The Plight of Anthropology
by narcissablaxk

Summary

Anna Strong hates college. She hates even more that Professor Simcoe, self-professed anthropological recruiter, won't stop harassing her. Her grade, and being able to stay in college, hinges on whether or not Simcoe is willing to give her a passing grade. And if that wasn't bad enough, Anna runs headlong into another professor, with the same posh English accent, outside the Common. What's worse, he seems to be a perfect, irritating gentleman.

Notes

Welcome, friends, to my first TURN fanfiction! Obviously, I realized that Annlett has very few fanfiction out there, some of which being the best fic I’ve read in a long time (Law, Order, Authori[tea], anybody??), so I decided, like an adventurous youth, to add to the small collection. This is a modern college AU wherein Anna is being harassed by her anthropology professor (Simcoe) and accidentally runs into a mysterious professor (Hewlett). There’s very little Annlett interaction in this first chapter, so bear with me!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter One: Gravity 101

Anna Strong loathed college. She could tell, with an objective and unbiased eye, that college was not for her. And yet, here she was, sitting in an anthropology class with the edge of sleep lingering just outside her vision and a professor that wouldn’t stop staring at her at the front of the class, both of them rivaling for her attention. She pretended to find something incredibly fascinating and looked down at her notebook, scribbling a note to herself.

“Professor Simcoe is the creepiest teacher I’ve ever had,” she wrote in untidy cursive.

“Annie,” came a rough voice that she immediately recognized as Caleb’s. “Psst, Annie!”

She turned halfway toward him, widening her eyes as she did so. Professor Simcoe, while apparently having no issues blurring the lines between a professional and personal relationship with students in his class, was nonetheless incredibly strict during the hour and fifteen minutes on Tuesday and Thursday that Anna, Abraham, Caleb, Ben, and approximately twenty other students were compelled to endure his company.

Caleb made a drinking motion with his hand, tipping his thumb toward his mouth while his pinkie remained in the air, professing some sort of fanciness and dignity. Abraham’s lips twitched beside him, but his eyes never left his notebook. Anna rolled her eyes and gave him a single nod, prompting him to put his hand down and out of sight of the hawk-eyed Professor Simcoe.

“Miss Strong?” his soft-spoken voice, much more intimidating than the usual boom of someone who had a prefix to their name, caught her in the middle of what was almost a chuckle. She froze, letting the smile melt off her face while she wondered what on earth she could have done this time to warrant his attention. Instead of responding to him, she let her eyes lock onto his, silently allowing him to continue his dialogue. “What can you tell me about the rebel spies during the American Revolutionary War?”

“Sir?” she asked, confused. When had they even made it to the Revolutionary War? She struggled to keep her hand still and not let it flip through the textbook, left vacantly open to a random page on her desk like a paper weight.

“Instead of simply sticking to the rules of etiquette usually prescribed during wartime, the Patriots are most often remembered as the dirty fighters,” Simcoe elaborated, each phrase taking him a step closer to Anna’s desk. “Why do you think that is?”

“Probably because they were desperate for freedom,” she shrugged.

Simcoe seemed to find her answer amusing. “Desperate?” he repeated with an undercurrent of laughter. It reminded Anna of the looming presence of a shark under a surfer. “Why do you choose that word specifically?”

“It was the only word that fit the bill. If you’re trying to upset an establishment, you need to use a word that conveys the intensity of your desire.”

“Because they were trying to upset the status quo.”

“The British were only trying to continue what they thought was effective. I think that warrants the use of ‘desperate.’”

“I think the use of ‘desperate’ is irresponsible,” Simcoe said plainly, finally turning away from her and moving on to his next target. “That makes treason sound like something that should be rewarded out of the goodness of our hearts.”
“So you don’t think the Americans should have fought for freedom?” Caleb piped up.

“If I wanted your opinion, Mr. Brewster, I would have asked for it,” Simcoe answered without looking in his direction. “Besides, all the Americans did was create yet another system that would eventually enslave them. Or else why would any of you be here, in introductory anthropology? Because you need a college degree to survive on your meager subsistence of social media, the internet, and Starbucks coffee.”

Better coffee than nasty British tea, Anna thought bitterly. But she angled her chin back down to her notebook and pretended to take notes once more, hoping that Simcoe had forgotten about her. The lecture continued for a few more minutes before the inevitable sound of students packing up shook Anna out of her reverie.

She shoved her notebook into her bag and zipped it closed quickly, always fearing the seemingly omniscient gaze of Professor Simcoe. And, as usual, before she was able to clear her desk and make it to the door, where Caleb was waiting for her, Abraham and Ben talking quietly just behind him, Professor Simcoe called her back.

“I have another class to get to,” she said quickly, hoping he’d buy the excuse while hope rapidly seeped out of her lungs. Simcoe’s eyes took on that momentary look of sarcastic surprise, and she knew he didn’t believe her.

“This will only take just a moment,” he promised, and Anna felt her face heat up, like it often did when she got anxious. The sweats were starting in her palms, and the hairs that always snuck out of her bun were tickling her neck more prominently than usual. She brushed her clammy hand over her neck and waited for Simcoe to speak.

“What is your major, Miss Strong?” he asked, as if he hadn’t asked her this question at least fifteen times already. But, knowing that he controlled her grade, Anna took a deep breath and prepared for another day of harassment.

“I’m undeclared,” she replied. Simcoe spent almost every class trying to convince her to become an anthropology major, and if she even thought she was passably good at the subject, she might not scoff so loudly when it was suggested. But, as it was, she was barely passing the class, her D only secured by, she suspected, the increasingly inappropriate crush that her teacher had for her.

“Ahh, yes, the universal answer for all freshmen,” he answered with a hint of a smile. Ordinarily, a smile on someone’s face might ease Anna’s nerves; but on Simcoe, it only amplified them. “Well, do you have any idea what you might like to study?”

“I was thinking law,” Anna blurted out quickly, hoping that a subject as drab as law might deter him. Alas, he turned his almost transparent eyebrows to her with a smile that showed more teeth than she ever cared to see.

He walked to the board and erased his notes from their class. “I don’t think law would much suit you, Anna,” he said, finally using her first name. It brought a shiver to Anna’s shoulders. “You’re much too soft, unfocused, for a subject like law. You might try something a little more…lassiez-faire.”

“Are you calling me dumb?” Anna asked, her temper flaring. If she were being honest, her temper with Simcoe was always at a dull simmer. It didn’t take much to cause an explosion.

He laughed, the cruel bastard, actually laughed, and turned back to her. “No, though I figure that your question basically confirmed that particular caveat. I was saying that you might try something
“Like anthropology?” she asked, tilting her head like the thought had just occurred to her. The sarcasm was not lost on Simcoe, whose face melted into a scowl. “Gee, I wonder if anyone’s ever suggested that to me before.”

“You might reconsider how you speak to a professor, Miss Strong—”

“And you might reconsider how you speak to a student, Professor,” Anna huffed, gathering her bag higher on her shoulder. “Your habit of keeping me after class for some discussion about my future is, in my opinion, very inappropriate. You wouldn’t want me to speak with the dean about that, would you?”

Simcoe’s face, frozen in the act of not taking Anna’s threat seriously, darkened significantly, and Anna found herself taking a step back. “And why would the dean believe you, a serial freshman with a failing grade in my class?”

“I’m not failing,” Anna insisted, but the glint in Simcoe’s eye tightened the nerves in her belly.

“Not yet you aren’t,” Simcoe said quietly, dangerously. “But the only thing that keeps you above an F is my favor. And if you aren’t willing to entertain it, then I see no reason for you to pass. You certainly haven’t learned the course material.”

Anna clenched her jaw, trying to swallow past the tears that were rising in her eyes. She hated crying; she hated even more that she often cried when frustration took over her. She would not cry here, in front of Simcoe. She hitched her bag higher on her shoulder and moved toward the door.

“Miss Strong?” his voice was grating on the very essence of her irritation. Anna squeezed her eyes shut and heaved a great breath through her nose, exhaling quietly through her mouth. She could feel the shakiness of her sigh as she turned to face him. He was holding out the last paper she had turned in, with a big red D on the top.

“Don’t make me reconsider this grade,” he chided playfully, but the coldness that ran underneath the words stilled the room. She stared at the paper for a moment, gently flapping in his grasp, taunting her. She snatched it from his hand, feeling the paper cut into the crease of her index finger. She ignored the stinging sensation and shoved through the door, her eyes searching for her friends.

They wouldn’t be there, she knew. They were already on their way to the Common, where they would find their lunches overpriced and packaged in shining cellophane for their convenience. Anna blinked back the frustrated tears waiting in the wings and cursed when one ran free, sliding down her cheek as she pushed open the door that led outside.

The crowd was always at its worst now; students from every discipline were rushing to get to the classes they were already late for, and others were walking at such a leisurely pace that traffic jams were inevitable. Anna had only taken a few steps when her shoulder caught a man in the arm, knocking them both awry. She stumbled, landing knees first on the concrete. The man, who had to be a professor, she realized with annoyance, had managed to barely maintain his balance, and was looking at her with what she could only describe as disgust.

Quickly, that repugnant facial expression gave way to something more fleeting, and he brushed off his coat with the same hand that he offered to help her up.

“My deepest apologies,” his British accent was posh and proper, and Anna’s irritation compounded at the sound that reminded her so of the man she had just escaped from. “I was looking at my
appointments, and it seems like I didn’t – well, obviously I didn’t see you, and – what I mean to say – oh, your knee is bleeding,” his hand was still extended to help her up, but the more he talked, the less inclined Anna was to taking it.

She winced as she pulled herself up, feeling the blood stick to her denim pants. She could see the dark stain on the knee, the pain stinging much like the tears that she had already started shedding before she had collided with the next nuisance in her increasingly exasperated life.

His hand was still extended, his eyes on her face. “My word, I cannot express – I am so sorry that I ran into you. I ran you over like a – well, rather, like a truck, and that is just not proper. Here, might you let me escort you to the clinic to get your knee cleaned up?”

He bent his arm so he was offering his arm to her, like this was the goddamn Regency Era, and Anna felt her shoulders stiffen. She didn’t even like men implying that she couldn’t carry heavy boxes or handle her liquor. Having someone offer his arm to her like she couldn’t even walk…she took half a step, determined to stride past him without another word, and had to catch his arm as her knee protested greatly at the motion.

He grunted slightly at her sudden weight, but recovered admirably and let her wrap her arm rather awkwardly around his shoulder so he could support her on their short walk to the clinic. His briefcase remained alone and desolate on the sidewalk, but she caught him casting his eyes back to it a couple of times to make sure it was still there.

“I don’t believe I have you in any of my classes, do I?” he asked finally, after their silence had extended farther than the length between the forgotten briefcase and its owner. “What is your major?”

“If one more person –” Anna grunted through gritted teeth, “asks me that damn question –”

He looked positively scandalized at her reaction, but cleared his throat and soldiered on. “Well, I’m going to hazard a guess, then. Computer science?” she glared at him. He faltered and tried again. “Engineering?”

“Undeclared,” she muttered. “And don’t try to sway me to your side.”

He chuckled a little under his breath, and Anna felt immediately defensive once more. “My dear, I doubt that if you were not already part of my department that I could sway you to it. It isn’t something you sway so much as something you live and breathe.” He caught the annoyed look that was clouding her face and immediately tried to amend himself, “That is to say, it’s rather a lifestyle instead of a choice.”

They had reached the door of the student clinic, and the briefcase was almost out of sight. He guided her to a chair and went to the desk, where the student worker eyed him with practiced wariness. He ignored her and picked up the pen that was chained to the clipboard like it often needed to be reminded of its purpose. “Name?” he asked her, pen poised.

“Anna Strong,” she answered, and watched as he scribbled it down, realizing belatedly that he was left-handed.

He gently placed the clipboard down on the counter and crossed the room back to her. “Well, Miss Anna Strong, please accept my dearest apologies for harassing you – well, not really harassing you – what I mean is –”

“You’re forgiven, Professor –” she trailed off, hoping he would fill in the blank.
He obliged. “Hewlett,” he said, giving her an antiquated bow that quirked the corners of her lips. If Caleb and Abe could see him...

And he was turning away from her, going back to his briefcase, where he had left his dignity and probably a chunk of denim from Anna’s jeans. She watched him leave, wondering when her day had gotten so completely ridiculous. She sat there for close to fifteen minutes before she realized that she didn’t actually want to sit in a sterile waiting room for two hours for a three minute cleaning job she could do at her own dorm.

She hobbled her way to the Common, where she found Abe and Ben sitting at a table, the remains of their lunch scattered over the surface. She collapsed into the seat, leaning into Abe’s shoulder.

“Where have you been?” he asked, his voice half-playful and half-concerned. “Class ended thirty minutes ago.”

Anna shrugged, unwilling to relate to her male friends the behavior Simcoe kept slinging at her. She knew both of them would be willing to protect her, but for some reason, she found that notion intolerable. No, she could handle this herself.

“Do either of you accident-prone idiots have band-aids in your dorm?” she asked. “I’m asking for a friend.”

Ben shook his head. “Caleb might, though,” he intoned after a moment. “He used to use them when he kept cutting himself shaving.”

“Another good reason to give it up,” Abe acknowledged, throwing his arm around Anna’s shoulders. The gesture was so familiar that she welcomed it for a moment, his girlfriend Mary forgotten.

“Why do you need a band-aid?” Ben asked.

Anna gestured down to her knee; Ben, on the other side of the table, could do nothing but listen as Abe tried to pry the story from Anna, which she refused to provide.

“I just ran into someone and I fell,” she hedged.

Ben, the one who knew and acknowledged when Anna decided to keep something to herself, gave her a silent but chastising look, to which she shrugged. Finally, he sighed and held out his hand.

“Give me your wallet,” he said. “I’m going to go swipe you something to eat before the Common shuts down for the afternoon. And then we’ll go get you a band-aid.”

“My knight in shining armor,” Anna answered sarcastically. “And nothing vegetarian or I swear to God, Benjamin –”

He waved her off and veered to the right, out of sight.

“How are you going to come by tonight?” Abe asked as soon as Ben was out of earshot. Anna shrugged his arm off her shoulder and turned toward him, the motion putting some distance between their bodies.

“What about Mary?” she asked quietly, knowing that Mary, the current student government secretary, would have people lurking everywhere. “We can’t keep doing this, Abe. I can’t.”

“Wait, Anna, wait,” he protested immediately and vehemently, as he always did. “Look, I know this is hard, but –”
“But what?” Anna prompted when his silence stretched. Apparently Abe hadn’t thought out the entire sentence. “What we’re doing is wrong, and I can’t keep doing it.”

