking down at the forms of her sleeping children. “I’m waking up Tim. If I don’t get to sleep, neither does he. Remember that when you have your own kids.”

Before Kayla can stand from her seat on the couch, Annie is up, her mug sloshing hot liquid from side to side. “Excuse me!” she says, taking off.

“I’m guessing the boys have had her up since one and she hasn’t peed yet.” Kayla lifts one brow before heading out to wake her husband.

I trace Annie’s footsteps—or coffee drops—all the way into the kitchen, down the hall, and to a door at my right. I tap and wait for her to answer.

She doesn’t, but I know she’s in there.

“Annie?”

“I need a minute, Owen,” she says, and her breath is haggard.

“What happened?” I say, one hand on the trim, my ear to the door.

Seconds pass, and I think she isn’t going to answer when the door to a little boy’s bedroom creaks open. “Two months, Owen.” Her head shakes. “You know my track record. Two months. I never make it past two months.”

I lift a hand to her cheek. “With them. Not with me. We made it past two months a long time ago.”

“Not like this.” She points from her chest to mine. “Not as a couple.” She breathes and breathes, and I fear she’ll hyperventilate any moment. “It just came so quick. I thought we’d have more time—”

“Hey,” I say, using the calmest voice I can. I lift her chin. “I’m not afraid. I’m not giving up on us. Not that easily. Not ever.”

She blinks, and I realize there are tears in her eyes.

“Maddox was wrong. And I’m not him. Do you hear me, Annie? He was wrong.”

She nods, and one of the tears filling her brown eyes spills out onto her cheek.

“We’re worth fighting for.” I nod at her, and she gives me a shaky nod back. “Right?”

She nods again, this time letting me pull her in for a hug. I wrap my arms around her and nestle my lips and nose into her hair. Breathing in the orange blossoms, I remind her that I’m here to stay.

## ANNIE



*P*anic attack averted. How is Owen so wonderful? Why didn't I force him to get that tattoo a million years ago to tell the world he belongs to me?

*He's not going to give up. He's not going to be like Maddox, making me feel unworthy, and he's not going to be like James, making me settle. He's not like any of the rest.*

I get to choose. I get a say.

I say *I'm worthy*. And I want Owen.

As I look at this photo of the two of us, it all feels so clear. So obvious.

Owen Bailey loves me.

*He loves me.*

And I love him. I'm pretty sure I always have. And fear of being unworthy of a love like his kept me at bay.

Unspoken, unknown, untrue *fear*.

Well, fear can take a hike.

When I leave Steve's room, hand in hand with Owen, I see my sister and Tim standing at the kitchen counter. Tim looks a little like he's been hit by a truck—and I feel him. My one a.m. start is catching up to me. That, and the emotion of Owen's gift.

Kayla has placed cinnamon rolls on four plates, one for each of us. We walk over to where my sister and her husband stand at the kitchen island. And I feel so grown up.

“When will the boys wake up?”

Tim groans. “They do this every year.”

They’re six and eight, when did this tradition of theirs really begin?

“Probably in an hour or so,” Kayla says, topping off mine and Owen’s coffee mugs.

“Round two,” I say. “I might need a pick me up.”

“Thus the coffee and sugar.” Kayla points to my mug and roll.

Owen laughs beside me. I sort of hate that I had to let go of him to dig into my food. I really need to figure out how to eat a cinnamon roll and keep Owen in my grasp. Maybe I could sit on his lap and eat...

I’m pondering this with serious consideration when my sister says, “Do you still have the vitamin B12 I gave you? That’ll help.”

I hover a hand over my full mouth. Vitamin—*oh!* To wake me up. Sure. “Coat pocket,” I say, my mouth half full.

“I’ll grab it.” Owen hands me a napkin and pecks my cheek.

I smirk. I’ve always been a little messier than him. “Thank you.”

“Things seem to be going well,” Kayla says, her eyes darting to where Owen walked away.

“They are. Better than well. You might have been right all along, Kayla. Enjoy it now, because I’m not gonna say that again.”

