

How to be a Heartbreaker

a new adult novella

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Chapter One

There are all of these books and movies about good girls gone wrong. What's *that* about?

Actually, I think I *know* what it's about, and even worse, I've seen it happen.

Take Lisa Kelley.

Graduated from my high school two years before me. Cheerleader, debate club champion, and salutatorian. Went to Arizona State on a cheerleading scholarship (yup, that's a thing), and where is Lisa Kelley now, you ask?

Jail. I'm not even kidding. She and her boyfriend robbed a Lovers Package shop.

Actually, that last part is urban legend. But Lisa Kelley's definitely in jail. For something. Her parents go to church with my parents, and my mom does a *lot* of praying for poor Lisa's soul.

But I digress.

Lisa Kelley is just one of many pretty, perfect girls who went all wrong-side-of the tracks. And for what? Because they got *tired* of being likable and respected? They up and decided that being eligible for a good job sounded unappealing?

Or did they think, *Hey, I've got a great idea ... why don't I deliberately make life difficult for my parents and people that care about me?*

I don't get that.

Look at Pollyanna, the relentlessly optimistic preteen from that sixties movie. Sure, she gets a bad rap for being, oh, I don't know ... kind of annoying. But I like to think she had the right idea by being optimistic and refined. And yes, she did have that little bad-tempered setback

when she (spoiler alert!) fell out of the freaking tree. But did that drive her to go get a tramp stamp of a dragon on her lower back? Do you see Pollyanna doing body shots and making out with girls just to get a rise out of Aunt Polly?

No. No, you do not.

Now, I'm not a Pollyanna. At least not in the unending optimism type of way. Truth be told, I'm a bit of a cynic, although only in private.

But I *am* a good girl.

That's right.

My name is Annie Gilmore, and I'm a good girl. And proud of it.

Case in point? It's Sunday night, and everyone else in the dorm is either watching TV or eating ice cream or gossiping. Me? I've been on the phone with my mother for the past forty minutes, like I am every Sunday night.

"And you're staying on top of your studies?" Mom asks.

I lightly bonk my head against the wall of the stairwell where I've hunkered down with my cell phone for some privacy from my roommate.

"Yes, I'm staying up on my studies. We're only a week into spring semester. How behind could I be?"

"Well, this is your chance to get ahead. Your father and I aren't paying to have you flunk out."

Actually, my parents aren't paying at all. I'm at Fordham University on a full ride scholarship (academic, not cheerleading. Told you I was a good girl.), and even my housing is

paid for. My parents *are* paying for my books, but everything else is on me, and my twice-a-week stint as office monkey in the president's office is barely getting me by.

But I *am* getting by.

And I am grateful for my parents.

I'll just be way *more* grateful after I get off this phone call ...

"Danny's mom asked about you on Sunday. Says he's seeing another girl, but she thinks it's only to make you jealous."

I tuck the phone under my chin and pull my blond hair into a messy knot at the top of my head and try not to scream. Danny Arnstadt and I'd had exactly two dates.

Prom. Mine, and his.

But if you listen to my mother, we were the greatest love since Elinor Dashwood and Edward Ferrars from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. The book. Not the movie. Because that, apparently, had been a "sham."

Danny is a perfectly nice guy, and I'm grateful that he took me to prom, because, when you attend an all-girls high school, coming by prom dates is harder than one might imagine.

But we have about as much romantic chemistry as a vegan and a rib eye.

"Well, I'm glad to hear Danny's doing well," I say. See what I mean? Nice girl.

Out of nowhere, there's a pair of flailing arms in my face as my roommate tries to get my attention with her typical overenthusiasm.

I put my finger over the voice piece of my phone. "Parents."

"Oh right, sorry," Corrie whispers.

Then: "ANNIE! You're late for study group!"

I roll my eyes, but my mother is all over it. “Was that Corrie?”

“Yup.” Not for the first time, I’m grateful that Corrie had been *relatively* conservative when my parents met her on move-in day back in August. If my mom could see Corrie now, in her low-slung sweat pants with “SASSY” across the ass, and a tank top that did nothing to disguise C cups, she’d probably start resending the e-mails for local churches she’d sent at the beginning of the year.

“Study group, honey? You should go.”

Corrie plays my mother like a fiddle, but I’ll happily take the out. Plus I don’t know for *sure* that there’s no study group. And it’s not lying if you can’t say one way or the other, right?

“Okay, Mom. Good talking to you. Tell Dad I’m sorry I missed him and I’ll catch him next week ... Mmm-hmm. Love you too.”

“*Finally*,” Corrie says, where she’s been rocking back and forth on her flip-flops for the entire end of my conversation. Then her hands are in my hair and she’s yanking out the rubber band and fluffing my hair around my shoulders. Only my hair doesn’t really fluff, so it’s more just like rearranging really straight, really boring shoulder-length hair.

“Zach’s up there,” she says, taking a step back to look at me, smacking her gum as she does so. “He’s asking about you.”

My footsteps falter. *Be cool, Annie.*

“For our *study group*?” I ask, following her up the stairs toward our shared room

“Please. Nobody has study groups this early in the trimester.”

I'm not sure how she knows this, seeing as we're both freshmen, and our experience is limited to the fall trimester that just ended, but she's got a point. I'm a very—okay, *really*—diligent student, and even I don't have much to work on this early.

Corrie, on the other hand, is not so much in the diligent student category. There's no Greek life at Fordham, but if there were, Corrie and her identical twin, Haley, would be the poster girls for it. They're both five feet, eight inches of toned legs, big boobs, and long, Victoria's Secret–model brown hair.

“Cor,” I ask suddenly. “Do I look okay?”

She gives me one of those aww-honey looks. “Of course. You look adorable.”

Adorable. A word I've gotten a lot of over the years. Cute. Adorable. Sometimes pretty. Never gorgeous, beautiful, or hot, but adorable is better than “But you're so smart!” so I guess I'll take it. I'm a five-foot-four blonde, with blue eyes that I'd been told looked like “doll eyes” (awesome, not), and adding to the cutesy image? Dimples.

Sexy I'm not.

But Zach Harrison doesn't seem to mind.

I put a palm over my fluttering stomach. Zach and I have stats and Introduction to U.S. Politics together this trimester, so I've seen him in class this past week, but we haven't really had a chance to talk.

And we *definitely* haven't had a chance to talk about the almost-kiss the night before we'd gone home for break.

I can hear the music coming from my and Corrie's room all the way down the hall, and as I've grown used to, there are like six, maybe seven people crammed into our tiny shared space.

But my eyes only land on one person.

Zach Harrison is this really beguiling combination of cocky jock, and sweet, smart guy. That combination is pretty much the epitome of my type. Plus, he's got this crazy-good wavy dark hair, blue eyes, and always has just the slightest bit of scruff to keep him from looking too pretty.

Since we live in the same coed dorm (he lives in the room right above me), I sometimes get to see him in his PJ pants and glasses, both of which he's wearing right now. Corrie says he's got a Clark Kent/Superman thing going on, and she's not wrong. In other words ... Zach Harrison is smart *and* gorgeous.

"Hey Annie," he says, sitting up when he sees me. He nudges my neighbor Tammy on the leg to move over so there's room for me. And for a split second, I think she gives me the stink eye, but then she grins and pats the seat between them. "Sit!" she says. "I haven't seen you like *at all* since December!"

"Uh-uh," Corrie says from the other side of the room, as she kicks the door shut with her foot. "Don't get too comfy over there. I have an idea."

"Because Corrie's ideas always work out well for everyone," Zach says in my ear.