“You know why I’m with Mary,” Abraham whispered, using the lowered volume to force Anna to get closer to him. “It isn’t my choice.”

His victimizing always had the same reaction; Anna rolled her eyes and moved away from him. “It’s the twenty-first century, Abe. Your father cannot tell you who to date. That’s antiquated and absurd. If you want to date me, then date me.”

“It isn’t that simple.”

“Like hell it isn’t,” Anna hissed. “Your father may be the provost of the university, but he has no control over you.”

Ben’s large silhouette was coming their way again, and Anna felt the looming presence of a listening ear. She scooted away from Abraham one more time, this time placing her bag between their bodies to force him apart. Ben deposited her wallet on the table, sliding two slices of pizza to her as he did so. Anna gave him a grateful smile and collected one of them, savoring the unhealthy taste of marinara sauce and cheese.

Abraham, no longer able to continue his conversation, left soon after that, dropping a quick kiss on the top of Anna’s head, like he often did out of friendship, or so he claimed. Ben watched him with a look that looked a little like disapproval.

“Whatever you two are doing, Mary is going to find out,” he warned, swiping a pepperoni off of Anna’s pizza. She didn’t even try to deny it; Ben always knew. He never told, never tried to trade their secrets for anything that could benefit him, but he always knew. Anna was grateful to have someone that knew everything; without him, she would have gone crazy by now. She gave him a rueful smile, her cheek full of pizza, and chewed pensively before she responded.

“It was only a couple of times,” she confessed. “A slip up that kind of turned into a snowball effect-type deal. I told him I want out.”

“Ahh,” Ben said, leaning back in his chair, letting his long arms fold behind his head. “That’s why he left, then.”

“I would assume so,” Anna agreed. “Now, I believe you owe me a band-aid. I’m pretty sure my jeans are forever welded onto my knee by now.”

They didn’t talk about Abe after that, and Anna never mentioned the other professor, the one who stumbled over his words more than any freshman she’d ever met. He had kind eyes, she remembered as she tried to ignore the pain that seared through her leg as she tore the jeans from the now dried blood.

Kind eyes but an accent that reminded her of someone with eyes like a shark.

She wouldn’t seek him out again. Setauket was a big-enough university anyway, she mused, wincing as she pressed the alcohol pad to the scrape on her knee. There was no reason why they should cross paths again.

“I found band-aids,” Ben said triumphantly, emerging from the shared bathroom, nudging the door closed with his foot. “They’re small, but you should only need two of them.”

She thanked him and pressed the band-aids gently over the wound, feeling his eyes on her as she did.
“What?”

“Simcoe is still bothering you, isn’t he?” he asked delicately, trying and failing to settle on a tone of voice that wouldn’t upset her. She didn’t ask how he knew; there was no point. She tried to ignore his question as long as she could, but the gentle pressure of his eyes on her would not abate. Finally, with a long suffering sigh, she nodded her head.

“Why don’t you tell someone, Annie?” he asked, kneeling before her so he could look up at her. “Someone will do something.”

“No they won’t,” she protested. “It’s fine.”

Ben placed his hand gently over hers, and she noticed suddenly that she had been fidgeting with the band-aids on her knee. “It’s harassment. We could get him fired.”

“And I will fail,” she answered. “I can’t afford to fail his class, Ben. They’ll put me on forced withdrawal. I’ll have to go back to Selah.”

The mere mention of her husband, if he could even be called a husband, darkened Ben’s face. “We aren’t going to let that happen,” he insisted.

“I just have to make it through this semester,” she promised. “I can do that. Let me do that.”

Ben retreated from her, realizing with his vast experience of Anna’s stubbornness, that there was no way he was going to convince her of anything tonight. He nodded, letting her smooth the band-aid over her cut knee repeatedly, and sat down at his desk to start his homework. When she was ready, she would talk.
Simplicity, An Advanced Course

Chapter Summary

In which Edmund ruminates on his new life in America and becomes, unfortunately, intimately acquainted with Richard's issues with Anna Strong.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you all for your kind words, reviews, reblogs, etc. The Annlett fandom is so sweet and so encouraging! I hope that I continue to impress or at least create something that you deem worth your time.

Chapter Two: Simplicity, An Advanced Course

Professor Edmund Hewlett would be hard-pressed to say that he found any place more comforting than his office at Setauket University. A visiting professor from Oxford, he was often uncomfortable and stiff in these new, unfamiliar, very American locations, like coffee shops instead of teashops, and small, shallow museums instead of the deep entombed halls of the museums he was familiar with. He longed for the National Portrait Gallery, and Trafalgar Square. He longed for England.

But, he supposed, his office wasn’t too bad. He had covered the one window that shed the harsh American sunlight over his shoulder and onto his left ear with a curtain that softened the sun and made the room comfortably warm without pushing it over the limit of stuffy. His bookshelves, the ones he filled to bursting, cushioned the walls with an extra foot of storage. He had just finished organizing all of them – by subject and then author, of course, and now often spent his few minutes break staring longingly at them, a marvel of organization and knowledge.

He gently placed his Starbucks cup on his coaster, resting beside his laptop. Really, he has promised himself that he wouldn’t indulge in that capitalist monster, but after plowing over that poor student, he figured he deserved a pick-me-up.

Unfortunately, Starbucks specialized in overcomplicated coffee concoctions that were more sugar than coffee, and couldn’t yet manage to figure out that in tea, the milk always goes first. He took one tentative sip before he decided that he probably wouldn’t drink it, yet couldn’t bring himself to throw the full cup into the trashcan. So he left it by his laptop, festering, a physical reminder that he couldn’t yet find his footing here.

He could say with certainty, however, that he preferred being here, even if it wasn’t home, than to his previous job. Before he had given himself permission to be a professor, he was a lawyer. Rather, if he were being honest, he was a terrible lawyer. He lacked the stomach for the morally ambiguous jobs, and he was considered of too high a status to demote himself to merely a prosecutor, or a white knight for the greater good.

But he promised himself, and his mother, that he would do something that would make a difference. He had thought, erroneously, he could admit truthfully now, that upholding the law would bring
about that change and that validation that he craved so much. But the more time he spent trying to
swallow back the bile as he defended another slimy businessman from his just desserts, the more the
pit in his stomach grew.

It took him almost five years before he gave up being a lawyer for the much-preferred position of
teaching law instead. His family friend Richard Woodhull had asked him to fill a position at his
school when their former professor had unexpectedly retired. Edmund’s sense of honor had called to
him, and he accepted, thinking this would be his penance for taking so long to change his profession.

And a penance it was.

A quiet knock on the doorframe shook Edmund out of his train of thought. Garreth Baker, a graduate
teaching assistant, was leaning against it, the tie around his neck already loosened in expectation of
the end of the workday. Edmund’s own tie was tight around his throat, like it always was until he
was in the sanctity of his own home.

“Some of the justice, law, and criminal justice department are going out for some drinks tonight,” he
said, smiling his kind smile that always made Edmund feel a little less homesick. “Do you want to
join?”

Edmund’s dismissal was on the tip of his lips before the poor child had even finished his statement.
“I don’t know if I’d feel comfortable –” he began, but Baker cut him off.

“Well, no offense, Professor Hewlett, but you’re never going to feel comfortable if you don’t do
something that makes you uncomfortable,” he shrugged.

Edmund felt an almost sardonic smile tug at his lips. “So the answer to comfort is discomfort? You’re
going to have to work on that particular argument, counselor.”

Baker graced him with a chuckle and a nod that Edmund felt was one of the more familiar and
personal moments he’d been blessed with since he got here. “The wording could use a little work,
I’ll admit, but the principle remains the same. Come out, get to know some of the other faculty; it’ll
do you some good. You’ll feel better.”

Edmund felt momentarily offended. “Who says I need to feel better?”

Baker’s almost pitying smile was soft and apologetic. “You stick to yourself, you leave as soon as
your office hours are over, and hardly any of the other professors even know your name, much less
your face. It’s hard to be in new place, sir.”

Edmund blinked slowly, registering the younger man’s words. Had he truly been that obvious? Did
the rest of the department see how unhappy he was here? Well, not unhappy, per se, but…he paused
in his silent rambling long enough to note with some embarrassment that he stumbled through his
thoughts even before he vocalized them before he realized Baker was speaking again.

“Great, we’ll ride together,” he said, tapping the doorframe happily and escaping before Edmund
could protest. He felt anxiousness, as it often did, bloom in his stomach and he knew, with all
certainty that he was going to embarrass himself tonight. That inevitable dread always hung over him
like a raincloud waiting for the right moment to strike.

His mind turned, once more, to that student he knocked over on his way to his office. A truly
regrettable situation, he thought with the faintest of blushes on his high cheekbones. He had been
rushing to get something to eat before his office hours began, that way he could be available to any
student with questions. And, as usual, he had rushed for no reason. He had run over that poor girl for
Her eyes had been so large, wide like the gaze of the moon, the lines of her eyelashes smudged just slightly from what he immediately recognized as previously shed tears. He had offered her his hand out of courtesy but also out of a necessity. He had been staring at her for too long, and staring without a reason was not proper. She hadn’t taken his hand, but he had left it out for her, like leaving a treat for Santa that he inevitably never took, but left a present anyway.

So what was the present that student left? Anna Strong. Her determination to walk alone, and her unapologetic lean on his arm spoke to contradictions that were hard to decipher, a complicated personality and multifaceted, layered person that would intrigue him for long after she slipped into his long-term memories.

And the way she snapped at him – Edmund smiled to himself. She reminded him, in a way, of his mother; a stony, unapologetic woman who managed to straddle the lines of masculinity and femininity without a problem.

He wished, if only for a moment, that she had been his student, so he could help mold that iron veined woman to be a true marvel in the courtroom. He wished he could be like her; he felt so weak compared to this woman that only spoke a few words to him.

The evening fell faster than he would have liked, and Baker was soon leaning against this doorframe again, mimicking his previous position, a shy smile on his face. Instead of trying to wriggle out of the commitment that had been forced upon him, Edmund gladly stood from his chair and reached up to his collar and loosened his tie. Baker’s eyes momentarily widened humorously.

“You’re actually going to go?” he asked, disbelief etched in the young lines of his face. Edmund gave him the bravest smile he could muster, knowing that if he didn’t, the nervousness boiling in his belly would seep through the lines of his clothes and give him away.

One glass of wine, what could hurt, right?

Unfortunately for Edmund, lawyers, even those who taught the law, did not drink wine. They drank scotch. Disgusting yellow and brown foul smelling liquid that burned down his throat and all the way to his chest. He hated scotch. He didn’t understand the appeal at all.

“Come on, Oyster, try not to look like you’re drinking rubbing alcohol,” Professor Andre said, lifting his glass like he was toasting to him. “This is the best scotch the bar has.” John Andre, professor of corporate law, was the charming better-looking foil of Edmund’s; he was always calm, relaxed, and thrived in social situations. The students, as well as fellow professors, had no problems doing favors for the blond haired, blue-eyed figure of Adonis, even when he didn’t offer them anything in return.

Oyster, Edmund mulled. Because he was withdrawn? He supposed he had earned that nickname. Trying to steel himself, he tossed back the rest of the scotch, regretting it almost as soon as it touched his tongue. This stuff was really horrible. He glanced toward the bar, wishing he could get a glass of red wine.

“Edmund,” Richard Woodhull, finally eschewing his silence for the sake of conversation, “how has America been treating you? Finally getting the hang of it?”

Edmund considered the question as Andre chuckled. “As a fellow Englishman, I can say with certainty that acclimating to America takes a lot longer than a few weeks, am I right, Edmund?”

There was his name, instead of a nickname. Edmund felt like he was gathering his footing
underneath him. He smiled at the suave Andre, who smoothly motioned for another round for the table while simultaneously pulling a woman that Edmund hoped he knew personally onto his lap.

“Andre is not wrong,” he began, and Richard’s face fell momentarily. “But it gets a little easier every day. However, what remains just as horrible as when I first got here is Starbucks. I simply do not, that is to say, I cannot drink their tea.”

Richard erupted in good-natured laughter that, for some reason, Edmund knew was not directly aimed at him. Something in the timbre of his chuckles clued him in to the source of his amusement, and Edmund found himself smiling along with him. “Well, Edmund, no one drinks Starbucks for the tea. They drink it for the coffee!”

“All the same, sir,” Richard waved off the ‘sir,’ “finding decent tea in this entire country has proven to be a conundrum I cannot solve.”

Andre lifted his glass once more, toasting that sentiment, and Edmund took a sip of his own replaced scotch, flinching a little less at the taste. In the silence of the company drinking, Edmund took his chance to glance around their surroundings. They were sitting at a dark bar, at a table rather than the actual raised bar, but the place was relatively empty. According to whispered words from Baker, this place was most frequented by professors and students, though they often ignored each other’s presence for the sake of propriety. It was within walking distance from the edge of campus, so college students most frequently occupied the raised bar and the wooden dance floor while the professors took up residence in the booths and tables.

The bell above the door jingled happily and Edmund’s eyes immediately rose to the sound, stopping completely at the sight of the same moon eyes that had haunted him for the rest of the day. Anna Strong.

She was flanked on either side by a tall, good-looking boy, her eyes were alight with a smile, and the bartender gave her a wink while pouring her a glass of something that looked like whiskey. She drank it without even the faintest trace of a flinch. She was ease personified, she was laughing with her head thrown back, her bun that had contained her hair gone and her hair long and flowing and shiny, and…

And she was looking right at him.

“Great,” Richard’s muttered exclamation, spat like an expletive, drew Edmund’s eyes back to his table. Richard’s eyes were aimed in the same direction that Edmund’s had just vacated. Anna had turned away from their table and back to the bar, where the taller of the two men put an arm around her shoulder and kissed the top of her head.

Edmund wasn’t sure why that gesture spread disappointment through his limbs, but there it was. He took another large gulp of his scotch, ignoring the burn now. It was dulling.

“What is?” Edmund asked Richard, who looked startled that anyone had heard him. His eyes were slightly guilty as he flicked them over to Edmund’s curious face.

“Nothing.”

Edmund didn’t push him, but cleared his throat and stood. Richard’s eyes followed him, but he didn’t say anything. The sudden silence amplified what felt like mistrust in Richard’s eyes. If Edmund was going to be forced to endure loaded silences, he was going to get his red wine, damn it.

As luck would have it, he happened to be leaning against the bar, waiting for the bartender, when the
tall man moved from Anna’s side and exposed Edmund’s position to her. She did a quick double take.

“I thought that was you,” she said by way of greeting, taking another swig of her drink.