Tim laughs while licking the icing from his fingers.

“I don’t need to say I told you so,” Kayla says. “I need my little sister to know her value and love a man worthy of her.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Tim says, lifting his coffee mug. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” Kayla and I sing in unison, clinking our mugs to Tim’s.

I set my mug back down, my hands clean. “I’m gonna check on Owen. Maybe he can’t find my coat.”

I walk out to the living room—lighter, joyful, a flutter in my heart that tells me all of this is right.

Owen is standing next to my coat, a piece of copy paper in his hands, reading. I study him only a moment when—*crap*.

“Owen!” I yip, and his head pops up, his sweet blue eyes wide.

And then he reads,

**“Sometimes you shouldn’t mess with a good thing. Sometimes you need to leave well enough alone. Sometimes friendship is enough.**

**I don’t regret giving it a go with my bestie. We both learned valuable lessons. But that doesn’t mean it was meant to be. The fact is, it wasn’t. I learned that sometimes friendship is enough. Friendship is all that’s there. And that’s okay. Be okay with enough.**

**Trust your gut. Trust your feelings. Trust what you know, my friends.**

**You’ll never regret it.**

**Sincerely,**

**Single Again Annie”**

He drops his hand, the article falling to his side. “Single again? You wrote this? You’re printing this? After everything we’ve proven? You’re breaking up with me? Were you lying to get me through the holiday?”

“No. I didn’t lie to you. Owen, I love you.”



“But you wrote this? It has a print date on it—for two weeks from today.”

“Yes, but—”

“Trust your gut,” he says, tears in his eyes. “Your gut is telling you we were never going to be right together?” His Adam’s apple bobs with a swallow.

“You said you’d prove to me—” I start, but Owen isn’t letting me finish.

“And clearly,” he says, holding up the article, “I was wrong. You were right, like always.” He drops the article to the ground and turns for the door.

I hop through the gifts and nephews and decorations blocking my path and follow him out into the wind and snow. “Wait, Owen! I wrote that a month ago. I—”

But he’s already in his car. The cold concrete bites at my bare feet, and the chill in the air reminds me that I’m wearing nothing but my favorite flannel pants and a T-shirt.

“Kayla,” I cry the minute I’m back inside. My sister can fix this. She’s older and wiser and one powerhouse mama. She will know what to do.

Bucky sits up, brushing his forehead on the branch of their fir tree. “It was Steve’s idea!” he slurs, still half asleep.

“Annie?” Kayla makes her way into the room, her brows furrowed and cinched. “What’s—”

“Owen found the breakup article. He found it, he read it, and he left.” I am in full panic, streaming tears mode now.

“Oh, Christmas balls.” She smacks her forehead with the palm of her hand.

“Kayla, what do I do?” I can’t stop the sob that fills my chest and falls from my lips.

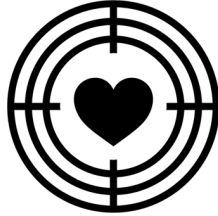
Kayla trips her way over to me, snatching me by the wrists and forcing my eyes to hers. “You love him?”

I nod.

“Okay—well”—she huffs out a breath—“you *are* Ask Annie, for holy sake. What would you tell yourself to do?”

It’s a jumbling, crazed question, but it works. I know exactly what I’d tell myself to do. I pick my jacket up from where Owen left it on the back of the couch and smack it into Kayla’s hands. “Here,” I say. “You drive.”

## O W E N



*I*walk into my mother's house, where my entire family has chosen to gather this morning. I'm greeted by two golden retrievers—Max and Princess, neither of which live here.

“Well, there you are! Did you sleep in?” Mom asks, bouncing Lulabelle on her hip, though it isn't even seven in the morning yet.

“No,” I say, and while a grin is my normal, natural attire, I can't conjure one to save my life. “I was with Annie.”

“Owen?” Coco says, her tone strained with worry.

Cooper, Miles, and Levi look over with her pleading tone.