I hide a smile. Corrie is definitely the idea girl—most of them leading to trouble. But harmless trouble. Not the weird jail-variety trouble I was talking about earlier.

My roommate is rummaging around in her desk drawer, bending over at the perfect angle to give Matt and Ian a perfect view of her tiny butt.

Finally, she pulls out a wine bottle. "Ta da!"

"Yay," Zach says drolly. "An empty wine bottle."

She points it in his direction with a warning glare. “Don’t be that guy, or you won’t get to play.”

“Play?” I ask stupidly.

I’m not the only one staring at my roommate in confusion, but then I see the slightly predatory gaze she is giving Matt—Matt who thus far has been impressively immune to Corrie’s come-ons—and I put the pieces together at the same time as everyone else.

Tammy groans. “Corrie, tell me you’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

“Spin the bottle!” Corrie announces, oblivious to everyone else’s horror. “I haven’t played spin the bottle since eighth grade.”

Zach gives her a dark look. “*Nobody* plays it after eighth grade, and for good reason. It’s ridiculous.”

I relax a little, realizing that everyone else is seemingly reluctant to get on Corrie’s creepy time machine and go back to middle school. But then I realize that Tammy’s already scooting forward to sit cross-legged on the ground, and even worse, Zach is also moving to join the circle.

“Tell me you have some sort of alcoholic beverage to make this more tolerable,” Tammy says, tucking her short black hair behind her ears.

Corrie is one step ahead of her, already digging out a bottle of her favorite vanilla vodka from her sock drawer.

“Is that all you have?” Ian asks dubiously.

“Take it or leave it,” my roommate says, wagging the bottle at him.

He takes a quick glance around the room, and apparently his potential kissing partners are unappealing enough to warrant the girly drink, and he shrugs and reaches for the bottle. “Got nothing better to do.”

“Gee thanks,” Tammy mutters.

I swallow nervously, wondering if there’s any possible way to get out of this. I’d played spin the bottle before. Once. And I’d been kissed before. More than once.

I know it’s old-fashioned and stupid, but I’d always been one of those girls that thought that a kiss should mean something, not a token to be given away in a game.

I try to catch Corrie’s eye, but she’s busy ripping open a bag of M&M’s, and not looking at me.

But someone is.

Zach.

He’s crouched on the ground as though he was about to sit down, but then his eyes lock on mine as he freezes. He knows I’m not into this.

I don’t know how, but this guy I’ve only known for a few short months, and who’s been my favorite part of college so far, *knows me*.

He gives a little wink. And then.

“Shit!” he says out of nowhere. “*Shit!*”

Everyone looks at him. “What’s up?” Tammy asks.

He puts a hand to his forehead in annoyance. “I just remembered I never finished my stats assignment.”

“Do it later,” Ian says, throwing a Chee-tos at him.

“I can’t,” Zach says as he flings the chip back and wipes the fake-cheese powder off his gray T-shirt. “Stats takes me forever.”

He’s already moving toward the door to loud boos. “Sorry kids. Gotta call it a night.”

He pauses then and turns back, as though it’s an afterthought. “Um, Annie. I hate to even ask this, but did you understand Friday’s lecture?”

My mind goes blank for a second. “Friday? Lecture?”

“Yeah, I took a ridiculous amount of notes, and I still didn’t have any clue what Professor Mayors was talking about.”

Ohhhhh ... “I—um—I’m *good* at stats,” I blurt out.

Everyone laughs, but Zach just gives me a private little smile. “Think you can walk me through one homework problem? I’ll be a fast learner, promise.”

Ian mutters something under his breath and Corrie’s eyes are narrowed at me, but I don’t care. I’ll take the out.

“Sure,” I say, probably a little too quickly. “No problem.”

Before anyone can respond, I step my way around the knees and chip bags on my floor, and a second later, I close the door behind me.

It’s quiet in the hall since it’s a Sunday, with only a handful of people’s doors open, and most of them are probably vegged out, watching TV.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, leaning back against the wall, and feeling a little shy. I *always* feel shy around Zach. Probably because he’s ridiculously good-looking, funny, *and*, I should mention, really good at stats. “I’m not really a big fan of the whole spin-the-bottle thing. Especially with Chee-tos going around.”

“Not crazy about it myself,” he says, leaning one shoulder on the wall next to me. There are a few inches between us. But not many. “I like those things to matter, you know?”

My eyes fly to his. What things? Kissing?

And now I want to know if he too is thinking about that moment a few weeks ago ... that too-good-to-be-true moment when we’d almost kissed.

After months of flirting and accidental touches, we’d been *finally* been alone in the laundry room (romantic, I know, but I’ve learned that in college, you have to take alone time where you can find it), and we’d been in one of those romantic comedy–worth positions, with me sitting on top of one of the washers, waiting for my clothes to dry, and him standing, a hand on either side of my hips ...

He’d leaned in ...

And then Corrie had barged in, demanding to know if I’d seen her green tank top.

The moment was over, and the next morning I’d flown home to Arizona and him to Boston.

But there was no Corrie now, and no plane to catch tomorrow.

I lift my chin slightly, wishing I would have at least swiped on some mascara today, but he’s not looking at my eyes. His gaze is locked on my mouth.

“Annie,” he says huskily, his eyes dark behind his glasses.

“Yeah?” I whisper, my attention now devoted to *his* mouth.

“I really want to kiss you ...”

There’s a but. I know there’s a but.

“... but I don’t want it to be in a dirty dorm hallway where Corrie could interrupt at any moment, anymore than I want it to be in a dumb game of spin the bottle.”

“Oh.” I don’t know whether I’m embarrassed, or relieved.

“When I kiss you, I don’t want to be listening to Tammy’s cackle,” he says. “I want it to be special.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering a little as I nod.

“Okay,” I say.

Okay? Okay, Annie?! That’s all you’ve got?

“You wanna hang out? Kill some time until they’re done with their game?”

“Nah, I actually need to call Danielle back,” I say, grasping at the first excuse that comes to mind. And really, it’s not a totally unreasonable one. Danielle is my best friend from high school, who I try to talk to once a week.

He nods, looking as awkward as I feel. “Okay, well. Night?”

“Night, Zach.”

His eyes drop to my mouth again, and for a second I think he might change his mind. But then he’s backing away, and the heat in his eyes is replaced by his usual playfulness. “Thanks for the stats help.”

I’m smiling as I scroll through my contacts and find Danielle’s number.

She picks up immediately. “You better have an update on The Guy. I’m not keen on that Christmas break cliffhanger you left me with.”

I grin, biting my lip. “I’ve got an update on the guy.”

Chapter Two

By Tuesday, my good mood has declined.

I saw Zach yesterday in class, but I was late for class, and by the time I'd gotten there, some gorgeous blond girl was in my usual seat. She has that perfect-skin, perfect-makeup, plus tiny-dainty-reading-glasses look going on that would have made me look like a little kid playing dress up, but on her, looked like Smart Barbie.

And we don't have any classes together on Tuesday, and on top of *that* I have my work shift at the president's office today. Normally I don't hate my job, but the past couple months have been hectic. There's a President's Gala on February 2, and the student workers have been assigned the majority of the boring, time-consuming tasks.

Today's riveting assignment? Name tags. And not the easy, print-a-billion-at-a-time-on-a-sticky-sheet name tags. No, these are fancy-have-to-be-printed-individually-on-card-stock-and-cut-by-hand name tags. Then they need to be put into these plastic things, which won't go with anybody's gala outfit, but I guess that isn't my problem about.

My problem to worry about had just walked in the door.