It took him a moment to realize she was talking to him. “Ahh, yes, well, I don’t usually come out to bars – besides this time, obviously, and I, uh – I was uh…I was very surprised to see you as well.”

She smirked at him; he was stumbling over every single word that managed to haphazardly tumble out of his mouth. He could feel his face heating up. The bartender finally acknowledged him with a single finger, letting him know he’d be right by.

“I come here all the time,” she confided, though it wasn’t necessarily a secret. “I’m surprised to see you here with Richard Woodhull.”

“You know Richard?” he asked, too surprised to stutter.

“My whole life,” she acknowledged. “So I suppose that puts you in the criminal justice department, doesn’t it? That was Richard’s department before he got promoted to provost.”

Edmund, too paranoid to open his mouth again, nodded.

“Oi, Annie dear, get me another beer while I take a leak, huh?” a scruffy, shorter man that had been sitting beside Anna this whole time stood and scooted away from the pair. His eyes flickered over to Edmund for half a moment before he ignored him once more.

“Get it yourself,” Anna called back to him before turning back to Edmund.

He opened his mouth to actually say something this time, but the bartender finally decided Edmund was worth his time. “Cabernet, please,” he said graciously, and the guy moved away from the bar to pour him a quick glass. He turned his eyes back to Anna Strong, who was watching him out of the corner of her eye.

“You might want to get back to your professor buddies,” she said conspiratorially, leaning toward him. “Richard is going to get jealous.”

Before he could ask her what she meant, she was being swept out of her seat and toward the dance floor by the tall man, back from wherever he had gone. He watched her as he spun her once, twice and dipped her, her mouth open in laughter.

“How do you know Anna Strong?” Richard’s immediate question sent Edmund’s eyes back to Anna, who was dancing and talking with the tall man, whose eyes were repeatedly lifting to where Edmund sat.

“I…uh…may have almost run her over this afternoon,” Edmund said truthfully.

Richard didn’t say anything to that, but his face suggested that he thought she deserved it. Edmund furrowed his brows but sipped his wine, finally at home at least in that respect. He let Andre steer the question back to safer waters, and tried to follow it, but didn’t succeed so much as his eyes did in following Anna Strong’s journey across the dance floor and back again.

Soon, another man joined the first two that accompanied Anna to the bar, and Richard’s face visibly darkened. Even Anna’s eyes, alight with giddiness, lost some of its luster. Edmund watched as she grabbed the newcomer by the arm, her head tilting toward the table where Edmund sat. The new man turned toward them and, seeing something that made avoidance impossible, strode over to the
“Father,” he said simply to Richard, who glared at him. Edmund, between the two of them and unable to leave, took a hearty sip of his wine and tried to ignore the coldness of the gaze father fixed on son.

“What are you doing here Abraham?” Richard asked quietly, his voice hushed but full of a rush of anger that felt like a gust of wind.

Abraham turned back toward Anna. “Ben and Caleb called me.”

“But not Anna?” his father pressed, his mouth twisting at the girl’s name.

“You asked me to steer clear, and that’s what I did,” Abraham hissed, “but she’s Ben and Caleb’s friend too. I can’t avoid her forever.”

Richard and Abraham fell into silence, and Edmund drained his glass and pushed his chair back, trying to escape from the argument. Unfortunately, they were backed against another group of people who were apparently so wrapped up in their own conversation that Edmund had no hope of freedom.

“I wouldn’t get too attached to your friend,” Richard finally said. “She’s on academic probation already, and if I could hazard a guess, I’d say she won’t be here next semester.”

Edmund’s ears perked up at that. Academic probation?

“Are you trying to get her kicked out?” Abraham accused, stepping closer to his father. “That’s unethical.”

Richard held up his hands. “I’m not trying to do anything. She’s doing all of this herself.”

“And I suppose you just somehow clairvoyantly know her grades?” Abraham snapped. “Or do you have her teachers reporting directly to you?”

Richard looked momentarily affronted. “It’s my duty to keep up with our problem students.”

Abraham let out a mirthless laugh that took even Edmund by surprise. “Problem students? She hasn’t caused a single problem since she got –”

“And what about that protest?” Richard asked gruffly. “That protest ended in a riot!”

“She was a participant, not the organizer,” Abraham retorted. “Half of the school was there. Including me.”

The woman behind Edmund rose to get a new drink and he took his rapidly closing opportunity to get up and flee, heading straight to the bar once more. Richard and Abraham continued to argue, but with the words muted, Edmund found the exchange much less intolerable.

“Do you only drink red wine?” the voice of Anna Strong put Edmund immediately on edge. He wasn’t sure if it was the notion that he knew something about her personal life that he shouldn’t be privy to, or if it was because he knew she was the subject of a heated discussion, but he still couldn’t find the words to answer her.

She smirked at him, endlessly amused by his inability to communicate when he wasn’t running her over in the street, and motioned to the bartender. He turned his back to them and started mixing
things together in a silver glass. Just the sight of it put him on edge.

“I like red wine,” he said finally as the bartender put a tiny glass in front of him and poured some amber colored liquid in it. Anna took a tiny bottle from her purse and sprinkled some red powder on the top of hers and his and held it up like he was going to toast it and then drink it without asking.

He supposed that’s what college students did, but not law professors.

“What is it?” he asked tentatively. She didn’t answer, but held up the glass a little higher.

Her dark brown eyes, endless in their swirling mystery, practically sparkled at him. Those were the constellations of someone who was lit from the inside with adrenaline and confidence. She was brave and unforgiving. He was trying to sniff the glass without giving himself away.

He was cautious, over-thinking, neurotic. He was the guy who could never see the forest for the trees. He was the man who saw constellations, but not the individual stars. And maybe there was beauty in simplicity, he thought as they clinked, and he tossed it back.

It tasted like apple pie.

She was grinning at him, her exposed collarbone flushed with the warmth and the alcohol. There was something supremely complicated about her, but there was a simple way that her proud smile (proud, she didn’t even know him) that made him feel, for lack of a better word, infinite.
Chapter Three: Linguistics

Chapter Summary

In which Anna's boat is rocked by not only Hewlett, but Simcoe and Abe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sunlight seared Anna’s eyes as her long lashes fluttered open, revealing her dark irises to the harsh morning. She groaned and pulled her pillow over her head, yanking some of her hair with her. She shoved it away, annoyed, and tried to settle back into her bed. But her head was pounding, her mouth drier than cotton. Ahh, the hangover, she thought ruefully as she sat up, pulling the sheet around her body with her. Abe was snoring peacefully beside her, his bare back exposed to the sun streaming in from the window.

She wrapped the blanket around her naked body and trudged with heavy feet to the kitchen, where she found Caleb curled up on the floor in front of the sink. His beard looked like it held the crusted remains of beer; his hair wild and tangled around his soft face. She let a small chuckle escape as she reached for a cup and turned on the faucet.

Caleb, startled out of sleep by the sound of water, lurched upward. “Huh, ugh,” he muttered expletives and not-quite formed words under his breath as he took in the sight of Anna standing over him, wrapped in a sheet, drinking water. “The hell you doin’ up, Annie?”

She shrugged and purposefully spilled a tiny dollop of water on top of his head. He recoiled sharply, like she was pouring gasoline.

“Couldn’t go back to sleep,” she answered finally, clutching the blanket a little tighter around herself. Caleb noticed her movement and pursed his lips.

“I guess Woody is still here then?”

She didn’t answer him but finished her glass of water and refilled it, searching now for a pair of aspirin. If they were going to start talking about Abraham, she needed to get rid of her headache. He seemed to take that as a yes and pulled himself up from the floor. His eyes fell on the microwave, projecting the time.

“Annie, it’s only seven in the morning!” he exclaimed, trying to shield his eyes from the unfairness of the situation. “What is wrong with you?”

She didn’t answer him, finally succeeding in her search for the aspirin. As Caleb continued to complain, Anna dropped three of the tiny pills onto her hand and tossed them into her mouth, washing them down with her refilled water. She returned to her bedroom, where Abe had hardly shifted since she had been gone. Her tiny apartment, so often filled with Ben, Caleb, and Abe, was a crowded reminder of their childhoods together. Now, that Anna was the only one awake, she felt like she was walking in a mausoleum of their memories.

She started quietly searching for clean clothes in her piles of forgotten laundry, grabbing an old
Setauket crew team shirt that was probably once Caleb’s and a pair of jeans that weren’t torn and bloodstained and slipped them on, braiding her long hair into a single plait that she pulled over one shoulder.

Abe shifted in the bed, the sheet on top of him falling lower, and Anna gave him one more look as she gently closed the door behind her, grabbed her keys from the hook by the door, and left her male friends to sleep off their hangovers.

She lived only a couple of blocks away from the university, and the walk was short, the breeze cool. Anna tried not to think about the night before, where Abe had finally returned to the group red in the face, spitting angry tirades about something Richard had said, and basically told her rather than asked if he could sleep over.

Anna felt shame settle on her shoulders like a heavy weight, but tried not to dwell on it. She and Abe had been best friends their entire childhood and their momentary relationship in high school had never left either of them. But even now, she felt something had shifted, something fundamental, like their own chemical compounds had started to move them apart. It hurt her heart to think about not having Abe as he was in her life, but she couldn’t shake the feeling. It lingered like momentary vertigo.

Part of it, she figured, was that weird professor she’d met. She had managed to drink a couple of shots with him. Hewlett? She smiled at the memory. He was so timid, frightened by the drink she offered him, his eyes locked on hers like he was afraid that she was going to poison him.

She felt an uncertain sense of pride when he finally drank it.

That seemed to break a dam within him. They had chatted, as intermittently as possible so that Richard wouldn’t get suspicious, every time he came to the bar to get a drink. He told her about his classes, how he wanted to be an astronomer, and she told him that she once wanted to be a musician. After that, she hadn’t settled on anything since.

Talking with Edmund Hewlett had been a disconcerting experience; he actually listened to her when she spoke, and responded in accordance to the subject instead of turning it back to himself. She was so used to being only an accessory in conversation – a pretty face to talk at rather than to, that she found herself smiling more often when he was talking to her.

He was a nice guy, she supposed, but exceedingly weird. He found confidence in talking about the stars, in talking about the law, but when she asked him a question about himself, he stumbled over all of his words, his face flushing dark red.

She had kept the conversation away from herself, if only to save herself the trouble. He was a fun conversation partner, but he wouldn’t be her friend. He was a professor, and one that was a constant dinner guest of Richard Woodhull. Nice to talk to at the bar. That’s it.

But her attentions hadn’t been on Abe, and that had rankled him for some reason. He enjoyed being the center of attention, probably his own lingering childhood feelings of inferiority, but his borderline possessiveness had never settled with Anna well. They had fought, though lazily, like they were hardly putting any effort into it.

The sun had risen higher in the sky, winking down at her through the thick clouds that usually shielded early risers from the harshness of New England mornings. She looked up at the clock tower in the center of campus and tried to decipher the time in the old clock face. It stared down at her, mocking her, asking her why she was here this early.
Truth be told, she wasn’t so sure either.

“Miss Strong,” the voice stopped Anna cold. She turned slowly, trying to hide the fear on her face. If she were truthful, she’d say she didn’t succeed. Professor Simcoe was standing at the entrance to the science building, his briefcase in one hand, and a cup of coffee in the other. “What a pleasant surprise.”

It wasn’t, truly. He crossed the small, university street and came to a halt in front of her. “I never see you here this early,” he remarked, his high voice landing gently on her frazzled nerves.

Anna tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace. “I don’t often come here this early. I was just looking for a walk.”

“Oh, perhaps I could walk with you,” he answered readily, and Anna almost flinched. “We could discuss your paper.”

“But you’ll be late for class,” Anna said, gesturing to the building. He turned back to it, as if he had forgotten it was there. He chuckled lightly, and Anna knew she was out of good luck.

“I don’t have to teach until nine,” he remarked. “I have plenty of time to help one of my favorite students.” He dropped his hand on her shoulder once, like a patting sensation that he didn’t quite complete, and Anna felt her shoulders tense in response. “Shall we?”

She silently groaned, but continued on her walk. He walked beside her in silence, the weight of his eyes on her more often than it was on the sidewalk. Finally, he seemed to deem their walk worthy of conversation. “Have you thought about what you’re going to write your next paper on?” he asked, using the pretense of conversation to get even closer to her.

She hadn’t thought about his paper at all; in fact, she tried to think very little about his class, but she answered readily all the same. “I thought I would write about the Culper Ring,” she answered. “I find the spy tactics fascinating.”

“Deceptive little buggers, the early Americans,” Simcoe agreed, though Anna was sure that wasn’t what she had said. “I suppose you’ll have to do some research, then. I could help you.”

“Of course,” Anna answered, glancing up at the trees passing above them, wondering when this hellish walk would end. Simcoe seemed to realize that Anna wasn’t really paying him much attention, because he swiftly changed topics. His hand swept in front of Anna’s torso, catching the lanyard she wore around her neck with her keys dangling from it.

“No car keys,” he noted simply while Anna tried to calm her own pounding heart. His quick movement was one of precision; a hunter. “I find it curious that you don’t live with your husband.”

The simple uttering of the word ‘husband’ halted Anna and tilted her world on its axis. No one knew about Selah, especially here. It had been so long since she thought of that word, of herself in relation to that word, that she felt like she had just been thrown into deep, cold water. Now she had to tread it.

“How did you know about my husband?” she asked, almost choking on the word. It wasn’t the right word to use to describe Selah. She was starting to shake, her hands quivering first and the most noticeably.

Simcoe shrugged like it was no big deal. “Nothing is a secret at Setauket University, Miss Strong,” he admonished lightly. Anna, with so many things to hide, felt like he was hinting at something else, but what it could be, she couldn’t place.
She could feel her whole body thrumming with adrenaline now, like it was preparing to answer the constantly unasked fight or flight question, and she had to force a deep breath through her nose to keep herself steady.

“So why don’t you live with your husband?” Simcoe’s smile was calm, almost kind. He knew she was getting upset; he would have to be dense not to.

She struggled against the wave of incredulity that was crashing over her, sending her awry. “He’s in prison.”

“Ahh,” Simcoe didn’t seem surprised. Anna surveyed the profile of his face, trying to figure out what his game was.

“Miss Strong?”

She let out the breath she didn’t know she was holding. Edmund Hewlett was walking toward the pair, his own briefcase in his hand, his shirt buttoned all the way to the top. His eyes raked over Simcoe and settled on Anna, where he seemed to notice immediately the shakes that were racking her body.

“Professor Hewlett,” she answered, trying to keep her voice steady.