“Whoa.” Coop says upon seeing me.

Miles walks over, sets a hand on my back, and offers his quiet, strong support. “Are you okay?”

“I knew I was right about her,” Levi barks. “I take back every kind thing I said about Archer. I—”

“Levi,” Meredith says, “sweetie, shut up.”

Alice cracks a grin at Meredith's scolding. “Did you hear her, Uncle Owen? That Meredith is a crack-up.”

My mother hands baby Lulabelle back to her mother and makes her way through the sea of Baileys. “Honey, what happened?”

“Nothing,” I say, not in the mood to explain myself. “It's over with Annie.”

“Over?” Coco says.

“Wait.” Alice moans. “I liked her.”

“Me too,” I say to my niece. “I just need to think—okay?”

I make my way through the crowd and find the only private room in this house: the hall bathroom.

It seems that just seconds ago, Annie had locked herself in a room and I had assured her that I was different. That *we* were different. She seemed to believe me. She said she did. If she felt so differently, why wouldn't she tell me? She'd have me learn of it in a public article? Maybe she planned to let me down easy after Christmas and then print the article. None of those possibilities make me feel any better though.

Her words broke my heart—but the fact that she was willing to let me go on thinking that we had made it, that she reciprocated all of my feelings, is what hurts the most.

None of it makes sense, and none of it feels like Annie.

There's a knock on the bathroom door, and I honestly don't know who it is—anyone from my family could be on the other side disturbing my not-so-peaceful moment.

“Owen,” Miles says. “What happened?”

“She doesn't want me. That's it.”

“Ow—”

I crack open the door and peer out at my brother. “Just give me a minute, Miles. I'll be out in time for stockings, I promise.”

“Take your time,” he says, sadness in his eyes.

But not two minutes later, there's another knock. “Miles—” I grind my teeth and open the door a crack, but it isn't Miles who stands outside this bathroom door.

It's Annie.

“Just hear me out, Owen,” she says, a tremor in her voice. My view isn't great down the hallway—but it's good enough

to see that every member of the Bailey family, including Annie's sister, watches this spectacle.

"I got the message. You don't have to ex—"

"Owen, please shut up," she cries, and with her words, a sputter of Alice giggles filter in behind her.

I let the door swing open wider, and I stand there, ready for her excuses, ready for Maddox Powell's words to affect the rest of my life—because that's what this is, isn't it? Maddox Powell convinced Annie to believe a lie about herself, and now we don't get to be together. If I ever see that man again—

"Owen, I love you."

I stare, unsure if I heard her right or if I even believe her.

"I wrote that article a week after we started dating. I wrote it with fear and doubt in my head. I just couldn't see how this would ever work out then. But it wasn't honest, and it wasn't true. I never could have printed it. I was wrong. I'm sorry I ever wrote it."

I open my mouth to speak, but she isn't done. My heart and brain take in each word, trying to decide if they're real.

"You said you wouldn't give up on me. You said we were worth fighting for." Her voice breaks, and she holds out the article she wrote. She flips it over to the blank backside—though it's no longer blank. There are scribbled pen marks all along the back. She shoves the thing at me. "Read it," she commands. "Honest and true."

And with all of my family and her sister watching, I do.

**"You asked me if THE ONE existed. You asked if you should settle for second best. The fact is, there is someone worth fighting for out there. Why would you settle for anyone but them? Be kind, be unselfish, be loving, be good to yourself. And if you are as lucky and as blessed as I am, THE ONE will fall into your lap. THE ONE will find you. THE ONE will be your best friend and long-lost lover all at once.**

**THE ONE does exist. Don't give up. Don't give in. You are worth loving. Just be brave enough to believe it."**

My heart swells with her words, *honest and true*.

And then, Annie Archer, in her flannel pants and messy red bedhead, kneels down on one knee in front of me, in front of this bathroom, in front of our families.

There's a gasp from the crowd—I'm guessing from Coco. And a small groan—I'd bet money on Levi.