I groan at the familiar face. "I thought you had a different shift this trimester."

Garrett Reed tosses his bag onto the table and drops into the seat across from me.

"Anners. You think I'd miss out on our bonding?"

I ignore the nickname. I've learned from experience that letting Garrett Reed know you don't like something is a surefire way to ensure he'll do it for life. "We've been back for over a week. Where were you last Tuesday and Thursday, waxing your chest?"

He sticks a finger in the collar of his striped button-down and glances at his chest.

“Wanna see?”

In response, I shove a stack of paper toward him. “We got more RSVPs. Your turn to update the list.”

“I thought the RSVPs were due in November.”

“They were. Which is why this is so fun.” I give him a big, shit-eating grin.

He gives one right back, his teeth all white and perfect. The perfect teeth go perfectly with the perfectly groomed black hair and perfectly proportioned brown eyes. In high school, Garrett Reed was prom king, golden boy quarterback. I know, because he tells me. Frequently.

By some bitchy twist of fate, we got stuck on the same work shift in fall trimester, and we hit it off like two really strong magnets facing the wrong way.

“I thought you said you were going to talk to someone about taking the Monday-Wednesday shift?” I ask.

“And by talk to someone, you mean ... my dad?”

Garrett’s dad the dean of the graduate business school, and from what I’d gleaned from Garrett, was one of those old-school no-free-lunch kind of fathers that had insisted Garrett “earn his way” even though he was getting free tuition. How I’d gotten lucky enough for this to be his way, I’ll never know.

“Yeah, him,” I say. “Or Jesus, or anyone who might ensure we don’t have to spend two hours with each other twice a week?”

“You wound me,” he says as he picks up a red pen and begins cross-referencing the list of RSVP cards with the master list. “And I *did* try to switch, because oddly enough, I was hoping to work with someone who’s not a smartass shrew, but it didn’t work with my class schedule.”

I shrug, not about to apologize for the fact that he’s possibly the only person in my world who doesn’t like me. I don’t know what it is, but Garrett brings out every possible flaw in me. Most of the time I’m fairly biddable. Pretty easy to get along with. Maybe even a little funny. But this guy activates every cynical and smartass bone in my body.

“How’s Lena?” I ask, referring to his high school girlfriend. They’d been dating since their sophomore year, and they’d been doing the long-distance thing now that she was at Brown and he at Fordham.

He doesn’t answer, and I glance at him curiously over the top of my cutting project. Garrett loves to talk about Lena. It’d be cute if it wasn’t so annoying.

“Hello?” I say. “Is this a new silent game? Because I’m down.”

Still nothing. Slowly I lower my hands and lean forward a little, my voice hushed. “*Psst*. Garrett.”

He ignores me.

“Garrett, did Leah ... dump you?”

Very slowly he moves the papers upward so I can’t see his face, still saying nothing.

A giggle escapes, and I clamp a hand over my mouth to stifle it, even though he’s already heard it. It’s horrible of me, I know, laughing at someone’s breakup with their longtime girlfriend. It’s just ... you’d have to know Garrett. He’s so damn smug about *everything*.

He drops the papers on the table with a sigh and leans forward. “Despite what you’d have everyone believe, you, Annie Gilmore, are not a nice girl.”

“I am!” I protest. But my laughter betrays me. “You got *dumped*.”

He looks at me for several seconds, and for a tiny moment I think I’m going to have to apologize—no, I *should* apologize—but then the corner of his mouth quirks up and he slumps back in his chair. “You’re a bitch.”

“What happened?” I ask, resuming my thrilling work with the name tags. “Did she get tired of you doing that thing you do with your shoulders? Because it’s super annoying.”

“What thing?” he asks, the pen he’d been twirling over his fingers pausing for a second before resuming its usual cocky pace.

“You know. That kind of shoulder roll thing you do when nobody’s looking.”

He stares at me. “I don’t do that.”

I tilt my head a little to admire my handiwork. “Yeah you do. It’s like how you reset yourself after you’ve just tried to charm the pants of someone. Usually a female someone.”

His eyebrows lift. “Haven’t charmed the pants off you.”

“Because I see through you,” I say, snipping the scissors in his direction. “And I’ve seen the shoulder roll.”

He stares at me for several seconds before sticking the pen between his teeth and shaking his head. He turns back to his checklist. “You’re weird.”

“But I’m right.”

He doesn’t bother responding.

We work in semi-companionable silence for several minutes.

“It was the usual long-distance stuff,” he says out of nowhere.

“Huh?”

“Me and Leah. We broke up because of the usual long-distance stuff.”

My cutting hand pauses, a little thrown off. The usual snappy retort is on the tip of my tongue. *We having a moment here, Reed?*

But for some reason, I hear myself say something else entirely. “Sorry, Garrett. Seriously. That sucks. But at least you get a rebound opportunity now, right?”

“You’re not going to ask me what long-distance stuff?”

I frown in confusion. “Doesn’t feel like my business ... But if you want to talk about it ...?”

He gnaws on the end of his pen for a minute, watching me. *Gross*. He looks away. “Nah.”

I shrug as though it’s no big deal, but seriously, now I’m a little curious. Garrett may drive me crazy, but he’s a “catch” as my mother would say. He’s good-looking, funny, gets good grades ... maybe a little bit of a jerk, but some girls like that. I wonder what he did that made Princess Leah dumped him.

There’s a knock at the small side office where we students work and our eyes snap to each other in a wide oh-no moment.

“Hey kids!”

“Hi Mrs. Ramirez,” we say in cheerful unison. Becky Ramirez is executive assistant to Fordham’s president, and in the interview, I’d been lulled by her five-foot-nothin’, strawberry blond pixie appearance into thinking she’d be a sweet, easygoing boss. And while she is nice

enough, she also has ridiculous expectations about what her student employees can get done in the span of two hours.

Helping each other survive Becky's sometimes ridiculous demands is the only way Garrett and I had bonded over the past few months, and she'd been *way* worse this past week now that we were T-minus a month away from the big gala.

"Which one of you wants to go for a coffee run?" she asks in her deceptively sweet-as-sugar voice, wagging her work-expense Starbucks card at us. My eyes flick to the window. It's pouring outside, and of course I've forgotten my umbrella. But still, as far as Mrs. Ramirez's requests go, this one's pretty tame.

"I've got it," Garrett says, already pushing his chair back.

I look at him in surprise. We keep a tally of these kinds of things, and I'm pretty sure it's my turn. "Thanks Garrett," she says, handing him the card. "It's for Father Rosetti and myself today, so if you get a drink carrier, you can probably carry back drinks for you and Annie. Our treat."

Don't have to twist my arm. "I'd love a—"

"Double tall, nonfat mocha, no whip. I got it," Garrett says, shrugging on his jacket and slipping out the door. Becky disappears, and I stare after them for a second.

He knows my coffee order by heart?

That's twice in five minutes that Garrett Reed has caught me off guard. This has to stop. He's so not the type of guy you let get the jump on you.

An hour later, Garrett and I have barely made a dent in the amount of tedious tasks that need to be done, but our shift is over, so we at least have a reprieve until Thursday.

“Where you off to?” he asks, slinging his bag over his shoulder as I button my coat.

“French,” I say, as he holds open the office door for me. “You?”

“Nothing. My schedule ended up pretty heavy on Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays, but Tuesday and Thursday afternoons are open.”

“Lucky,” I mutter as I glare out at the nasty New York weather. I guess I should be lucky it’s not snowy, but it might as well be. The Phoenix native in me hasn’t adjusted to the cold, much less the *wet* that is the East Coast winter.