He stared at her for too long, much too long, and his eyes betrayed his innocence, his own questions. Finally, after a long silence, he cleared his throat.

“Miss Strong, you will be late for our appointment!” he exclaimed, giving Simcoe a momentary glance that looked distinctly dismissive. Anna blinked even as he motioned to the building he was walking to. “You didn’t forget, did you?”

Her brain frantically trying to keep up, Anna heard herself say, “Of course not, Professor Hewlett,” she quickly stepped up beside him, and he surreptitiously stepped half in front of her, his shoulder shielding her. She relaxed. “So sorry, Professor Simcoe, I must be getting along.”

“And what, pray tell, would you have to meet with a law professor about?” Simcoe asked, his eyes never leaving Hewlett. The two men considered each other, sizing the other up. Anna had forced herself not to compare Simcoe to Hewlett, but seeing them standing in front of each other now was a surreal experience. Hewlett existed somewhere far from Simcoe’s nightmarish cloud.

Anna hesitated. “Well, I was considering going into law, and my friend Abraham suggested that I speak to Professor Hewlett, so I…well, I did,” she said quickly. Hewlett, beside her, hitched his bag a little higher, a show of pride, of victory. “Shall we?” she directed at him. He gave her a single nod and continued on his way, Anna practically trotting beside him.

“Are you alright?” he finally asked after Simcoe had faded from their view. “I’m sorry for butting in, I mean, you looked –”

Anna waved him off, realizing that her hands were still shaking as she did. “No, thank you.”

The silence stretched long after that, Hewlett practically fidgeting beside her to say something, anything. She let the quiet ease her stretched nerves. She made it a point not to talk about her husband to anyone who wasn’t her close friend when they had gotten married. How Simcoe had known was baffling. And even more sinister, he could tell she lived close to the campus because she didn’t have a car. Momentarily, paranoid, Anna considered moving.

Hewlett was still struggling to open the conversation. Finally, she took pity on him when he couldn’t
seem to find the words to speak.

“Are you really going to your office?” she asked, ending the question in an exhalation that betrayed the continued stress she felt.

He jerked out of his thoughts visibly, letting his eyes fall on her. “Oh. Oh, yes, that is where I am going, but you needn’t accompany me if you don’t – that is to say – if you don’t want to. Our clever ruse is up.” His eyes roamed her face, searching for any clue as to what she was feeling. She figured she must be quite an enigma; first so angry, then kind, frightened, and now kind once more.

She felt her lips twitch into a smile, the mention of her husband momentarily forgotten. The way he stumbled over his words when she caught him off guard inspired her to do it more often. She shrugged. “I have nowhere else to be.”

He almost literally tripped at her response, and she let laughter fill her, banishing the panic of Simcoe and the self-loathing that Abe brought about. It seemed laughter always snuck up on her quickest when she felt almost lost, frazzled. It was almost hysterical laughter, the one that can dissolve immediately into tears. He let her laugh at him, his face impassive but slightly warm, and led the way to his office.

It was expertly organized, almost cold, but the bookshelves had been arranged with such care that Anna felt love pouring off them. She immediately turned her eyes to them, scanning the titles for something she knew. Nothing. She didn’t know anything. Swiftly, her own insecurity was back.

“Who was that man?” Hewlett asked her, setting his briefcase down on his desk and opening it, taking out folders of papers. “And why was he making you so uncomfortable, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“That is…” she hesitated, and backpedaled, “no one important. I can handle it.”

His eyes rose from his papers and settled on her, fixing her with an almost stern look that reminded her of being scolded, but then his expression softened. “I will respect your wishes,” he said simply. “But, before you go, there is something I would like to ask you.”

Anna felt that sudden uncertain feeling where a fleeting flirtation becomes too real; had she been too kind to this man she hardly knew? Was he about to presume some sort of control over her like Simcoe did? Like Selah did? She froze, her back to him, her heat turned upward toward the bookshelves.

“This is…going to sound – well, it probably is unethical -,” Hewlett seemed to be talking to himself more than he was talking to Anna.

Oh God, he was going to ask her out, wasn’t he? Didn’t he know he couldn’t ask out a student here? Anna felt her cheeks flush dark red, and struggled to banish the blush. He was still trying to find the right words to say, and Anna quickly realized she hadn’t been listening.

“but I might as well…Miss Strong, if you are willing, I would like to become your tutor.”

Anna, already poised to reject a professor asking her on a date, paused, mouth open. Wait, what? “My tutor?” she asked, her voice quiet. Of course he wasn’t going to ask her out. Her disappointment in that fact, a fleeting pang of it, was quickly replaced by her own self-loathing. A professor would never want to date her. She probably wasn’t smart enough for them and their stupid books and degrees.

He seemed to sense that she wasn’t going to react favorably. “Yes, well…I heard from someone in
the faculty that you are, well, how should we say – academic probation –”

“Richard,” Anna answered simply, furiously. “He told you that I was on academic probation?”

“Well,” Hewlett hesitated. “No…not me, per say, but he did say it in front of me, to his son. Abraham, I think his name is.”

Anna exhaled sharply through her nostrils, anger filling her numb limbs. She could feel the rage that the mere mention of Richard Woodhull ignited in her boil to the top and over.

“What I meant was,” Hewlett was still talking, “if you are struggling with anything, I only teach two classes, so I have –”

“Why?” Anna asked sharply, crossing her arms.

He halted. “Why what?”

“Why do you want to help me?” she asked again, her voice gaining volume. “I’m not part of your department. You don’t even know me. So what’s your interest?”

She was being cruel now, using that particular word. His cheeks, his impossibly high cheekbones, flushed with it. But she had been so sure that he had been interested in her, at least as a friend. She had relished in the attention, in his quick glances. She shouldn’t have; she was leading herself on as much as she was leading him on. But the notion, the mere idea that he was offering to help her pass her classes, like she couldn’t manage to do it alone, was hurtful. Insulting, even.

He seemed to be at a loss for how to respond. After watching him struggle, Anna held up her hands to stop him, even though he was nowhere near a coherent response. “Look, with all due respect, Professor Hewlett, you don’t know me. At all. And neither does Dick Woodhull.” The use of the word jolted Hewlett, who looked scandalized. “I don’t need your help. I certainly don’t need your goddamn pity.”

“I don’t –”

“Do not interrupt me,” she warned, and he immediately fell silent. “If I get kicked out of this school because of my grades, then fine. But if I’m going to get kicked out because Woodhull has an issue with me or my father, then…what?”

Hewlett’s hand was raised like he was in a classroom.

“Your father?” he questioned.

“My father is dead,” Anna clarified. “It’s none of your business. If Richard wants to kick me out because of personal issues, I’ll give him another riot.” She pulled on her braid and glanced around the office, looking for her bag, and realized she came without one.

“Riot?” Hewlett looked more than mildly alarmed now. “Miss Strong, I can’t let you –”

A knock at the door stopped Anna from replying. Hewlett called out a meek “come in.”

Abraham stuck his head in the door, his eyes stopping on Anna, whose face was still red with anger, tiny hairs poking out of her braid in all directions. “Professor Hewlett?” he asked like he wasn’t sure. Hewlett nodded. “Professor Woodhull is asking for you,” he said, his eyes still on Anna.

“Of course,” Hewlett said. “My apologies, Miss Strong, but it seems that our time is at an end.”
“Good,” she said quietly. The drop in Hewlett’s shoulders told her he heard her. She felt a sting of momentary guilt that she quickly stomped on. He let her leave the office first, closing the door securely behind him. He bade Anna and Abe good-bye and left them standing in front of his office door, too embarrassed to even look at Anna when he departed. She let out a frustrated sigh that seemed to prompt Abe into speaking.

“Why were you talking to Hewlett?” Abe asked.

Anna, unwilling to relay the entire ordeal, simply answered, “He’s the one who ran me over yesterday in the Common.”

Abe, not even caring that Hewlett wasn’t out of earshot, exclaimed, “That guy?”

She could see Hewlett pause in his walk; just enough of a hitch in his step for Anna to notice. “Leave him alone,” she admonished Abe, feeling her guilt deepen, as it often did when her fit of rage was over. Abe didn’t say anything after that for a while, and Anna was glad. Nothing he could say was going to fix the wretched morning she’d had.

“You left this morning,” he said finally, and Anna groaned aloud.

“I’m allowed to leave my apartment when I please,” she snapped. “And you aren’t staying over anymore.” Before Abe could respond, she left him there, walking in the same direction Hewlett was going. She didn’t look back.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys so much for reading my work, it means so much to me that I have so many of you messaging me on tumblr, following my hyperactive reblogs of Annlett stuff. Thank you guys for being so wonderful!
Introspection, an entry level class

Chapter Summary

In which Ben learns of Edmund and serves truth to not only Anna, but Abraham as well. Simcoe continues to be a bully, but Edmund is having none of it. Our hero and villain finally meet.

Chapter Notes

You guys are so kind with your constant feedback; once I post this I'm going to go and comment on your comments. Thank you for your love, please know that I cherish it greatly!

It was noon; Anna felt like it took all day just to get to the halfway point. She met Ben for lunch, forgoing Caleb’s still irritated muttering about waking up too early and Abraham’s longing looks and the chastising that she was sure to endure now that she was barring him from her bed. Besides, she was practically bursting to tell someone about Hewlett. Ben, with his tight lips and lack of judgment, seemed like the best choice.

“You yelled at him?” Ben was laughing into his cup of coffee, his hair still a little too rumpled to not be hung over. “You actually yelled at him?” Anna’s eyes zeroed in on a stray cowlick that she wanted desperately to pet down, but she resisted. “Come on, the poor guy was only asking to be your tutor.”

“You know what, I already regret telling you about him,” she grumped, swiping his coffee cup and taking her own long sip. “It’s not about the tuturing, exactly –”

Ben smirked at her. “Then what was it? Because I would assume you’d be happy he wasn’t asking you out. I mean, unless you wanted to go out with him.”

Something in his tone made her narrow her eyes. “What do you mean?” she asked tentatively, trying to decide how she felt about his criticism of Professor Hewlett. After relaying the whole story to him, from their initial collision outside the Common and their conversation at the bar and today, she felt not only even guiltier for yelling at Hewlett, she also felt…vulnerable.

Ben had been in this position before. He held up his hands and leaned back in his chair, the picture of nonchalance. “Nothing. I mean, Annie, if you wanted to date him, what is so wrong with him being your tutor? There’s nothing shameful in having someone help you.”

“I don’t need help,” she insisted. “And I certainly don’t want to date him.”

Ben raised his eyebrows at her over his cup. Anna wanted, so much, to ask him what the look was for, but she was exhausted. The morning had already gone on so long, and she still had two more classes to attend that day. She reached into the little paper bag that Starbucks gave the unfortunate souls who order some of their food and pulled out a piece of lemon cake. Ben watched her eat the
piece thoughtfully, as though he knew she had more to say.

She let her eyes focus on something far away. “I’m just…” she sighed heavily. “I’m annoyed that my business is being aired at goddamn faculty meetings at bars. And even more annoyed that Richard thinks he can talk to Abe about my grades.”

“So you took it out on the guy who offered to help you?” Ben asked, still smirking. “Sorry, Annie, that’s just a misdirection of anger.”

“Stop calling me Annie!” she exclaimed. “Who are you, Caleb?”

Ben shrugged. “Abe and his father shouldn’t be discussing you, that’s true. But there’s also no point in getting upset if you’re not willing to acknowledge the role you’ve played here.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, do you try to do better in school?” he asked, “Or are you hoping that you flunk out?”

Anna opened her mouth to protest, but Ben held up his hands. “Wait, let me finish. Your marriage to Selah was rushed, and probably not really what you wanted. You used his arrest and the loss of James as a catalyst to change your life. You came to college at twenty-two years old. You came here feeling like you were too old to start changing your decisions. So did you come here just because your friends were here, or because you truly wanted to have your own career? There’s nothing wrong with finding a career outside of college education. You just have to figure out what that career is.”

She felt exhaustion weighing her down now more than ever. “I don’t know what I want,” she muttered.

His hand came to rest on her shoulder reassuringly. “There’s nothing wrong with that. But maybe you might want to start looking into it. Because if you decide that it is college, you’re running out of time to turn your grades around. And if it isn’t…then why waste your time?”

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“Where were you last night?” Mary asked, checking for the third time if the poster she’d just hung was straight. “I thought you were coming over.”

Abraham shrugged. “I ended up going to the bar with Ben and Caleb, and I lost track of time. I know how you hate to see me drunk.”

Mary nodded, her eyebrows raised. Her yellow skirt fluttered around her knees as she twirled around her boyfriend and crossed to the other side of the hallway, pulling tape from under her arm, where she had trapped it against her torso. “Was…was Anna there too?” Her voice betrayed her forced nonchalance, but Abraham heard it.

Abraham hesitated. “Probably before I got there. I didn’t see her,” he lied.

Mary seemed to take him at his word, but the silence that followed went on too long for Abraham’s comfort. He didn’t often mention Anna in Mary’s presence. It was typical for the girlfriend to resent the ex-girlfriend, but his relationship with Anna was complicated. Even more complicated than he originally thought.

Their first “slip-up,” as Anna called it, happened after Abraham had a fight with Mary. He had gone to Anna for comfort, which, as he could tell now, was an excuse. He was looking for understanding
from a woman he thought he was better suited to. But he missed her; he missed Anna’s deep laugh, her big, soft eyes, her rough hands. He missed all of her. Mary, already onto another subject, dropped a kiss onto Abraham’s cheek and held out the posters to him.

“I’m sorry, what?” he asked, finally tuning in. Mary pouted at him, sticking out her lower lip only slightly so she wouldn’t smudge her lipstick. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Mary, he did, but she just… wasn’t Anna.

“I said I have to go to class,” Mary said again, feigning exasperation. “Could you hang those for me?”

“Sure,” he smiled at her, and she puckered her lips, asking for a good-bye kiss. He obliged her, a quick peck that made guilt twist his gut, and she sashayed away, pulling her backpack higher on her shoulders. She was everything he should want; she was part of the honors college, polite, popular, beautiful, and intelligent. But she lacked the fundamental wildness that Anna had coursing through her veins. She wasn’t spontaneous.

Abe flipped the posters over and surveyed them. It was an invitation to an open forum where the student government would let the student population ask questions. Anything from financial aid to the job market were up for grabs. Mary made Abe attend every semester, and most of the time, fewer than ten people showed up. Even fewer asked questions. It was hard to find a group of people that cared about the details that went into their higher education. As it went, Abe hardly cared to know, and his girlfriend and father were both in the system.