"Owen Gray Bailey, I know I've taken forever to wise up. But I love you. You're my target. Don't give up on me. Marry me?" She gives me the cutest half smile and a one-shoulder shrug. And then she's scrambling her fingers into her flannel pants' pocket. She pulls out a red, white, and blue plastic Spiderman ring and holds it up to me.

"Oh, Owen," my mother cries, though I can't see her face. I can't see anything but Annie.

"You don't have to resort to dramatics," I tell her, giving her my own half-smile. It says she is loved, it says she is forgiven. It tells her that I understand her—and I'm sorry too.

"Not dramatic—just honest," she says. "My truth is that I love you, Owen. And Grammy says I have to marry you. So—" she gives a small shoulder shrug, her eyes bright. "Why wait? I'm pretty sure I've kept you waiting long enough."

"Annie—"

"And I *want* to marry you. With every fiber of my being, I want to, Owen."

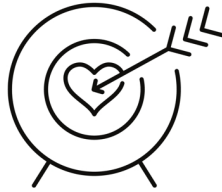
I stoop, meeting her eye level, and cup her cheeks between my palms. "I love you, too, Annie," I whisper before pressing a kiss to her lips.

"*Ew*, he's eating her face off again!" Alice moans. Her words are heard just above a chorus of cheers. Because my family has heard every word, seen every look, felt every emotion alongside us.

The Baileys don't miss a thing.

# EPILOGUE

ANNIE



ou two?” Grammy frowns at my fingers knotted with Owen’s.

“*Y* Hello, Grammy. We love you too,” I mock.  
But her frown only deepens. “Annie Archer, I told you—”

Owen rumbles with a laugh at my side. She turns her glower on him.

“I know what you told me, Grammy. That’s why we’re here.” I glance over at my very adorable fiancé.

“Well, one of the reasons. I also want to buy a pie. You got any chocolate in today, Elsie?”

Grammy lifts up on her toes and pinches Owen’s cheek. When she finally pulls back, there is a bright red mark where her fingers once were. “Of course I have chocolate. This isn’t my first rodeo.”

Owen laughs. “Perfect. I need a whole pie today.”

“And—” I interrupt. Really, a pie? We’re here with news! I snake my arm around Owen’s back and hope for a reaction.

Gram does not disappoint. “No,” she barks. “I told you—”

“You told me to leave him or to marry him.”

My grandma’s wrinkles seem to smooth with the slack in her cheeks and jaw. “Are you?” She points from me to Owen.

“The two of *you*?”

I nod. “Yes!” I say, and it comes out more like a squeal than an actual word.

Grammy reaches up for both our necks and we are thoroughly Grammy-slapped.

“Annie popped the question on Christmas,” Owen says, and he’s beaming. He loves that I proposed. And to be honest, so do I. It was as if those words, that question—it healed us both in that moment.

I owed him that. I owed myself that.

Grammy pauses mid-slap. “What did you say?” She peers at Owen.

“Ah, that Annie proposed on—”

Grammy’s arms fall to her sides. Her bottom lip protrudes, and she gives her head one shake. “No. No, the man proposes.”

“Come on, Grammy—”

“No,” she says, giving me the evil eye. “Go on,” she says to Owen.

“Ah.” Owen peers from Grammy to me. “Here? You want me to—”

“Come on.” She pounds his backside, and I’m not sure if Owen bends to one knee or if it’s Grammy who pushes him there.

Owen’s eyes flit from Grammy to me. “Ah, Annie, would you do me the honor of marrying me?”

I don’t even get to answer. “Very good. Yes.” Grammy gives us each another pat. “Much better.”

Owen gets to his feet, his hand slips into mine and Grammy doesn’t say a thing.

“Well?” I say, peering at my grandmother. “Are you surprised?”



“No. I saw it coming a mile away.” She shakes her head, her bottom lip protruding. “I’ll get the butter syrup.”

“Oh, Grammy. We have to go. Owen has... a thing.” I don’t know what Owen has, just that we need to be on our way.

“I do—but I’ll take that pie first.” He grins.