Garrett pulls out a sleek black umbrella and waggles at me. “I’ll walk you.”

I stare at the umbrella. Then at him. “Why?”

He rolls his eyes and gives a little laugh before taking my arm and tugging me outside even as he pops open the umbrella and holds it over our heads.

It’s weird, walking huddled under an umbrella all cozy-like with Garrett Reed, but oddly not unpleasant.

“So I never asked, how was your holiday break?” he asks, as we dodge a huge puddle and make our way across campus.

“Not bad. Pretty uneventful.”

“So no progress on Operation Get-a-Boyfriend?” he asks, glancing down at me.

Weirdly enough, Garrett is the only person at school that knows that I’ve never had a serious boyfriend. I think Corrie suspects as much, but I’ve always been a little vague about my past romantic encounters. Probably because I didn’t have any specifics to talk about. A first kiss at summer camp after sophomore year, a couple movie dates with a guy from my all-girls high

school's "brother school," and of course the decidedly unromantic prom excursions with Danny Arnstadt.

But no boyfriend. Not really.

"I never should have told you that," I mutter. It had been a moment of weakness last December. He'd been asking me for advice on what to get Leah for Christmas by asking about my favorite gift from a boyfriend.

I'd slipped and told him I'd never had one, but that I was working on it.

Mercifully, he hadn't teased me about it. Much.

"It's not an operation," I mutter as we come to a stop outside the building of my French class.

"Annie wants a boyfriend, Annie wants a boyfriend ..." he taunts like a second grader.

I punch him in the gut and he grunts. "Knock it off. I am *not* talking about this with you."

I start to walk away when he grabs my arm. I glance down at his hand in surprise, and he drops it quickly. "There's a party at my house this weekend. You should come."

"You need help scouting out your next girlfriend?" I ask.

"Yeah, because your goody-goody perspective is sure to bring in a winner," he shoots back. "But seriously, come to the party."

I admit I'm a little surprised by the invitation, and although I don't think I want to go ... not really, a part of me is intrigued. Instead of living in a dormitory like the rest of us peons, Garrett lives in some fancy brownstone off campus with a bunch of other guys. And from the way he talks about it, they're always having parties.

"Why would I want to do that?" I ask, stalling for time.

He shrugs. “There’ll be a bunch of people. Maybe you’ll meet a guy.”

“Maybe I *have* met a guy.”

He looks at me steadily. “Have you?”

Maybe. Possibly. But because I’ll *die* if I’m proven wrong about Zach, I just shrug instead of telling Garrett about him. “Not really.”

Garrett nods once. “So then come to the party. I’ll give you the details on Thursday.”

He moves away before I can protest, taking the shelter of the umbrella with him, so I’m forced to dart up the stairs to get under cover. “Such a gentleman,” I mutter.

I glance over my shoulder all the same, just for a second, but he’s already joined the maze of other students and umbrellas.

I shake off the rain, as well as any weird vibes I might have been getting from Garrett all day.

And then my phone buzzes, and I make myself forget about Garrett altogether, because it’s a message from Zach.

Ice cream tonight? Just the two of us? I know a place.

I smile happily and respond yes. Maybe next time Garrett asks, I’ll have a boyfriend after all.

Chapter Three

“Zach, tell me again how you weaseled an invitation to this party?” Corrie asks, as she; her twin sister, Haley; and Zach and I make our way to the address Zach indicated the following Friday.

“I didn’t *weasel*,” he says, exasperated. “Some guy in my econ class invited me and told me to bring some hot girls.”

I can’t hide the quick grin at being described as hot. It’s probably old hat for Corrie and Haley, who are the *epitome* of hot girls, especially in their tight dresses and high heels. But for me, it’s a nice break from *adorable*.

I’d resisted Corrie’s insistence to borrow one of her shrink-wrap dresses and instead stuck with something that felt more *me*, not to mention more practical for the twenty-something degree weather: jeans, a sweater, and boots. But the jeans and sweater are tight, and the boots have a bit of a heel, so maybe I do look hot. Sort of.

I glance at my phone, checking to see if I have a message from Garrett. I feel a little bad telling him last minute that I can’t make it to his party, but he’ll understand. Especially if I can go into work on Tuesday with a boyfriend on my résumé.

I feel something brush against my hand, and realize that it's Zach's hand. He's not looking at me, and is still talking to Haley, so it must have been an accident.

He looks at me, then looks away just as quickly.

Hmm. Maybe not an accident.

I grin and put my phone away. Garrett hasn't bothered responding which means he's likely already drunk, probably on the hunt for a rebound from high school girl. That, or he's forgotten all about his invitation anyway, and doesn't care.

I follow the group up the stairs toward the loud music, feeling a little bit like an impostor. I'm so not a party girl, and I'm positive it's written all over my not-low-cut sweater. But the house is packed with scantily dressed girls barely standing upright, and I realize nobody's likely to notice me, much less judge me. I relax a little.

"Remember," Corrie shouts in my ear, before Haley drags her away. "Don't drink anything you don't actually *see* poured from the keg."

"Thanks, Mom!" I call as she disappears into the mess of people. I feel a hand on my lower back. Zach. "She's right, you know," he says, his lips against my ear. "Careful what you drink. Some people suck."

He guides me toward the keg and finds us two keg cups, which he fills himself. I take a small sip of the one he hands me. I'm not a big drinker, but I kind of like beer. But I tend to stop at one. Maybe two.

I'm about to ask what people do at a party like this, but then Zach takes my hand and leads me toward the back of the house where it's quieter. Not *quiet*. But quiet enough so that we

find a somewhat secluded corner of the room. He positions me so I'm out of the way of jostling bodies, and I let him, my shoulder blades against the wall, as I take another sip of beer.

He's not wearing his glasses tonight, and although I sort of love his glasses, he also looks really good like this, his blue eyes all dark and watching me.

"So, tell me I'm not the only one who noticed that terrible smell in poli sci today," he says.

I let out a horrified laugh. "What *was* that?"

"Who do you think it was? Cornrows who eats that birdseed shit all during class, or tall girl in the front row who drinks chocolate milk like it's going out of style."

"Definitely Birdseed Guy," I say. "That stuff can't be good for the digestive track, right? Not unless you're part of the aves class?"

Zach lets out a little laugh that makes his eyes crinkle in the corners. "*Aves class*. God. This is why I like you, Annie."

I blush a little and take a sip of my beer. It's warm, but maybe if I drink enough I'll stop feeling so damn nervous around this guy who seriously seems to like me. And for all the right reasons too.

As though reading my thoughts, his voice goes serious. "I wish I'd met you a year ago."

"Why, what happened a year ago?" I ask, trying for cheeky, and coming out ... squeaky.

He looks away for a moment. "Bad relationship. Guess it happens to all of us at some point or another, right?"

Some of us don't have relationships happen to us at all.

“What happened?” I ask, jumping at the chance to get to know him better, even though I’m not sure I *really* want to know about his ex.

He glances down at the cup he’s barely touched. “Melissa. And she wasn’t bad news, at first, you know? She was fun ... a little more wild than me. She made me feel alive and young, and all that crap.”

We are young, I want to interrupt. But I don’t.

“Things slowly got out of hand. It started out as breaking curfew. A lot. My parents were pissed, but I think deep down maybe they figured that was part of having a seventeen-year-old son. And then there was the drinking. I didn’t do much, but she did. A lot. So there was a lot of driving her home, trying to sneak her past her overprotective mother, and hoping she didn’t puke until I could get her into the bathroom.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah. And despite all this, I didn’t see the grand finale coming.”

This can’t be good.