He tucked the posters under his arm and made his way toward the Common, intending on putting the posters up in the political science building, where the future leaders of the country would probably be coerced into attending. They would never turn down an opportunity to debate, after all.

He was just leaving the Common when he spotted a familiar head of messy light brown hair. “Ben!” Ben paused just as he was about to cross the street and turned to his friend. “Hey, I see you braved going to class today,” he said cheerfully. “You look dead tired.”

Abraham shrugged. “I had to be at my father’s office at 8 a.m. to answer phones and shit, so I basically just brushed my teeth and ran from Anna’s place at 7:45 this morning.” Ben shook his head, a laugh punctuating the almost dog-like motion, reaffirming what Abe always thought about his friend; that he looked like a friendly golden retriever. “Speaking of which, have you spoken to Anna today?”

Ben’s laughter quickly shuttered. Abe raised his eyebrows. “That’s a yes.”

“Look, whatever is going on between you two is not any of my business,” Ben said innocently. “I just serve as a sounding board for whoever needs it.”

“So she has been talking to you,” Abe confirmed. Ben sighed, and Abe could see him struggling not to roll his eyes. “Look, I just want to know if she told you why she’s shutting me out.”

Ben’s look shifted from exasperation to something akin to pity. “Abe, she’s not shutting you out. She’s just trying to get her life in order.”

“And, what I can’t help her with that?”

“No, you can’t,” Ben insisted. “You’re a distraction, you are inviting more problems that she doesn’t have time for. What happens when Mary finds out what you’re doing?”
Abe rolled his eyes. “She’s not going to –”

“Come on, how stupid do you think she is?” Ben exclaimed, finally crossing the street, forcing Abe to follow him. “She’s going to find out, if she doesn’t already suspect you. You’re dating Mary, Abe. She should be the one whose feelings you’re considering.

“I do,” Abe insisted, but Ben shook his head.

“You aren’t. You’re completely forgetting that Mary even exists when Anna’s around. And if that’s so easy, then why are you with Mary? Because she deserves to be treated better than this.”

“This has nothing to do with Mary,” Abe protested, and Ben gave him a mirthless laugh in return.

“Fine. But when Mary finds out, and she will, that’s going to bring hell down on Anna. Is that what you want for her?”

Abe considered the question, turning his eyes up to the sky. “No, I don’t.” Ben nodded triumphantly and continued down the sidewalk toward another row of buildings. “But I want to be with her,” he called after him.

Ben paused and turned back to his friend. “Well, I don’t think you’re the only one.”

There was nothing for Abe to say to that. Ben gave him a shrug at his confused expression and turned his back to him, continuing on his way to class, leaving Abe to dwell on the unexplained statement.

***

Edmund Hewlett spent most of his day trying to forget the embarrassing implosion that was his morning. After stumbling in a less than stellar manner over his own words with Anna, she had basically told him that he had crossed some sort of line he didn’t know existed. He couldn’t fault her for being defensive, at least, to a point, but he felt his own defenses rising as well. If he was in a position to help, what was so wrong with accepting it?

He sighed, once again trying to expel the thought from his mind. He scanned the heading of his student’s paper for the umpteenth time, trying to remember if he’d actually thought the argument was logical or not. He couldn’t remember.

Just as he managed to read past the first page, a quiet knock startled him. He called out a “come in,” that was hardly audible and marked on the side of the paper where he’d left off. The professor that he had seen with Anna that morning was standing in the doorway. He was certainly an off-putting character; his curly brown hair cut close to his head, his too wide eyes large and disconcerting. He was a supremely large man, as well, and Edmund found that he wanted to stand up, if only to close the gap in their heights.

“Can I…can I help you?” he asked tentatively, giving in to his impulse and standing, offering the man his hand to shake.

“John Simcoe,” the man said, shaking his hand firmly.

“Edmund Hewlett,” he replied, trying to ignore the pain in his hand as Simcoe squeezed. He motioned to the chair beside his desk. “Please, sit.”

He did, his face holding no malice, and took in the office. Edmund had felt a little self-conscious when he saw Anna do the same thing, but his insecurity lied in hoping she didn’t think it was cold, or boring. With Simcoe, he felt almost an instinctive need to defend why he decorated it so.
“Can I help you?” he asked again when Simcoe didn’t speak.

Simcoe turned his eyes back to Edmund. “I was hoping I could speak with you about Anna Strong.”

Edmund’s eyes slid away from the man as he considered the question. “I’m not sure what there is to talk about,” he said tentatively.

“Well, I’m her anthropology teacher,” Simcoe began, “and I’ve taken sort of an…interest in her.”

Edmund narrowed his eyes at his choice of words. The motion went unnoticed, and Simcoe continued without interruption.

“I’ve been trying to convince her to choose a major and declare it soon, but she seems to be digging in her heels. And now I hear that she’s considering law, but…I must confess, she doesn’t seem to be bright enough to be a law student. I’m sure you understand.”

He had the nerve to chuckle, the sound high pitched and unnerving, and Edmund almost shivered in spite of himself.

“I’m actually quite sure I don’t understand,” Edmund said curiously, feeling like he was already pushing invisible boundaries with the man once more. “As far as I can see, Miss Strong –”

“Oh, it’s Mrs. Strong,” Simcoe corrected. “You didn’t know?”

“She’s married?” Edmund exclaimed, much more passionately than he meant to. He quickly cleared his throat. “No, no we didn’t talk about that.”

“Apparently she likes to keep it a secret,” Simcoe confided, like they were suddenly best friends. Edmund leaned back in his chair, the better to get away from him.

“As I was saying,” Edmund continued, “Mrs. Strong has shown to me that she possesses every quality necessary in a pre-law student; she’s tenacious, stubborn, and naturally intelligent.”

Simcoe chuckled. “I confess, I have yet to see any of those qualities, and I see her twice a week,” he said. Edmund found his hackles rising, but tried to quell it. It wasn’t his job to defend Anna Strong; it was her own, and her…husband’s.

“Is there something specific you wished to talk to me about?” Edmund asked, suddenly wishing to be alone.

Simcoe regarded him carefully, as if trying to decide how far to push him. “I just wanted to make sure you weren’t wasting your time.”

“No student is a waste of my time,” Edmund defended.

The two men sat in uncomfortable silence for a long moment, both trying to figure out what the other was trying to accomplish. Edmund was starting to understand why Anna had looked so terribly frightened when he spotted her walking with Simcoe this morning. How horrifying must it be to face this man twice a week, and in a position of power, no less.

“Well, I’m glad we cleared that up,” Simcoe said finally, standing up and brushing off his slacks like he had managed to somehow dirty them without moving from his seat.

“Of course,” Edmund said tonelessly, motioning to the door. Simcoe gave him one last look before he closed the door behind him, leaving Edmund alone to ponder what the hell just happened.
The next morning, Anna sat in Simcoe’s class, her head buried in her notebook. She had tried to take notes, she really had, but his class had been particularly fast-paced, and he hadn’t put any lecture points on the board, so within five minutes, she had resorted to intricate doodling in the margins of her notes.

“Alright, seeing as we have a few minutes left, let’s take out a sheet of paper for a pop quiz,” Simcoe said gleefully, his eyes practically shining with the opportunity to give students yet another failing grade.

Anna groaned and turned to a blank sheet of paper, and kept her pen poised over it.

“When was the turning point of the American Revolution, and why did it turn the tide of battle?”

The flurry of scribbling from the rest of the class felt like whispers of judgment. When was that again? It was…Yorktown? Monmouth? She stared blankly at the paper. Simcoe had moved on to the next question.

“Why did the French offer aid to the Americans?”

She felt her hand twitch, but could offer no answer. Caleb, beside her, was humming something under his breath while he scribbled, and Anna felt her cheeks warm. She was the only one in the classroom that wasn’t writing something. How long had she tuned out? How much had she missed?

She could feel panic starting to close in on all sides. She had intended on passing this class without having to stomach Simcoe’s advances, pass on her own merit, but she was already failing a simple pop quiz.

“Explain why the title “Common Sense” was provocative and tell me what kind of propaganda it was.”

She had to leave. She wanted to leave. She glanced up and Simcoe was staring right at her, a smile perched daintily on his lips. His eyes fell toward her still blank paper, and Anna knew she couldn’t get up and leave now. She felt anxiety stick her to the chair as her panic continued to build.

She was failing.

If she hated college so much, why would failing bother her so completely? She should be happy she was about to be outside this unnecessary system that asked for far too much money for little to no immediate gain. She should be rejoicing, deciding what she was going to do when this was over. But she was panicking. She wanted to do well. She couldn’t say why, or what she wanted to accomplish, but she didn’t want to fail.

The rest of the class lurched with a solid movement and started handing in their quizzes, some with a few sentences, others with full paragraphs of developed answers. Anna shouldered her bag and turned in her blank paper, with her name scrawled across the top, and lowered her head into the crowd and ducked out into the hallway before Simcoe could catch her.

Edmund loved libraries. He was often flabbergasted now at the amount of people who stayed away from the books and immersed themselves in their computers, but he found the smell, the atmosphere, and being surrounded by so much knowledge comforting. He allowed himself a short reprieve of his grading and decided to tour the library. He hadn’t even visited since he started working at Setauket.
It was a small, modest library, especially for a university. It was three floors, poorly designed, and it had elevators that often stopped and hung precariously in between floors for an interlude that was much too long for his comfort.

He found the section he was looking for; a small non-fiction section in the back corner of the third floor where he could find biographies and autobiographies. He loved reading about the lives of people that came before him. There was so much truth there, hidden between the words, that even the lies were quickly dissolved before him. It was a calming read, nothing too terribly exciting, like fiction that sought to put you through a roller coaster.

He had just chosen a biography (Mary, Queen of Scots) when he heard a quiet sniff from the corner of the room. He paused, his hand still extended to pull the book off the shelf, when the sniff came again, louder, followed by a quiet sob.

He abandoned the book and went in search of the noise. Around the stacks were desks with dividers between them so students could work in limited isolation in peace. Sitting at one of them, with her back to him, was Anna Strong.

She was still wearing that crew shirt that made Edmund want to ask where she’d gotten it, and her hair had fallen out of the braid it had been in when he saw her last. But her shoulders were shaking with her quiet cries, and, as he watched, she scribbled something on her paper and crossed it out again.

He didn’t want to say anything – he figured she wouldn’t want to see him here anyway, and the notion that she was married was constantly being screamed into every corner of his brain. He decided quickly that he was just going to grab the book and leave. He turned around to do just that, and his briefcase – the damned wretch – fell from his shoulder and landed in the crook of his elbow, making quite a racket.

Anna turned around in alarm, wiping her eyes hastily. “Of course,” she breathed. “Of course it would be you.”

Edmund, knowing that his face was bright red, shrugged. “I just came here for a book. I’ll leave you to your studies momentarily.”

He turned away from her again, already deciding that he wasn’t going to comment on her tears, and heard her sniff again. He went back to the shelf and grabbed the biography he had been eyeballing, and when he turned around to make his exit, Anna was turned completely toward him.

“I’m sorry that I kind of shouted at you this morning,” she said quickly, her voice thick with her tears. Edmund felt, surprisingly, no residual embarrassment or anger at the recollection of their previous conversation. He supposed that seeing her actually cry made it less important. She sniffed again, and Edmund wished forcibly that he had a handkerchief to offer her. Never again would he let Andre tell him handkerchiefs were out of style. They were necessary. “I mean, I’m not sorry I got angry, because my grades are none of your business –”

“Apology accepted,” he said quickly, unwilling to dive back into a conversation he’d already thought too much about. “Do you mind…I mean,” he stumbled, as he usually did. He took a deep breath and soldiered on. “Do you want me to look at what you’re working on?”

She glanced back at her desk, covered in torn out pieces of paper from her anthropology essay, and shook her head. “It’s all garbage anyway,” she said ruefully.

“Well, maybe I can help,” he offered. “If you want me to, that is.” He held up his hands like she was
pointing a gun at him.

She gave him a watery smile that actually warmed him, and gathered the papers. “I just…I don’t know what I’m trying to say,” she said, handing them to him.

He nodded understandingly and took the pages, sitting on the seat beside her. He scanned through them quickly, holding out his hand for her pen. She gladly handed it over, and he started correcting grammar, spelling, and organizational issues.

She was right; she had no idea what she was trying to say. She had a working knowledge of the subject matter, as far as Edmund could tell, but no real way to string it together. It was like having someone write an academic essay on their hobby without letting them do research. She watched him intently, flinching whenever he made a sound, whenever he crossed something out.

“This isn’t me being mean,” he said quietly as she continued to stare at him. “Most of this will help you in the long run. I hope you don’t think I’m being mean.”

“I was pretty mean to you this morning, so I think I’ve earned it,” she said with a slight smile.

He stacked the papers up when he was finished with them, handing them back to her with a smile. “Okay then. Time to try again.”

He wasn’t sure where to go from there, so he pulled his briefcase strap higher on his shoulder and stood, ready to leave before she could decide she’d made a mistake. He gave her one more smile before he started to leave.

“Same time tomorrow?” she called after him.

He felt hope when he saw her smile. “Tomorrow,” he confirmed.
A Lesson in Rebellion

Chapter Summary

In which Abe continues to push his luck, and Anna finally feels like something is beginning to turn in her favor.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your continued support. I have literally shed tears over the love you have given me, and I just want you all to know that I appreciate the time you spend on my work. I appreciate it so much. I hope all of you are having a wonderful weekend, and continue being perfect rays of sunshine.

“Say, Tall-boy,” Caleb sipped his beer and stared at the glass. “Where’s Annie?” He let the question hang in the air for a few moments before he turned to Ben, who shrugged. Abraham, on the other side of Ben, cocked his head toward him. “I haven’t seen her since Simcoe’s class today, and she skipped out quick.”

“Probably at her apartment,” Ben answered, pointedly ignoring Abraham’s raised eyebrows. “I haven’t seen her since this morning.”

“So tell me why we’re here again?” Caleb motioned to the bar, which was full to bursting on Thursday night, widely proclaimed as “College Night.” The dance floor was a writhing mass of bodies that seemed to move as a collective group rather than several individuals. The blackboard behind the bar, instead of holding the few regular specials, was adorned with pink and green chalk, all of which loudly offered up mixed drinks at discounted prices.

Caleb loathed College Night, mostly because it offered him too many opportunities to get into mischief that he probably couldn’t talk his way out of. Ben wasn’t keen on it either; he was only social with very select people, and faceless sorority sisters and fraternity brothers did not fit his bill.

“Ask Abe,” Ben said. Caleb lowered his head closer to the bar, perilously close to the mouth of his bottle of beer, and pursed his lips at the aforementioned friend.