A minute later, we collect our chocolate cream pie and go.

I have no idea where Owen is taking me. The plan was to ring shop—*check*. And tell Grammy—*check*. And now we are in Kellogg, Idaho, forty minutes from home.

“Owen—”

“Just enjoy the drive,” he says, sliding his hand across the seat of this car and slipping it into mine.

I breathe out a laugh. “I am enjoying the drive. I would enjoy it a whole lot more if I knew where we were going.”

“I just have a little business to take care of. And I thought you’d like to be there.”

Business? O is a teacher... would he really be picking up supplies or have a meeting in Kellogg? We’re not even in the same school district.

I’m not great at being patient, but I try. Because it’s a lovely day and I’m with Owen.

He punches an address into his GPS, which announces we have two minutes until we reach our destination.

Two minutes later, we pull up to a one-story, green-trimmed home. This is not a school. Or even an office building.

“Tell me you didn’t buy us a house,” I say, peering out at the little place.

“Shh.” He hushes me with a grin. “I already bought us a house, remember?” Then he hops from the vehicle and marches around, opening my door and helping me out. “Just wait right here.” He looks from my spot at the car to the front door of the house.

“Owen—”

He presses a finger to my lips. And then he replaces that finger with his mouth. He kisses me softly. “I love you, Annie Archer. Always have, always will.”

I swallow, my breath caught in my throat.

Owen opens the back door of his Buick and pulls the pie from his backseat.

Then, he takes off up the walkway and knocks on the front door of the house.

A man opens up, no older than Owen. He smiles when he sees Owen—they must know each other.

Wait... *I* know that man. I haven't seen him in six years, but I know that face.

Owen gestures out to me, and I offer a small, unsure wave to *Maddox Powell*, my college beau.

I hold my breath and listen, just barely hearing Owen above the breeze.

“I made you a pie once, Maddox. But I owed you another.”

Maddox smiles, and my heart literally stops. What. Is. Happening?

And then, the nicest man who ever lived opens up the white pastry box, pulls out Grammy's chocolate pie, and smashes it in Maddox Powell's face.

He leaves Maddox standing, stunned and covered in chocolate and whipped cream. I am speechless—and I'm ready to run. Am I the getaway car?

But Owen doesn't rush. He pecks my lips once more, one hand in his pocket. He opens my door and waits for me to step inside. I see him salute Maddox before walking around and getting into the driver's seat.

My mouth drops. “Owen! What was that?”

He leans over, pecking my waiting lips once more. “I just thought the most lovable human I know—that's you, by the

way—owed Maddox a pie. That’s all.”



## Bonus Epilogue

### Miles

hat are you working on?” Mom stands in the doorway of my studio, a sweet grin on her face.

“*W* “Oh.” I blink away from her back to the watercolor in front of me. “Just something for Owen and Annie.” My siblings are all consumed with other things these days—Owen with Annie, Levi with Meredith and new adventures, Coco with her girls, and Cooper with school. Which means I have more time to work than I’d like some days.

“Can I see?” she asks, always conscious of my need for privacy.

There comes a time when I’m ready for someone to see my work—but the beginning stages are not it. Still, this is my mother, the kindest, gentlest woman I know.

I give her a small nod, and she walks over, standing beside me, looping her arm through mine. The sketch of roses and songbirds isn’t much yet, but my mother looks at it as if she’s staring at the next Mona Lisa.

“They still need you, you know?”

“Who?”

“Your siblings, of course. I know you like your quiet studio and your time, Miles. But I know you. Best of all, you love your family. You need to know that they still need you.”

I wrap one arm around her, tucking my tiny mother into the crook of my arm. “I know that,” I say, though she may have read my mind. She was always doing that growing up too.

“Don’t forget it. And don’t be afraid to go find someone for yourself, Miles.” She blinks up at me.

She means well—but I’m not looking. I love painting and teaching and my family. There is no room in my life for anything more.



## Delaney

The crowd is roaring. They’re chanting.