He takes a deep breath, like he really needs to get it off his chest. So I let him.

“Melissa’s older brother sometimes hooked her up with weed,” he says quietly. “I didn’t partake—not because I’m a saint, but I was on the varsity basketball team and didn’t want to risk it, you know?”

I nod.

“But ... she’d left a baggie in my car one day. Just left it there on the front seat after I dropped her off at her friend’s house. Throw in the fact that I was late for practice, and was speeding. Enter the cop, and ...”

My heart sinks. “No.”

“Yup. Let’s just say my high school friends *still* call me MIP because they think it’s funny. As you can imagine, my parents didn’t find the whole minor-in-possession bit *quite* so humorous.”

“Zach.” I put my hand on his arm. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugs and stares over my head. “It’s probably good that it happened. Forced me to start making better decisions. In friends.” His gaze drops to me. “And girls.”

My mouth goes dry.

He takes both of our cups and puts them on a window ledge above our heads, before settling his hands on my waist. My heart is hammering. *This is it.* Zach Harrison is finally going to kiss me.

“I like you, Annie,” he says, his forehead coming down to rest on mine. “I like that you’re smart, and that you can make me laugh, and have the biggest, most gorgeous blue eyes I’ve ever seen. I like that I could introduce you to my mom someday without sweating like a pig, and I like that you make me want to be better—”

“Yo. Harrison.”

Zach and I both freeze at the sound of his name, and he slowly lifts his face away from mine with a meaningful this-isn’t-over look.

God, it had better not be.

“What’s up?” he asks, turning toward the interloper.

I groan when I see who’s standing behind him. I *knew* I recognized that voice.

Garrett Reed looks stunned to see me, and his eyes move from me, to Zach, to the minuscule space between us, then back to Zach again.

For a second I could have sworn I saw something dark cross his face, but now he's just the usual smirking Garrett. "You brought that Corrie girl, right?" he asks Zach, ignoring me altogether. Typical.

Zach nods.

"She's wasted, man. Someone needs to get her out of here. Her sister's even worse off."

"Already?" I ask, incredulous. "We've been here, what, ten, fifteen minutes?"

Garrett shrugs, not really looking at me.

I sigh and move away from Zach reluctantly. "I'll get her," I say. "She's my roommate."

"I guess I should probably get Haley," he says reluctantly. "Think you can keep Corrie away from the keg while I take Haley home? Then I'll come back, and—"

"I can help," Garrett says.

I glance at him in surprise. "Help?"

"It's my party. I'm not letting a drunk girl in a tiny dress and a goody-two-shoes walk home alone in the dark."

His party? This was Garrett's party? Of all the annoying coincidences ...

"I said I'd come back for her," Zach says, his voice a little edgier than I'm used to.

Garrett shrugs. "Suit yourself man. I'm just saying, by the time you get Twin A home, who knows what Twin B will have gotten herself into ..."

"He's right," I say reluctantly. "You take Haley, and Garrett and I can get Corrie."

"You know him?" Zach asks, jerking a shoulder toward Garrett.

“We work together.”

Zach looks between the two of us before nodding slightly. “Cool. Thanks man,” he says to Garrett. “I really appreciate it.”

It’s subtle, but I’m pretty sure Zach’s use of the first person just then is his way of letting Garrett know that we’re all on Zach’s agenda. That *I’m* on Zach’s agenda. And I guess I am ... sort of.

Garrett just nods. He still hasn’t really looked at me, and that bothers me for some reason. Surely he’s not mad that I backed out on his party? Well, I *thought* I backed out on his party ...

Zach promises to come over as soon as he gets Haley home, and then disappears into the crowd.

I expect Garrett to give me crap, but instead he just jerks his head in the direction of the other room. “Your girl’s this way. Does she have a jacket?”

“Yeah, it’s in that pile by your front door,” I say.

“You grab that. I’ll get her.”

I reach out and snag his sleeve, pulling him to a stop before he can move away. “Garrett.”

He glances at my hand, before meeting my eyes, his eyes oddly unreadable.

“Thanks,” I say simply.

He nods once. Twice. “Any time.”

Chapter Four

Half an hour later, Garrett and I are sitting side by side on my bed, looking at a passed-out Corrie.

“Do think we should, like, close her mouth?” Garrett asks.

“Only if she starts snoring,” I say, watching as Corrie flings a hand over her head before making a soggy, snuffling noise before rolling onto her side.

“So,” Garrett says after several seconds.

“So,” I say, thinking his next line will be something along the lines of *I should be going*.

“Two lies, Ms. Gilmore. I’m surprised at you.”

Huh? I turn my head to look at his profile, which is surprisingly close. We hadn’t turned on any lights in an effort to get Corrie from party mode to sleepy mode. It apparently worked. She was asleep the second her head hit the pillow.

And now I’m kind of tempted to turn on the light, because I’m all too aware that I’m sitting almost hip to hip with Garrett Reed, only the soft glow from the streetlamp outside to break up the darkness.

“You’ve lied to me twice.”

I frown. “About what?”

“First, about coming to the party ...”

I held up a finger about that. “I never said *for sure* that I’d come to the party, I said I’d *try*. Plus, it’s not like I went MIA. I texted you and said I couldn’t make it.”

“Except you *did* make it, albeit by accident. Which leads me to the second lie. I thought there was no boyfriend in the picture.”

“There’s not,” I hedge.

He studies my profile. “Didn’t look that way from where I was standing.”

“Come on,” I say, elbowing him. “Like you’ve never made out with a girl at a party.”

But Garrett doesn’t take the bait, and instead sits waiting for an explanation.

It’s weird—in the same way Zach seemed to know that I’m not the type of girl to kiss a guy in a game like spin the bottle, Garrett seems to know that I’m not the type of girl to kiss a random guy at a party *just because*.

The comparison between the two guys is a little unsettling, partially because I’d always subconsciously put Zach in the prince category, and Garrett in the . . . Well, I don’t know exactly what category I’d put Garrett in. I *do* know that that category seems to be changing tonight.

And that weirs me out more than anything.

I look away quickly. “Zach’s not my boyfriend,” I clarify.

“But you want him to be.”

I lift my shoulders.

He runs a hand over his mouth and gives a little laugh. “I so did not see this happening when I invited Zach to the party.”

My gaze flies back to him. “*You* invited Zach to the party?”

“Sure. We sit next to each other in econ. Help each other out with notes when the other person zones out. He’s a good guy, Annie.”

He says it begrudgingly, but that's not what gets me. It's his use of my first name. He always calls me Gilmore, or Anners, or a handful of less-flattering nicknames.

"I should have figured you'd be the one to tell him to bring hot girls," I say, trying to lighten the mood.

"I certainly didn't mean you," he grumbles.

"Hey!" I say, a little offended, especially since it's a soft spot of mine. "I can be hot."

Garrett closes his eyes. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what *did* you mean?"

He opens his eyes then and turns his head slowly to face me, and suddenly I'm extra aware that it's really dark in here and that I can feel his breath on my cheek.

I turn my face, just a little, and now I can feel his breath on my lips. And it feels really, really nice.

Too nice.

Because this is Garrett Reed, and ...

"Gilmore," he whispers, his face moving imperceptibly closer. My face tilts up. My eyes close.

For one horrible second I want Garrett to kiss me. Not a slow, sweet melding of mouths, but the hot, hard kind of kiss that quickly escalates to me peeling his shirt over his head, his hands unfastening my bra ...

I want him to push me back against the pillows, and...

There's a soft knock at the door, and we both spring back as the door slowly opens.

"Annie?" A voice whispers.