“Abe?” he asked.

The music had chosen to swell at that particular moment; the crowds on the dance floor cheered in appreciation. Abraham had to wait for a long moment before he could answer.

“I just needed a drink,” he defended. “It was a…rough day.”

Ben awkwardly shifted in his chair, a movement Caleb caught.

“You two need to punch each other to get it out of your systems?” he asked with a trace of laughter in his voice. “Because I hate to say it, but that will be the worst fight I’ve ever witnessed. And I was
there when Annie punched Ben.”

The mention of Anna’s name sent a wince over Abraham’s face, but Caleb was in the middle of a large gulp of his now lukewarm beer, and Ben was the only one that saw it. He felt a momentary pang of sympathy for his friend, but instead of voicing it, took another sip of his beer.

“We don’t need to punch each other,” Ben replied, his voice a little sharp.

“Well sitting here staring into our drinks is fucking boring,” Caleb remarked into the silence. “So are we going to get pissed or are we going to just talk about our feelings?”

Neither of the others answered him, and after staring intermittently at them both, Caleb groaned and motioned to the bartender. “Can we get three shots of tequila here?” He waited for the other two to protest, to say something, but the silence stretched on. “Okay…” Caleb shook his head and held out his hand eagerly for the shot.

“Abraham!” the feminine voice cut through the men’s tension, and Abraham, who had just filled his mouth full of tequila, froze, his lips pursed comically in the act of struggling not to spit out the drink.

Mary, still in her flowing yellow skirt, this time with a white tank top and a pair of truly tiny pink sneakers, plopped down on the seat beside him. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” she said, kissing him on the cheek. Abraham swallowed his shot, his throat protesting.

“Have you?” he asked. Ben, beside him, shifted uncomfortably.

“Did you hang up those posters?” she asked, motioning at the same time to the bartender. “White wine,” she told him and turned her attention back to her boyfriend.

He nodded at her. “In the political science building.”

She gave him an approving smile and sipped her wine. “Caleb, Ben. Nice to see you.”

Caleb, who was already lining up his next shot, waved his hand at her without even looking up. Ben gave her a smile that looked and felt forced. She gave them an uneasy smile and turned back to her boyfriend. “Where’s Anna?”

“Trying to catch me in a lie?” Abraham asked.

Mary’s face, so pale and delicate, hardened. “It was just a question, though I wonder why your response is so waspish.”

Abraham didn’t respond, and the longer the silence between them stretched, the more Mary seemed to understand that she had walked in on something that wasn’t meant to be seen. She considered her boyfriend’s face, then Ben’s, and Caleb’s, before clucking quietly to herself and nodding.

“Well, fine. If that’s the way you want to be,” she said quietly, her eyes betraying only a hint of future tears. She slid off the chair and tucked it gently underneath the bar, scooped up her glass of wine, and moved toward the tables. On College Night, hardly any tables were occupied by faculty; most were used as holding tables for purses, jackets, and the like.

“That was unnecessary,” Ben remarked quietly.

Abraham grunted something unintelligible. Ben ignored him and turned on his stool, deciding to lean against the wood of the bar while surveying the rest of the patrons. Caleb soon joined him.
“Abe…” Caleb said after a long bout of silence. “What’s Mary doing?”

With a heavy, impatient sigh, Abe turned on his stool. Mary, who had managed to find a few of her friends from student government, had since moved from her original corner table to one close to the dance floor.

“What’s she doing?” Caleb asked.

Robert Townsend, with his pressed shirt and khaki pants, was indeed leaning close to Mary, saying something quietly to her. His head was lowered slightly beneath hers, so he had to look up through his long eyelashes at her. She was grinning devilishly at him, all traces of her former annoyance gone.

“Of course she is,” Abraham grumbled.

He turned away, back to the bar, and ordered another drink. Ben and Caleb continued to watch, occasionally exchanging significant looks when Mary lowered her hand to Robert’s arm, and again when he stood and offered her his hand to dance.

“You’re not going to do anything?” Caleb finally asked.

Abraham, instead of answering, tossed a twenty onto the bar and pushed the stool back, landing unsteadily on his feet, and left, letting the door to the bar slam closed behind him.

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1:00 a.m. Anna stared mutinously at the clock as it continued, against her will, to tick the time away, and turned back to her anthropology paper. Her decision to let Hewlett look at it had been a reckless one, and one she almost immediately regretted when he held his hand out for her pen, but she couldn’t deny the powerful feeling it gave her when she realized that she was following what he was saying.

His notes, small ones, scribbled in his neat hand, said things like “how does this contribute to your thesis?” and “maybe this point fits better over here?” and she smirked against her will, because he was right.

She was being proactive again; she was accomplishing something, and finally, she knew she was going in the right direction. She aggressively scratched out a sentence and added another, feeling the subliminal appreciation that progress gave her. She would finish her rough draft tonight, type it out before class tomorrow, and give Hewlett a typed version of it tomorrow evening.

Three loud knocks shook her from her train of thought, and she cursed quietly. She made a quick note and put her pen down, moving toward the door.

“What, Caleb, are you looking to sleep in the kitchen again?” she laughed as she opened the door. Her laughter immediately halted.

Abraham was standing in her doorway, his hair messy and disheveled, his eyes red around the rims. Anna immediately closed the door halfway, closing off the open space that her body did not fill.

“What do you want?” she asked firmly, trying to ignore the way he was looking at her, like he was trying to drink her in. He glanced at the door, like he was hoping his eyes could open it, but she held it tighter. “Abe.”

“I don’t know what I want,” he rasped, his voice rough from alcohol. “But I want to find out what I
want with you.”

She grimaced. While not an unexpected answer, she still didn’t feel equipped to respond to his statement, especially since Abe was drunk. “Abe…”

“You’re my oldest friend,” he pleaded.

“I can still be your friend,” she replied easily. “That isn’t a problem. The problem is…everything else.”

He blinked, the movement taking his gaze down and away from her. She let him sit in silence for a while before she sighed. “Abraham, I’m busy. Is there something else you wanted?”

“I came all this way,” he protested. “And you’re not even going to let me in?”

She furrowed her brows. “I thought I was very clear this morning.”

The look he gave her could only be described as betrayed. “You’re just going to let me walk home drunk?” he asked, the hard edge coming back to his voice. “After I walked all the way here from the bar?”

She felt herself waver, but spoke before she could second-guess herself. This was the kind of Abe she didn’t like; he handed you guilt with the same hand that he offered out of love or friendship. “I’m glad you didn’t drive, but there’s nothing I can do about it now. I don’t want you spending the night anymore. I already said it; I don’t know how much clearer I can be.”

His hand landed on the door heavily and Anna flinched sharply. He leaned his weight on it, and she felt her arm start to struggle against it. She looked up at him and his eyes met hers; she saw only determination in them. “Abe,” she warned. “Don’t.”

He continued to lean on the door until she was forced to give way, the door opening wide and slamming hard against the wall. He stumbled in, his feet landing, for the first time that night, on the carpet. She closed the door, her jaw clenched, and left it unlocked. He watched her, waiting for her to speak. When she didn’t, he followed her into the living room.

“What…what is this?” he motioned to her anthropology papers, spread out over her tiny table. “Homework?” he laughed like the notion was preposterous. His movements were sluggish, heavy, the lead in his arms making him move slower than usual.

She sighed heavily through her nose and, instead of sitting down like she had originally planned, reached for Abraham. He eagerly responded, his hands resting on her neck. Instead of letting him pull her in for a kiss, her hands immediately reached for his pants, where she quickly rummaged through his front pocket and pulled out his phone.

“What…” his confusion only spurred her to move even faster. With his phone in her hand, she quickly shoved Abraham away from her and onto the couch, where his equilibrium prevented him from bouncing immediately back up.

She had to scroll farther than she wanted to find Mary’s number. She pressed her thumb to it, willing it to load faster.

“Anna, what are you doing?” he asked, finally managing to get up. “Shit, my head.”

“Yeah, you might need a glass of water,” Anna threw over her shoulder as she quickly texted a message to Mary. “Here, let me get it.”
He leaned back onto the couch, content now that Anna’s displeasure with him seemed to have fizzled out. She rummaged more than she needed to in the kitchen, pretending like she couldn’t find a clean glass to put the water in. She tapped her fingers against the counter as she turned on the faucet, the cup filling quickly. Finally, as she was turning it off, the phone lit up with a response.

She felt stress leak from her shoulders.

She gave him the water, watching carefully as he struggled not to spill it on himself. She felt a sneer playing at the corner of her lips and turned away from him and back to her homework before he could see it. She went back to it, her pen tapping idly on the corner of the table while she read Hewlett’s comments.

“Your point isn’t clear here. Try to find new words to use.”

She pursed her lips and considered the sentence he had marked, her lips tracing the words silently. She had just started to rewrite it when Abraham spoke up behind her.

“What are you doing?”

She sighed. “Homework.”

He chuckled quietly. “Homework,” he repeated under his breath, the word an expletive on his lips. “So you’re just going to ignore me?”

Anna did not respond, but continued to struggle through her sentence, finding that creating a coherent one was even more difficult when her concentration was constantly broken. She sighed and scratched it out again.

“Anna –”

“Abraham,” she snapped. “I am busy. I told you I was busy. Now you can either sit there in silence while I work, or you can leave.”

She could hear him getting up from the couch. She closed her eyes and willed him not to come near her – alas, her prayers went unanswered and his hands landed on her shoulders, kneading at the knots he always found there. Her sigh, borne more out of exasperation than pleasure, only spurred him on.

She tightened the muscles of her shoulders almost subconsciously, and Abraham laughed, his hand slipping in his drunken clumsiness.

“Why are you always so tense?” he asked.

She shrugged his hands off, tensing even harder when his hands went immediately back to where they were before. “I’m tense because you won’t stop touching me,” she exclaimed, throwing his hands off again. “I told you. I’m busy.”

“Why are you acting like this?” he snapped.

A quiet knock at the door brought another groan to Anna’s lips. “Come in,” she called, watching Abraham’s face closely as their visitor opened the door.

“I came as soon as I got your message,” Mary said, moving immediately toward her boyfriend. Another tall man, one Anna recognized, moved in behind her.
“Robert,” Anna said, giving the newcomer a nod. Abraham’s face hardened at the other man, but he barely spared him a glance before he turned back to Anna.

“You called Mary?” he whispered, betrayed.

“I told you to go home,” Anna replied, making sure that Mary could hear every word she said. “You didn’t want to go because you were drunk, and seeing as I am without a car, I let your girlfriend know so she could collect you. I believe that warrants a ‘thank you.’”

He narrowed his eyes at her, and Anna forced herself to smile. “You’re welcome,” she said to him, patting him on the shoulder.

Mary gave her an almost apologetic smile as she guided Abraham to the door. Anna followed them, if only to make sure the door was locked when they left.

“Anna,” Mary said as Abraham started down the apartment’s stairs with Robert. “Thank you for messaging me. And…I’m sorry that…that he came here.”

She moved to leave, seemingly embarrassed by the conversation, and Anna quickly grabbed her wrist. “I told him not to come here,” she said. “I know that…I know that you don’t like me very much, and I don’t blame you,” she held up her hand as Mary opened her mouth to interrupt her. “Abraham has been my friend, but I do want you to know that. I told him not to come here anymore.”

Mary’s eyes shot up to her at her last word. “Has he been coming here?” she asked.

Anna didn’t have to answer. Mary nodded at her once and let her eyes shift somewhere else. Quietly, demurely as ever, she left.

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Anna made it to their library spot first the next day, nervously rolling her anthropology paper between her hands. It had taken her a long time to get to sleep the night before, and even longer for her to write out the corrections that Hewlett had marked.

She folded the papers flat again, grimacing as the corners curled up, a signal of her anxiety.

“I take it you have something new to show me,” his voice was quiet, almost a whisper, but she jumped regardless.

“Ahh, forgive me,” he apologized quickly, but his apology couldn’t banish the smile on his face. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Anna shifted from her chair to the one beside it, against the wall, and offered her vacated seat to Hewlett, who took it. She placed the papers in front of him, but he watched her instead. A crease of concern sent a wrinkle across his forehead.

“Are you alright?” he asked. “You look…”

“Tired? Stressed?” she chuckled. “Yes, I am. Alright, that is.”

He seemed to find amusement in her stumbling, and suddenly, she understood how he must feel when she smiled at his own stuttering. She felt a blush take over her face, and instead of pointing it out, Hewlett turned to her paper and picked it up, flattening the corner.
When he held out his hand for her pen, Anna had one ready. Their fingers brushed as she passed it on, and in the fluorescent light of the library, she caught the blush that rose on Hewlett’s cheeks.

They sat in silence while he read, occasionally making quiet sounds of approval or disapproval. The sound of his pen scratching on the paper soothed Anna, and she found herself drifting off to sleep. It was a sound of comfort, of progress, but also of criticism, and assistance. It soothed her, knowing that she was finally taking an active role in her life. She had spent so long being a passenger in her own destiny that something as simple as a tutor felt like she was putting her life back in order.

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Selah never came home on time anymore, Anna reflected darkly as she shifted in their bed. His shift at the bar ended at 2 a.m., and it was close to four, and there had been no sign of him. She turned toward the empty side of the bed and reached for his pillow, clutching it tightly against her abdomen, where her stomach should have grown. She let her hand come to rest on the fluffiest part of the pillow, where she wished her stomach had been allowed to extend. But no, James had been taken from her and Selah, before she’d ever had a chance to see his face, to hear his voice. And Selah… Selah seemed to find comfort in taking himself away from Anna as often as he could.

The first sob that shook her body felt like the beginning of a thunderstorm, and she couldn’t stop the storm that slowly sapped the strength of her body until she drifted into a restless sleep.

***

Anna felt her eyes flicker open, her surroundings confusing her at first. She was…in the library, and her head was resting on someone’s shoulder.

“I knew you were tired,” Hewlett’s voice startled her, and she quickly sat up straight, wiping the sleep from her eyes. “Don’t worry, you drifted off for only a few moments.”

“I’m…I’m sorry,” she said, trying to shake the melancholy that hung around her. “I just…had a long night.”

“I can tell,” he said, and the comfort in his voice banished her shame. “Your paper is much improved.”

When she looked up, he was looking at her with a smile that filled his eyes to the brim, and she found herself smiling in return. “Go home and rest. Tomorrow, we will find the sources that will back up your argument. And we can discuss your other classes as well, if you would like for me to do the same thing with them.”