“You don’t want me to go on?” I clamp my fingerless gloves to my waist and bore a glare into Serena. “Are you kidding me?”

“Your vision for the Judys has changed.” She shrugs. “Ours hasn’t.”

“Okay, but—”

“But you go out there, Lane, and your whole—” My bandmate—and sorta friend of six years—looks me up, then down. “*Vibe*,” she settles on, “is going to screw with our success. I’m sorry. You wanted to be done. You’re done.”

“I never said—”

“You said you wanted to sing.”

“Well, yeah,” I say. I’m tired of backup. And I have a voice.

“*Lead*.” She huffs. “I’m lead. Always have been. Astrid’s fine with that. Dawn is too. We’re rock, and you want to go *folk*.” She shakes her head again as if I’ve suggested genocide.

“It’s something new. We’ve done the same thing for—”

“We’re doing what we like. What works.”

I sigh, my head to the ground, my bass growing heavy strapped to my back. “For you. It works for you.”

She nods—agreeing with me. “Which is why you’re done. And I’m not.”

Another “Judys! Judys!” roars from the crowd.

“Gotta go, Lane. You know the drill. But good luck. I never hated you.”

Wow. After six years as lead bass and killing myself to grow this band into the most popular punk rock of the decade, I end with that glowing review? “But who’s going to play bass?”

Serena doesn’t even hesitate. “Judy Cane.” She nods to a corner backstage, and I see the guitarist wearing *my* Judy shirt.

“You’ve already replaced me?”

“Laney—we both knew this was coming.”

I can’t look at her anymore. I can’t. I turn, darting quickly past dumb Judy Cane and her ironically perfect name for our band.

I beeline for my dressing room. I’m thankful to find Ash inside. I think I’m hyperventilating, and I’d rather not die a lone Judy in the back of this dressing room, while Judy Cane goes on stage with *my* band.

“Ash,” I huff through heavy breaths. “What am I going to do?”

She crosses her arms over her chest, a scowl on her face. “I told you not to say anything.”

But how could I not? I felt it in my gut. *Folk*—that’s what I’m meant for. That’s what I should be doing. I’d hoped the Judys would come with me.

“But—”

“But the problem is you’re replaceable, Lane.”

My breath hitches with her words.

“Eddy left.”

“That was mutual,” I say.

“You clearly aren’t out there with your band tonight—the people aren’t going to miss that. Eddy doesn’t want you, the Judys don’t want you. Why should your fans?”

*Ouch.* My PA is a doll, isn't she?

"I'm giving it to you straight. You've got to convince the people, somebody that wants you, that *they* should want you."

"I want me." I don't care what anyone else thinks. I never have.

"Wonderful." Ash gives me a mock grin. "I hope you have enough self-love to support your career."

I grind my teeth and put on my big girl panties. With hands on hips, I stare her straight in the eye. "Fine. Any suggestions?"

"Actually, yes." She holds out her iPad, and I take the thing.

An ad takes up the screen—a mansion in the background and thirty men lined up in a half circle out front.

"What's this?"

She taps the screen and words appear. CELEBRITY LIFE.  
CELEBRITY WIFE.

"A new reality show?" I say, not computing any of this.

"That," she says, "and your ticket to becoming desirable again."

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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and you helped give me one. You created something so lovely!  
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Love,

Jen



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Atkinson has been dreaming up love stories and writing them down since she learned her ABCs in elementary school. While Jen has written a variety of genres, from romantic suspense to laugh out loud romcoms, all of her novels contain three things: a love story, a happily ever after, and all are closed door reads! If you want to feel all the feels, and get a little light head from swooning over cinnamon roll heroes, grab one of Jen's books.



When she isn't writing... or editing... or creating fun graphics about books to share online, Jen is dating her husband, hanging out with her children, and forcing her family into epic board game competitions—that she will surely be the winner of.

To learn more about Jen follow her on Instagram at [@authorjenatkinson](#) or join her Facebook group: Jen Atkinson Books, Readers, News.