It's Zach. Oh God, *Zach*. I spring to my feet.

How was it I'd gone my entire life with a couple of lame kisses I could count on one hand, and I'd come *this* close to kissing two guys in the same night?

Except only one of them liked me. Only one of them had been carefully courting me for months, if you could say that about a nineteen-year-old. And the other ...

I glance over my shoulder at Garrett, but he's already on his feet, pulling on his wool jacket, his expression the same old, easygoing, cynical mask I'd gotten so used to.

I should be relieved. It had been a fluke. I'd been an easy target for a horny guy who'd just broken up with his high school girlfriend.

But I'm not relieved. I feel ...

Crap.

I don't know what I feel.

"Night, Anners," Garrett says, giving my hair a little tug like I'm the annoying kid sister. He moves toward the door, and he and Zach do one of those weird guy-handshake things, although they don't exchange any words.

I watch Garrett, waiting for him to turn around and look at me. Waiting for his eyes to help me understand what the hell just happened. But he's gone without even a glance my way.

Forget about it, Annie. Count yourself lucky for not doing something stupid with a guy who'd never ever bother to call you the next day.

I move toward Zach, trying to force my brain to that moment we had earlier at the party. I try to remember *that* almost-kiss, instead of the other one that nearly just happened.

His hands find mine, pulling me in. I close my eyes for a second, partially because this guy is so damn *good*, but also because I'm feeling a little guilty for my almost-but-wasn't moment with Garrett.

"Sorry about tonight," he says, putting his lips close to my ear. "Not exactly the Friday night I'd envisioned.

I let out a long breath. "I'm just glad we got Corrie and Haley out of there. They'll have a headache tomorrow, but it beats some of the alternatives."

He nods. "It's a little like parenting, huh?"

Right on cue, Corrie lets out a loud snore. I giggle. "Yeah, something like that."

"You going to sleep?" he asks, his thumbs rubbing over my palms.

I meet his eyes. "You mind? It's been kind of a long week and a long night."

And I need some time to think.

"Sure." His hands squeeze mine. "Good night, Annie.

"Night, Zach," I whisper.

He turns away, but he turns back at the last second. "One of these days, Annie ..."

I give him a little half smile. "Yeah. One of these days ..."

But my smile fades after I've closed the doors. *One of these days ...*

For the life of me, I have no idea how I want that sentence to end.

Chapter Five

Garrett doesn't show up to work on Tuesday.

Not on Thursday either.

And I can't even legitimately get mad, because Mrs. Ramirez told me that even though Garrett had a scheduling conflict this week, he'd still stopped by to pick up some work to do from home so I wouldn't get stuck with all of it.

I wish he'd stop pulling these good-guy stunts. It's throwing me off balance.

And the *other* guy in my life hasn't been around either. Zach has some massive biology project that's taking up all of his time. I guess it's not a bad thing. It gives me plenty of time to figure out ...

Figure out *what*?

Who I want?

It's not even really a contest. I mean, Zach and I are practically going out, and Garrett is ...

Hell, I don't even know *where* Garrett is, much less who he is, or what he is to me.

And by the following Tuesday, a week and a half since the might-have-been-an-almost-kiss-but-probably-wasn't, I've convinced myself that I don't care.

Then he shows up.

“Anners,” Garrett says, strolling into our shared office space like he has a hundred times before. “You do something different with your hair? It’s looking a little flatter than before.”

Just like that, we’re back.

I’m relieved.

I think.

“How’s *Zachary*?” he asks, plopping into the chair across from me. “Dreamy?” He flutters his eyelashes.

Yup. We’re definitely back. It’s as though that sexually charged moment in my room never happened. *Thank God.*

“He’s great,” I say, putting on a bright smile.

Garrett’s eyes narrow for a fraction of a second, as though he senses—and wants to call out—my BS. But then he grins right back. “Can I be maid of honor at your wedding? I’d look great in whatever pink poof you’re going to make your bridal party wear when you and Mr. Perfect trot down the aisle.”

“I am *not* going with pink poof at my wedding.” I snatch back the muffin he’d just swiped from my plate. “And I’m not certainly planning my wedding with Zach.”

“No?”

“No.”

Garrett moves quickly, grabbing a chunk of the muffin before settling back again as though the conversation’s over, but I see it.

That shoulder roll.

I’d seen it a hundred times before, but for the first time I’m wondering what it *means*.

“What are we working on today?” he asks.

“Well, seeing as you were absent all of last week ...”

I want him to explain.

He doesn't.

“While you were out, I and Monday and Wednesday shift guys finished up all the name tags. Now it's just the last-minute stuff. Table assignments, finding work-study students to do setup and takedown, things like that.”

He nods, and lets me pass off the table assignments to his side of the desk while I go through the list of vendors Mrs. Ramirez gave me and call to make sure that everyone's still got us on the calendar for the second.

The next two hours pass in the old familiar routine of bicker and teamwork, bicker and teamwork, until I'm surprised to see that our shift's up.

And surprised to realize that I feel ... bummed.

Talk to him, Annie. Ask about that night ...

But before I can grab on to the half second of courage, I realize that we're no longer alone.

“Katelyn!” he says, turning toward the newcomer. “What are you doing here?”

The cute little brunette standing in the doorway blushes. “I, um, brought you a sandwich?”

It'd be tough to say who looks more stupefied by the paper bag she's holding out, me or Garrett. But he recovers faster. “Thanks!”

The poor girl still looks embarrassed. “Sorry if I overstepped. That text you sent before your shift said you didn’t have time to eat before your boring-ass job ...”

I snap my head around to glare at him. *Boring-ass job?* It hadn’t felt *boring* fifteen minutes earlier when he’d held the stapler above my head until I told him my middle name (Elinor. Remember, my mom and *Sense and Sensibility*). It hadn’t felt boring when his body had pressed against mine, just for a flash of a second.

“Nah, this is great. Thanks,” he says to Katelyn, grabbing the bag and his coat at the same time.

She looks at me a little uncertainly, because Garrett the heathen didn’t bother to introduce us, and I give an awkward wave. “Annie. Partner in the boring-ass job.”

“Ah. Well, nice to meet you, Annie,” Katelyn says before flicking her thick dark hair over her tiny shoulder. How did she even get in here? Admittedly the president of Fordham didn’t have Secret Service, but since when had any peppy little princess been able to just wander in ...

Oh God.

God. Am I jealous?

I’m not. I quickly stuff my water bottle and notebook into my bag and throw the strap over my shoulder. I glance up just in time to see Garrett looking at me, but he glances away the second our gazes meet, and he lets Katelyn hook her arm in his.

Then he walks away.

I stand perfectly still for several seconds before I remember that Garrett is not my almost-boyfriend. Zach is. Zach, who’s ...

Damn it. Why can’t I think of at least one good Zach-quality right now? *Anything.*

I'm saved from myself by my cell phone, only it's a whole other kind of hell on the other end. "Hey, Mom."

"Hey, sweetie! I just thought I'd call to catch up since we missed you on Sunday. Sorry about that, but we've offered to help fill in at the youth group at church on Sunday since the Morrises just had their baby ..."

"Uh-huh ... uh-huh ..."

I let my mom ramble on for a while as I exit the administration building and settle on a bench. It's still cold as crap, but sunny, and the biting fresh air feels good on my hot cheeks.

Garrett and Katelyn. Are they together? And since when?

"And did I tell you what I heard about Julia Morbacher ...?" my mother says in her I-shouldn't-be-gossiping-but-I'm-doing-it-anyway voice.