She gathered up her paper, beaming with pride when she noticed far fewer marks on this draft than the last one. Her smile seemed to please him – his grin matched hers when she looked up.

“If you want, I can give you a ride back to wherever you live,” Hewlett offered, grabbing his briefcase, and she could hear the jingle of car keys. “I think it would be far from gentlemanly to let you walk home in the dark.”

Simcoe’s own assertion as to her living arrangements came back to her suddenly. “How did you –?”

He pointed at the lanyard around her neck. “No car key.”

She took it in her hand and pulled nervously. “Oh.”

He furrowed his brows. “I didn’t mean…that is, I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, his face
morphing from his previous hopeful to worried. “I just…I assumed it would be a chore to walk home if you are indeed as tired as you seem to be.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Professor Hewlett—”

“Edmund, please,” he corrected. “At least when we’re alone.”

There was something forbidden about having his first name on her lips; something even more forbidden about knowing that she had to keep his name a secret. She smiled slightly, the notion thrilling.

“Edmund, then,” she said slowly, and his eyes shined at her. “I would be extremely grateful for a ride home.”
Infinite Velocity

Chapter Summary

In which Anna comes home at night with a visitor, and finds an unwelcome one.

Chapter Notes

You guys are amazing, wonderful people. That is all. :)

Anna felt the pressure of bad decisions settle heavily upon her. She trudged up the stairs to her apartment, listening intently for the sound of Hewlett’s – Edmund’s, she corrected herself – footsteps following behind her. She wasn’t sure what prompted her to invite him inside. Perhaps it was the way his eyes shined when she used his first name that did her in. Maybe it was just…the way he made her feel – like she was important, and smart, and worth listening to.

She fumbled with the lock, feeling unexplainable nerves tighten her muscles, making even simple motor skills a hazard. He still hadn’t said anything, content to follow silently behind her. Perhaps he was worried, as she was, that anything he said would break this tentative spell that neither of them wanted to name. She finally swung the door open, and realized as she did so that the living room light was on.

She hadn’t left it that way this morning.

Anna must have made some sound, because Edmund’s presence tightened in behind her; she could almost feel his chest against her back as she froze in the doorway. Her own hand rose from her side and came to rest on Edmund’s arm, tightening on the material of his jacket.

“Nice of you to finally come home,” Abraham was sitting in the living room, his back to Anna. She exhaled loudly, realizing suddenly that Abraham had been in possession of a spare key since she started living in this apartment. “I’ve been here for hours.”

She felt like she was walking into a war zone, stepping into her own apartment with Edmund behind her. She cast a glance back at him, shrugging as his eyes questioned the situation.

Abraham finally turned around, catching sight of someone standing beside Anna. He narrowed his eyes, then raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Professor Hewlett?”

Edmund sighed. “Evening, Mr. Woodhull.”

Abraham turned his gaze to Anna. He struggled with his words, his lips working silently around different expletives that he didn’t settle on. Finally he managed a strangled, “What the hell?”

“Professor Hewlett,” she addressed Edmund carefully, “would you mind waiting for me in my…room?” she hesitated over the word, but as she frantically struggled to come up with another solution, the only other one was for him to leave, and she didn’t want him to leave yet.
“Your room?” he repeated.

She turned her eyes to him. “Straight down the hall. On the left.”

He gulped, his Adam’s apple working hard to manage it, and nodded. She watched him go down the hallway, his curious eyes lingering on the photographs pinned to the wall with thumbtacks and the one Game of Thrones poster she’d added to the door to her room. The decision struck her as incredibly childish now. He cast one more glance over his shoulder as he closed the bedroom door behind him, and Anna hoped she hadn’t left something like her underwear on the floor.

Just the thought made her want to throw herself down the stairs in embarrassment.

But she couldn’t; Abraham was still staring at her like she’d brought in a bloody corpse instead of a professor. She closed the front door and locked it, hanging her apartment key on the hook by the door.

“What the hell is he doing here?” Abraham asked again, trying to keep his voice low so Edmund couldn’t hear him but not really succeeding.

Anna gaped at him incredulously. “Do you really have the nerve to ask that when you’re the one who let yourself into my apartment without asking me first?”

He held out his arms wide, like he was claiming the space. The movement infuriated her. “Anna, I came here to talk to you. About what happened last night.”

She snorted and dropped her bag in the entry by the small pile of her shoes that she often discarded there and forgot about. “I’m surprised you even remember last night.”

He groaned. “Anna, please, could we get serious for a second?”

“Oh, but when I want to get serious, I’m being rude?” she exclaimed. “I’m putting a damper on your party? I’m offending you? And when I come home, to my apartment, and see you in here, even after I expressly told you I didn’t want you to come here anymore, I’m still the one that needs to be chastised?” she didn’t bother lowering her voice this time. She didn’t care if Edmund heard her. “Why don’t you get serious for once?”

“I am serious,” he protested, moving toward her. She immediately retreated, holding up her hands like he was pointing a gun at her. “I came here for a serious conversation, and you have…you brought Professor Hewlett here?”

She growled, low in her throat. “I don’t owe you any sort of explanation.”

“It’s unethical.”

“So is your father telling you about my academic status, but are you going to report him?” she asked, tilting her head like she really wanted to know the answer. “Of course you aren’t; because you have no problem bending or breaking the rules when it applies to you.”

“Mary broke up with me,” he quickly changed tactics, realizing that she wasn’t going to capitulate to his original plan of action. “She knows…about us.”

Anna truly wasn’t surprised; her tone reflected it. “I’m not sure what that has to do with me.”

He moved toward her again, this time taking her hands in his own. “Anna, please. You know that I love you.”
His eyes were full of it, brimming with the love he professed, and she believed him. He had been her best friend since they were both children – he was the man that comforted her when she lost James, when Selah went to jail. He was the man who always stood by her. She had figured that they would fall back together eventually, but not now.

“I love you too,” she admitted quietly. “But I can’t be with you.”

“Can’t or won’t?” he asked, defeat seeping through his voice. “Because it feels like you’re denying something that you want.”

She pulled her hands away from him. “Stop telling me how to feel! You don’t know what I’m dealing with, or what I want. All you know is that it doesn’t line up with what you want. Now, I asked you not to come here anymore, and I stand by it. Go.”

“But –”

“Abe.”

“So I can’t be here, but Hewlett can?” he asked, lowering his voice again.

She sighed. “He’s tutoring me, okay?” she said. “He’s helping me pass my classes, so yes, he can be here. And I’d appreciate it if you kept that to yourself.”

He shook his head at her and stepped around her, grabbing his jacket and tossing it over his shoulder recklessly. Anna watched him go, and as he put his hand on the doorknob, she called out, “And leave my key.”

She hid the key when he finally left, putting it underneath the cushions of her couch, and went to find Edmund. He was sitting, as awkwardly as ever, at the small chair that she had left in her bedroom by pure accident. His briefcase was sitting in his lap.

Anna was suddenly very aware that her room was a mess. Luckily, most of her clothes had been put away the day before, but her bed was a tangle of sheets and blankets, and she could see her turtle pillow pet sticking out from under the bed. A blush colored her cheeks. This was a different atmosphere than the library; it felt decidedly more intimate to be looking at Edmund in the dim light of her lamp in her bedroom, the shadows playing over his face in a way that clouded his expressions but not his feelings. She could see that he felt the stark difference of their power dynamic now. He was in her lion’s den, and for the first time, she had power, if only the power that was given to the vulnerable.

It was surprisingly not as awkward as she’d expected it to be, seeing him sitting in her bedroom like he belonged there. She felt like they’d been friends for a long time already, their friendship unbothered by simple things like her turtle Horseradish’s wrinkled face judging them from under her bed or the fact that she was the type of woman who never made her bed.

“Sorry about that,” she said quietly, and he brought his eyes up to her.

“Don’t be,” he reassured her, standing from his seat. “Abraham is your friend.”

She let out a mirthless laugh that made him look, if possible, even more confused. “Yeah, sure.”

“Well, he did have a key to your apartment,” he noted, and Anna covered her face with her hands. “He’s important to you,” he said simply.

“He is,” she answered. “But he seems to think that he’s the only thing in my life that is important to
me. And that just isn’t true.” She knew he’d heard most of their argument; his face reflected it. There wasn’t anything she’d said in there that she wanted to keep from him, but it felt like she was a zoo animal, and she had revealed something to a faceless scientist behind the glass that would draw a multitude of conclusions from it that weren’t necessarily true.

He was watching her carefully, trying to find the words to say something that he seemed to know she wouldn’t want to hear. She let him struggle through it, knowing that he wouldn’t be satisfied until he said it. Finally, he sighed. “Is he as important to you as your husband?”

She could feel her heartbeat thundering in her chest. “How…?”

“Professor Simcoe came to see me,” he explained quietly. “He uh…he mentioned that you’re married.”

She exhaled loudly, collapsing onto her bed. “It’s not any of your business,” she said sharply.

“Of course,” he answered calmly, but she could feel the anxiety lurking just behind it. “But you can always talk to me, if you want.”

“I don’t,” she snapped. “He’s my husband in name only.”

He nodded and didn’t speak again for a long time. She could feel frustration lingering at the edges of her vision, masquerading as anxiety. It was such a thin line for her, most of the time, that frustration, anger faded into anxiety and panic. She struggled to keep that in check. She wouldn’t let Edmund see that. Not now.

After a few minutes, his hand reached across the great divide of her room and settled on hers. She looked up at him, and he looked, if possible, as anxious as she felt.

“I’m sorry that I mentioned it,” he said quietly.

She turned her hand over so their palms were brushing, and tightened her grip on his hand. “Let’s forget it was ever mentioned.”

She released his hand and let him follow her into the living room, where she put in the first disc of Firefly and leaned back into her couch to watch. Her obsession with the show was not something she advertised – the show had only lasted a season and many people thought that was a hilarious point to make – but the space western brought her some indeterminable peace that distance often did.

He watched it in awe, his smile soft and childish. “How have I never seen this?” he asked quietly.

She chuckled at his reverence. “You’re British,” she said simply. “Don’t you guys all just watch Sherlock?”

He looked scandalized. “We watch many things other than Sherlock, thank you very much.”

She let her nerves exit through her laughter. He smiled at the sound. “And yet you’ve never heard of Firefly.”

“I admit, I’m upset I’ve never seen it,” he agreed. “I love space.”

“I know,” she said quietly. “That’s why I picked it.”

She felt his eyes on her, but refused to look back; instead, she focused on the show, and smiled when he did the same. After the first episode, he leaned over to her and said, “You know, I can’t decide if
you remind me more of Zoe or Inara.”

She chuckled. “Zoe was always my favorite, but I think I’m probably more like Inara.”

He nodded in approval and turned his attention back to the television.

Hours later, Anna woke up with her head resting softly on a pillow that was sitting on Edmund’s lap. She glanced up at him and smiled. His mouth was slightly open, but his eyes were closed. His eyelashes were splayed across his cheek like feathers, his hand resting gently on her back. He had to have put the pillow down so she would be more comfortable, and had gotten himself stuck on the couch in the process. The notion tickled her more than she cared to admit, and she found herself shaking with suppressed, giddy laughter. Her mirth eventually shook him awake, and Anna was graced with a moment of pure bewilderment on Edmund’s face before he realized where he was.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” she greeted, and his bleary eyes landed on her. A soft, quiet smile took over his face, and the tenderness there took her by surprise.

“You’re the…I should say, you fell asleep first,” he defended, trying not to yawn. “I just didn’t want to wake you up.” He glanced at the watch on his wrist, trying to decipher the time. The Firefly disc had ended, and was playing the menu music on repeat. Anna fumbled for the remote and turned it off, bathing the entire room in darkness.

She felt Edmund freeze beside her, and patted his arm reassuringly. She rose from her spot on the couch and went to the light and flicked it on, relishing in the sheer terror that the change in lighting brought out of Edmund, the distinguished law professor. He cowered, actually cowered, against the light, covering his eyes like it would blind him.

Her laughter coaxed out his own.

“I suppose I should go,” he said, rising from his spot on the couch and straightening his jacket, already hopelessly wrinkled from his lounging.

She felt an unexplained disappointment spread through her, but ignored it. She nodded at him and led him to the front door, where he lingered for a few moments. She couldn’t help but feel like they were at the end of their awkward first date. To put an end to their standoff, she wrapped her arms around his waist in a hug that he eagerly returned.

It was weird, hugging someone that would be standing in front of a class in a matter of hours while she sat in the desks – but they were both so much more than their occupations. She ignored the societal pressures that had been ingrained in her since she was young. Edmund was, by her guess, only in his early thirties. She was twenty-two. Not a large gap, especially for adults.

She wondered, with a jolt, why she was rationalizing a hug.

She watched him descend the stairs, smiling at him even wider when he paused at the bottom and looked back up at her. She closed the door to her apartment and locked it. She allowed herself the cliché moment of leaning against the door and wondering what she was feeling.

Giddiness, that’s what it was.

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“You have to talk some sense into him,” Anna pleaded, letting her eyes flicker between both Caleb and Ben, who were staring at her not unlike a pair of disapproving parents. “He showed up at my apartment, without telling me.”
Caleb shrugged. “He’s done that before.”

“And he refused to leave,” Anna implored. “I have asked, repeatedly, for space.”

Ben lowered his head to his hands and left it there. “He’s not in a good place right now, Anna. Mary broke up with him, and now you want nothing to do with him? I don’t think an intervention is going to help right now.”

Anna huffed. “I didn’t say I didn’t want anything to do with him. I just said I didn’t want to be with him.”

“Which is essentially the same thing to Abe,” Caleb pointed out. “You’ve always been more than a friend to him.”

“Well he needs to get over it,” Anna snapped. “I want to be his friend, but that’s it.”

“Then give him space,” Ben reasoned. “You took his key away, so he can’t get into your apartment anymore. Do what you wanted: stick to your plans, do better in your classes, and let Abe realize that he’d rather have you as just a friend rather than lose you completely.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Anna asked, her voice quiet. As annoying as Abraham had been lately, he was still her oldest friend. They shared too much of their lives to cut each other out now. No matter how stubborn Anna could be, the idea of losing Abe forever was still a terrifying thought.

“He will,” Caleb said confidently.

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Edmund found that he had a crick in his neck the next morning from falling asleep on Anna’s couch. He squeezed the offending tendon between his hands as he got dressed the next morning, but couldn’t bring himself to regret the act of sleeping on her couch.

When he realized she was asleep, her breathing quietly evening out, he noticed that she had slipped sideways once more, her head just barely resting on his shoulder. But that put her neck at a severe angle, and even looking at it made him uncomfortable.