"Nope." I hope my voice inflects that I don't care about Julia Morbacher, who is the daughter of one of my dad's coworkers and someone I'd met all of three times.

"Her parents found out that she'd filled up their vodka bottle with water ..."

Le scandal!

"And of course, she didn't think it through, and since water freezes and alcohol doesn't ..."

I close my eyes and let my mom finish her gossipy story, which ends with the usual refrain: "I know I've told you this a thousand times, but I'll tell you again: Your father and I feel *so* fortunate that you've never so much as ruffled a single feather—well, other than when you sprang a coed college on us—but you've never so much as caused us a worry, or stepped a toe

out of line. And we're so glad that you're good and kind and smart, but we were just laughing last night that you have the best quality of all ... predictable, and ..."

My eyes fly open.

Predictable.

Predictable.

Is that what I am? *Yes.* Yes, it absolutely is what I am. Nobody is every surprised by anything I do, *ever.*

And suddenly it hits me.

All of those good girls gone wrong? It's not that they got tired of being good.

It's that they got tired of being *only* that.

Sticking to the straight and narrow? That I could get behind. It's who I am.

But being predictable?

That is supposed to be my identity?

And yet, it's completely true.

Planning on law school because it's safe? Check. Eating a salad with low-fat ranch every single day for lunch because it's healthy (ish)? Check. Going out with the nice guy with the glasses who thinks I'm a nice girl. Check.

I hear a loud giggle, and look over to see none other than Garrett and too-cute Katelyn, who halfheartedly resists letting him pull her into a puddle. She squeals as he jumps in beside her, splattering them both with what has to be freezing, muddy water.

It's irresponsible, and stupid, and ...

I want that.

I want to be the girl that gets pulled into mud puddles and can laugh about it, because hey, it's just mud. I want to be the girl who makes out with the guy who I'm pretty damn sure is Trouble with a capital T.

Even more than that, I want to be the girl that drives a guy so crazy that he pins me up against a wall and kisses me because he can't help himself. I want to be so absorbed with a guy that I forget I'm in public so that someone shouts, *Get a room!*

I want to feel sexy and wanted, and be able to say whatever I want whenever I think it.

But the problem is not what I *want* to be. It's what I *don't* want to be.

I don't want to be Zach Harrison's perfect, nice-girl rebound. The girl his parents want him to date.

His words float back to me, as though from a distance. *I like that I could introduce you to my mom someday without sweating like a pig, and I like that you make me want to be better ...*

They were nice words. Sweet words. *Perfect* words, actually.

But they're words for another girl, at another time.

They weren't perfect words for me. I didn't want to be the path to someone else's perfect. I wanted to be *me*.

I wanted to be the *me* I am around only one single person. The *me* that's free to be cynical, a little testy, and who's not always worried about saying just the right thing.

My eyes have never left Garrett, who's brushing mud off Katelyn's cheek.

I know exactly who *that* me wants to be with.

And I'm too late.

Chapter Six

I've been mentally preparing for this dumb President's Gala for months, but somehow I'd always imagined that by then, Zach and I would be an item, and that I'd proudly have him by my side.

Instead, I'm alone.

Two nights ago, I gave Zach my let's-break-up-before-we're-even-together speech. I'd been as honest as I could without spilling my guts about my newly realized feelings for Garrett. The two guys had a class together after all, and I couldn't bear the thought of Zach saying anything to Garrett. Not that he would, but just in case, I'd left that bit out.

Instead I explained that while Zach is the greatest guy—and seriously, he *is* the greatest guy—there's just that elusive “something” missing. He'd nodded. And because he is, well, *perfect*, he even looked a little upset about the whole breakup thing, which was oddly refreshing. I'd been expecting him to take the chivalrous high road, all “Best of luck to you, Annie, here's a kiss on the cheek.”

Instead he'd given sort of a rough nod of his hand, plowed his fingers through his hair, and said “*Christ*. This sucks.”

Then he'd walked away. And *that* had sucked.

But I'd seen him a handful of times in the days that had passed, and while he hadn't quite been friendly, he'd been civil. Maybe someday we could be friends, but I won't blame him if not.

So here I am, dateless at a gala that I *really* don't want to be at.

Mrs. Ramirez and the rest of the staff at the president's office had made it sound like the highest honor that their student employees were allowed to attend, but we knew better. We're still on the clock, just in fancier clothes.

In my case, "fancy clothes" involves a navy sheath dress that Corrie had talked me into buying with the spending money I'd made from work. I told myself that the dress was an investment. Navy was classic, right?

But really, I like the way the dress gives me curves that I don't really have, and makes my blue eyes look a little mysterious instead of wide-eyed-little-girl-plays-dress-up.

More than that, I want someone else to notice those things too, but I'm not getting my hopes up. Garrett and I hadn't talked about anything important at our last shift, but I'd seen the final name tags. We were each allowed one guest, and he has one.

Katelyn Day.

So they're a thing.

I haven't seen them yet, and that's just fine by me. Instead, I'm sitting with the other students, picking through the food I'd piled up from the fancy buffet. I'd intentionally sat next to Maggie, who works the shift before Garrett and me, because the girl is a talker and doesn't really care if her listener is active or not. Because I'm not listening. I'm too bracing for...

"What's up, Anners?"

He's wearing a tie. And Garrett Reed wears his skinny blue tie really, *really* well.

"You know I don't like that nickname, right?" I say without heat.

"Of course. Why do you think I persist?" he asks, as he kicks out the chair next to me with his foot and plops down. There was another kid sitting there just a minute ago ... DJ

something or other, but he went to the bathroom, I don't bother to tell Garrett to move. I don't *want* him to move.

"Where's Katelyn?" I make myself ask.

He says nothing for several moments, and at first I think he's not going to respond. Then that damn shoulder roll. "What can I say, Gilmore? She isn't the one."

I press my lips together, trying to play it cool. "Well ... it is fairly soon after Leah."

His roll inward for a second. "Yeah. I guess."

We fall silent for a moment, and I realize that Maggie's never stopped talking, and is still in the middle of a story about this one time that her mom accidentally put potatoes in a pie instead of apples, but it was oddly kind of good, and ... *yawn*. And then she launches into *another* story, this time about a runaway rooster, and ...

"Dance?" Garrett asks out of nowhere.

"*Dance?*"

He nods toward the center of the room, where there is a dance floor, although hardly anybody on it.

"I don't really dance," I say, my palms suddenly sweaty.

"Great, because the old folks aren't really dancing either. All we have to do is just sort of sway."

No, we have to sway while touching. There is a big difference.

But then he stands and holds out his hand for mine, and what can I say, I'm a sucker for old-school gestures like that, especially when the band moves into a slower-paced Frank Sinatra song.

Garrett's fingers are warm on mine as he leads me toward the makeshift dance floor, and I try to tell myself that it means nothing ... that it's just a convenient excuse to get away from Maggie's god-awful stories. But when he turns toward me and slides a hand down to my waist and pulls me close, I let myself think it's more.

"I love this song," I murmur as my hand tentatively finds his shoulder.

He doesn't respond.

And he's right. It *is* sort of like swaying, only ... nicer.

I see Mrs. Ramirez and her husband dancing a few feet away and she gives me a wide grin and a little wave. She says something to her husband, which I imagine to be something along the lines of *Isn't that so cute, my two little worker bees are dancing.*

"So," he says, his head tilting down toward mine since he's a good foot taller than me.

"No Zach tonight."

My fingers tighten reflexively on his. "No Zach."

He nods once, and I feel his palm shift on my back. I *think* he pulls me imperceptibly closer, but I don't let myself lean in like I want to.

I glance up to find him watching me. "What?" I ask, "No snarky comment about my failed attempt at Operation Get-a-Boyfriend?"

He grins his old Garrett grin then, and I've got honest-to-God butterflies just at the sight of his smile. Things were so much simpler when I wasn't so dang aware of the guy.

"Nah. I don't want you to get all weepy on me. Besides, I already know the thing with Zach's old news."

"*You knew?*"

“Sure. I have a class with Zach.”

My footsteps falter. “He *told* you?”

Garrett shrugs. “I asked.”

Why? “Why?” I ask, deciding to be bold for once in my life. “Why did you ask?”

This time, it’s not my imagination—his hand definitely moves on my back, his fingers spreading slightly, setting my skin on fire even through the fabric of my dress.

“Christ, Gilmore,” he says, sounding annoyed, his chin brushing against my hair. “You really have no clue, do you?”

My heart is hammering now, and my hand is definitely sweaty in his, and there’s this almost painful knot of hope in my throat, but if I’m wrong ...

The song isn’t over yet, but apparently our dance is, because all of a sudden I’m being pulled across the dance floor. “Where’s your coat?” he asks, shooting me a glance over his shoulder with unreadable eyes as we approach a side door.

“My coat?”

“Never mind,” he grumbles, already shrugging out of his suit coat and dropping it over my shoulder even as he ushers me none too gently out the door and into the cold.

“Garrett, it’s *snowing*,” I say, glancing around at the smattering of snowflakes. “You don’t have a coat, you’ll freeze—”

“This will take just a minute,” he says, walking in a crazed circle, apparently oblivious to the fact that he’s wearing only a white button-down shirt in New York in the middle of winter.

I pull his jacket more tightly around me and watch him nervously.

He stops his pacing and looks at me, his expression miserable through the thickening snowflakes. “You make me laugh, Anners.”

Well. Okay. That’s ... random.

“You’re the only girl that’s ever done that,” he continues. “I mean *really* makes me laugh. And you never flirt with me. Ever. The very first day of work back in September, you called me an obnoxious egomaniac, do you remember that?”

I blush. “Sorry,” I mutter, “It’s just that you were so—”

He kisses me.

Not a slow, dreamy sort of kiss, but the hot, urgent kind that a guy plants on a girl to get her to stop talking ... or because he can’t help himself. His hand holds my head still as he deepens the kiss, but just as I let my fingers sink into his shirt, he lifts his head.

For a second I think he’s going to pull away—call it a mistake—but then his hands slide down to grip my arms, and his eyes get a little urgent. “I *loved* that you called me out on my shit. Maybe that makes me a masochist, but being around a girl that didn’t seem to care one way or another whether I liked her ... it’s refreshing. *You’re* refreshing.”

I shake my head a little, trying to follow him. “So all this time ...”

His eyes are locked on mine. “Our first day back from Christmas break. Do you remember what you asked me?”

I bite my lip, thinking back. “Um, something about waxing your chest?”

He smiles then, just a flash, before he goes serious again. “So you remember our conversations in detail, too? Good. But no, not *that* question. The one that came after that. The important one.”

I go still, and he takes another step toward me. “Ask me again, Annie.”

I’m frozen, and not just because it’s thirty degrees outside. “I asked you if Leah dumped you,” I say softly.

“That’s the one,” he says gruffly. “And the answer is no. *I* broke up with *her*, Gilmore. I told you it was typical long-distance stuff, and it was. I suffered that all-too-common affliction of falling for someone else. That damn shoulder roll you notice? It’s been my way of trying to stop feeling that way about you, but I can’t.”

I suck in a sharp breath. So *this* is what dying of happiness feels like.

His hand moves to cup one of my cheeks and my eyes close. “You wanted to know why I asked Zach about you,” he says quietly. “Ask me that again too.”

I open my eyes, letting my gaze do the asking for me, the way his hand cupping my cheek is his answer.

“Last one,” he says softly. “You asked what happened with me and Katelyn. Care to take a guess?”

My hands curl into his shirt in silent response.

He moves even closer, and I let him press me into the brick wall behind me as I search his eyes. “Once Zach told me that you two weren’t a thing ... I couldn’t stand the thought of bringing another girl tonight, knowing that you were available, Annie.”

“Why didn’t you tell me how you felt?” I say, my fingers curling around his tie to keep him close.

His fingers roam my face. “I was going to. That first week back. But I wanted to take it slow. I didn’t think you’d go out with a guy who’d just broken up with his girlfriend, so I thought I’d try to be friends first.”

“The party,” I say.

“The party,” he says with a rueful smile. “I thought I had a honest-to-God chance when you told me that first day back that you didn’t have a boyfriend. But then you showed up that night with Zach.”

I press my lips together and look away, but he puts his thumbs beneath my chin so I’m forced to meet his eyes. “What happened with you and Zach, Annie?”

“Didn’t work out,” I whisper softly.

“Why?”

“You know why,” I say, giving his shoulder a little punch.

“Tell me anyway,” he says a little desperately, grabbing my hand and holding it still.

“I like you,” I say plainly. “A lot.”

His smile is small at first, just a slow curving of his lips, but then it turns into the full, cocky Garrett-grin. How have I not always loved that grin? Or maybe I *have*, but I was just too dumb and careful to see it.

This time when he moves in, he does so slowly ... purposefully, and I’m more than ready for it.

I don’t want to miss a single moment.

Not the way my breath catches, or the way his gaze drops from my eyes to my mouth in that very last second before his lips meet mine.

The kiss is perfect. My fingers curl into the shirt around his shoulders as his mouth opens over mine, his tongue touching mine shyly at first, and then more confidently when I open my mouth wider.

Holy crap.

There are no words to describe kissing Garrett Reed in the snow.

I don't know how long we stand there, making out against a brick wall, and my body seems to keep getting hotter and hotter despite the cold weather. And as wonderful as kissing him is, it's starting to feel like enough, and the clothes that are keeping us from freezing our asses off are increasingly starting to feel like annoying barriers. I want to be chest to chest, hip to hip, mouth to mouth. I want to feel his skin warm against mine.

Garrett's hands move restlessly over my back before they slide forward to rest against my rib cage, moving upward over my breasts just briefly, and we both moan. He mutters an oath as he pulls his hands back to safer territory since we're outside where anyone could see us, but it's too late. Now I want his hands *everywhere*.

I want to know Garrett's body as well as I know his laugh and his shoulder roll and the kindness he tries so hard to hide behind his cocky grin.

I just want *Garrett*.

I frown in protest when he pulls back, both of our breaths visible in the cold night air. For a split second I'm terrified that I'm no good at this kissing thing, but then he smiles. "I want to do this all night, Annie, but damn it ... it's *cold*."

I laugh a little, my hand reaching behind me for the doorknob, even as I lift on my toes to give him one last kiss.

“We could go back to your place,” I say softly, my mouth pressed against his. “Make out.”

His teeth nip my lip. “And here I thought you were a good girl.”

“Oh I am,” I say, a little breathless as his lips find my neck. “But I could use a night off.”

“Annie,” he says, grabbing my hand before I move away. “Does this mean Operation Get-a-Boyfriend was successful?”

My heart flips over. “Depends. You applying for the job?”

“Yes. Now offer me the position.”

I let out a pretend sigh and drag him back into the warm hallway. “Garrett Reed, will you be my boyfriend?”

He grins, and I melt. “Hell yes. Anners.”

The End



a note from Lauren Layne

Thanks so much for reading Annie & Garrett’s story! To find more Lauren Layne books, please visit the [library](#).