So he had carefully…very carefully…taken a pillow from beside him and placed it on his lap, just over his thigh, and guided the sleeping woman to it, gently petting her dark hair that threatened to block his view of her peaceful face.

He watched the next couple of episodes of Firefly avidly, his hand mindlessly running itself through her long hair, and smiled as she seemed to fall into deeper sleep. She shifted in the middle of her dream, her free hand coming to rest under the pillow, just above his knee, and he tensed, feeling his hand stop in her hair.

She groaned, a tiny, quiet sound, and he resumed his petting.

He had fallen asleep that way, his own head tilted much like hers had been at the beginning, and slept more peacefully than he had since he left England.

That is, until he felt her move beside him, the hand that was resting on his thigh riding dangerously high as she pushed herself into a sitting position. He pretended to be asleep, if only to keep his facial expressions in check, but her hand stayed there, high on his thigh, and he wondered if she knew he was awake.
The damned minx, he thought ruefully.

He finally decided to stir, relishing in the laugh that she gave him at his sleepy face, and found that she was, if possible, even more beautiful when she just woke up. Her hair was a mess, but he could see the tracks his fingers had made in it, and admired his work.

It was intoxicating, seeing her like that.

He had been surprised when she hugged him; around the middle, like she was seeking comfort. He allowed himself to melt into her embrace, petting her dark, luxurious hair one more time before he pulled away.

He glanced back at her before he crossed underneath the awning to the parking lot. She was watching him, like some dark angel of the heavens, and he felt, once more, infinite.
March 23

Chapter Summary

March 23 is the day that Anna dreads every year - and her friends promised that she'd never have to spend it alone.

Chapter Notes

A note before I begin: You’ll notice that this chapter isn’t the name of a “class” or a “lesson,” which is the trope I’ve been using for chapter titles. That’s because this chapter is different. I’ve been looking for the right time to do this, and it will feel like a departure from the usual tone of the fic, but this particular part is something I felt deserved its own chapter. You’ll also notice a slightly different writing style - that is by design.

There is a depression, anxiety, death of a child, loss content warning, and a hint of self-harm as a passing mention. Either way, if any of those things trigger you, you might want to skip this chapter.

The morning of March 23 dawned with rain on the horizon, and Anna considered for a long time not leaving the warmth of her bed. She had felt the sneaking presence of depression looming above her as the month of March continued, marred only by her tutoring sessions with Edmund, which often ended in her showing him some movie or television show he had not been exposed to in England. It was her way of paying him for his time, she reasoned, and they had graduated to often bringing takeout food back to her apartment and eating it while he looked at her papers, followed by the ease of television.

Abraham hadn’t spoken to her in almost a month, but Mary hadn’t spoken to him either, so Anna figured their relationship would either fall back together eventually or just stagnate where they were, stuck in this awkward limbo that he refused to acknowledge.

Ben and Caleb hadn’t changed, that much she was grateful for.

She rolled over, her mind lingering on the day, and felt tears welling in her eyes. She sighed and let them flow, knowing there was nothing she could do to stop them today. She rolled over in her bed and faced the wall, hugging Horseradish close to her.

A knock at her door forced her to get out of bed. She grumbled the whole way over there, her shoulders stooped.

Ben and Caleb were at the door, holding a bag of something greasy and coffee cups. They both gave her bracing smiles and embraced her, holding her longer when she dissolved into heavier tears.

“We promised,” Ben said when she asked why they were there, “that you would never have to spend this day alone.”
Caleb nodded and opened the bag, revealing donuts, croissants, and an assortment of other pastries. “We brought food and coffee, and we have movies to last the whole day,” he said, motioning to his backpack. “All silly comedies. What do you want first? We Are The Millers? Yes Man? Tammy? We have it all.”

Anna allowed a small smile to sneak over her face, but it was chased away almost immediately by her melancholy. Her friends moved into the kitchen, where they busied themselves opening and closing various cabinets without much luck finding plates, until Anna had to point out that she had paper plates on top of the refrigerator.

“Don’t you guys have class today?” she asked quietly as she moved toward the couch without food or her coffee.

Ben, noticing her movement, grabbed a plate and put a donut, a chocolate croissant, and a kolache on it. He set it on the floor in front of the couch, and placed the coffee beside it. He wrapped her in the blanket she left strewn over the back of the couch. It smelled like Edmund’s cologne.

“Not on March 23,” Caleb piped up.

“James would have been three today,” Anna said softly, feeling tears on her face again. Caleb, in his infinite loudness, went silent. Ben glanced back up at his best friend, hoping that he would have something, anything that could cheer her up. But Caleb looked just as lost as Ben felt. Both of them felt useless in this situation; their interactions with Anna, their friendship, was often predicated in her wild recklessness, not tears. Anna did not often cry out of sadness, just anger.

A quiet knock startled all three of them. Anna quickly wiped her eyes and made to get up to answer it. Her movement almost upset her cup of coffee.

“I’ll get it,” Ben said, holding out his hand. She settled back into the couch, her eyes staring past the television without really looking. Ben spared her one more glance before he went to the door.

Abe was staring at his hands when he opened it, as if he was expecting to get reprimanded immediately.

“What are you doing here?” Ben asked.

“It’s March 23,” he said simply, and nodded toward inside. Ben considered him for a long moment before he decided his motives were pure and moved aside. Abe slipped his shoes off in the entry and took his place beside Anna on the couch, holding out his arms for her to fall into. She stared at his face, trying to remain impassive. The standoff held for a few moments before she hugged him close and dissolved into sobs.

They let Abe and Anna stay that way for a while, Anna sobbing inconsolably and Abraham whispering words of comfort into her hair, and watched like outsiders. This was the first year that Anna had even opened the door when Ben and Caleb came calling. The other two years she had spent with only Abe, and from what he told the two of them, she spent most of it crying and sleeping intermittently. She didn’t want to remember that March 23 existed.

And while Abe always professed that he spent most of the day feeling useless, he never let her have alcohol, he never left her alone, and he never let her do anything that could harm herself.

“Happy birthday, James Strong,” she finally said when her tears abated. Abraham released her from his arms and surveyed her face.

“Happy birthday, James Strong,” the rest of them said.
Abe rose from the couch and poured Anna a glass of water, watching her closely while she drank it. “How do you feel?” he asked gently. She watched him over the rim of the glass, her brown eyes large and rimmed with red. “More?”

She nodded and passed the glass back to him. He refilled it and brought it back and repeated the previous interaction. Ben nodded toward the coffee. She took it between her hands and let the cardboard warm her fingers.

“How do you feel?” he asked gently. She watched him over the rim of the glass, her brown eyes large and rimmed with red. “More?”

She nodded and passed the glass back to him. He refilled it and brought it back and repeated the previous interaction. Ben nodded toward the coffee. She took it between her hands and let the cardboard warm her fingers.

“Do you want to call Selah?” Abraham asked, wincing when her eyes filled with tears almost immediately. He hugged her close again. “Okay, okay, we don’t have to call him.”

“He left… he left me… alone,” she said between hiccups.

Abraham exchanged looks with Ben and Caleb. All three of them were, once again, at a loss, as often people are when others are dealing with grief they can’t feel as keenly. Caleb shrugged and took Abe’s seat beside Anna, taking her face in his hands.

“What do you want us to do, Annie?” he asked, and for once his voice held no humor at all. “Anything you want, we will do.”

She shook her head. “Nothing,” she remarked quietly. “There’s nothing to do.”

Caleb, defeated, returned to Ben and Abraham. Ben, with a look that plainly said it was his turn, moved into the living room and put Yes Man into the DVD player and pressed play. Anna, soon, was sleeping soundly on the couch, her head burrowed into her turtle pillow pet that Abraham quickly fetched for her.

“We haven’t seen you for a while,” Ben said to Abe, their voices hushed while Anna slept. “How have you been?”

Abraham shrugged. “Mary still won’t speak to me. She’s dating Robert Townsend now.”

“Saw that coming,” Caleb commented. Abraham glared at him, but he pretended he didn’t see.

“And Anna?” Abraham asked. Ben raised his eyebrows at him. “I just want to know how she is.”

“Her grades are getting better,” Ben said evenly. “So she feels a little less pressured. Simcoe still tries to get her to declare an anthropology major, but she’s gotten pretty adept at avoiding him.”

“And her… tutor?” Abe asked, his face a mask of indifference.

“Don’t,” Caleb warned. “Don’t start talking about him.”

“What, why?” Abraham asked, clearly latching onto something that could give him information.

“Because the poor bastard is helping Annie become a better writer, he doesn’t need any more shit,” Caleb said with a laugh. “And we all know that you think every man that looks at Anna is trying to steal her from you.”

“Most of the time, they are,” Abe pointed out.

Caleb tutted. “You can’t own women. They can’t be stolen. They aren’t a horse. Or your dignity.”

Abraham held up his hands in surrender. “Fine, let’s talk about something else.”

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Ten minutes after six thirty, Edmund stood from his and Anna’s spot in the library and looked around for his companion. They had spent almost as much time in the library as they did at her apartment, and she had expressed a few days ago that she would meet him here at six thirty. She was never late before.

The blossoming of their friendship was the saving grace of Edmund’s adventures in America. He missed his mother, he missed his horse, he missed his telescope, still marooned in England. But Anna’s friendship occupied him with mirth he thought he’d never feel here, and he felt increasingly at home beside her.

His own meetings with Richard Woodhull and other professors like Andre and Simcoe had almost poisoned him to the academic process. Simcoe seemed content to consistently rule with fear, shock, and awe rather than educate his students, Andre had no problem spending weeks at a time going completely off topic, and Richard Woodhull took as much interest in the lives of students as he did in his employees.

All in all, the faculty acted as much as children as some of the students did, except they professed to be better than the students.

Perhaps that was just how academia worked, but Edmund couldn’t understand the elitism of the departments that were supposed to be grooming the next batch of leaders. It was almost as if they didn’t even like the students; much less want them to succeed. They took too much pleasure in their failures, in their panic.

Twenty minutes past their meeting time. Edmund pursed his lips. Had Anna forgotten?

He occupied his time surveying the shelves of the non-fiction section, a section he had woefully left alone since his first foray into the library over a month ago. Although, he thought with a smile, he traded reading for a friendship, and that he couldn’t truly be sorry about.

Could he really feel sorry that he left Mary, Queen of Scots’s world behind so that he could learn that Anna’s smile differed based on who had brought it about? Could he really mourn for someone like Roosevelt when he was too busy looking at the way Anna’s hands tightened around Horseradish whenever Malcolm Reynolds was in trouble? Did he really want to trade Charlemagne for Anna’s quiet confessions in the dead of night, when their eyes were so tired they couldn’t hold them open?

It was seven, and Anna was nowhere to be seen. Edmund had to admit to himself that she wasn’t coming. He thought about what could have kept her as he meandered his way down to his car. She could have gotten held up somewhere, but she had told him her last class ended at two those afternoons. Their meetings were habit now – she wouldn’t have just forgotten.

He sat in his car and considered his options. He could pretend that he wasn’t worried, or bothered by her lack of presence, but on the other hand, he could swing by her apartment and see if she was okay.

Five minutes later, he was sitting in the parking lot of her apartment complex and trying to work up the courage to go upstairs.

He could hear the television through the door when he made it to the top of the stairs. He almost sighed in relief. At least she was safe. He knocked confidently on the door, already trying to figure out how he would tease her for forgetting.

That is, until Abraham Woodhull opened the door.
“Professor Hewlett,” he said, his voice devoid of emotion.

“Mr. Woodhull,” he answered. “Is…Miss Strong here?”

“Now isn’t really a good time,” Abe said, practically closing the door on him. Edmund held out his hand and stopped the door before it could close.

“She was supposed to meet me at the library half an hour ago,” he said. “I just want to know that she’s okay.”

Another male’s voice rang out from behind Abraham. “Let him in, he might be able to help.”

Edmund practically shoved the door open. “Help? Help with what?”

The shorter man Edmund had seen with Anna that first night at the bar was sitting at the dining room table, flanked by the man that Edmund had seen dancing with Anna. He vaguely recognized them from the pictures that Anna hung all over the apartment.

“Um,” the bearded one trailed off.

“Is she okay?” Edmund asked, almost ashamed at the amount of concern in his voice. The taller one smiled at the sound.

“I’m fine,” Anna’s voice was a welcome change to the male tenor that had filled the apartment. He moved deeper into the apartment, into the living room, and found Anna wrapped in a blanket, hugging Horseradish, staring at the television screen without really seeing it. Her eyes were puffy, swollen, and he was pretty sure the little blood vessels in her eyelids were broken.

He rushed to her side, ignoring the way Abraham moved almost protectively closer to the couch as he did. He reached for her hand, and settled for placing his hand over one of the blankets she was cocooned in. “What’s wrong, what happened?” he asked worriedly, searching her face for clues.

“I’m sorry I forgot,” she answered, hardly looking at him. “I didn’t realize what the date was.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” he immediately said, hoping she’d say more.

Behind him, he heard the other men talking amongst themselves. By the time he looked away from Anna, they were moving toward the other room, giving Anna and Edmund some semblance of privacy.

“What’s the date?” Edmund asked, trying to prompt Anna into speaking.

Her eyes finally fell to his, and he was taken aback with the lack of fire he found in them. He reached for her hands again, and this time, she untangled them from the blankets and took his hands in hers.

“March 23,” she said quietly, and he was alarmed to see tears in her eyes again.

One fell free, and he gently wiped it away with his thumb. “I don’t know what that means,” he admitted quietly. “But I don’t want it to make you sad.”

“How is James’s birthday,” she clarified, but the name was unfamiliar to Edmund.

“Well, happy birthday, James,” he answered slowly, “but why should that make you sad?”

“Because he’s dead,” she spat, her face contorting in anger for a moment before it returned to
sadness. The tears fell in earnest now, and she didn’t even blink to clear them. Edmund sighed and shifted in his seat, trying to figure out what to do next.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally. “I don’t really know what to say.”

“Me neither,” she shrugged. “Don’t feel bad.”

She cuddled into his side, letting Horseradish pillow her head as she laid it across Edmund’s thigh. He ran his fingers through her hair, making sure that every tear that escaped from the eye he could see was soon wiped away by his finger.

“Who was James?” he finally asked. “If you want to say.”

She was suddenly crying harder, like the words brought her a new wave of grief. Edmund pulled her upright and onto his lap, so her face was cradled in his neck. She clung to him, her arms around his neck and shoulders, and he could feel the dampness of her tears soaking through his jacket and shirt.

Finally, long after Edmund had forgotten that he asked her a question, she answered it. “James was supposed to be my son.”

Edmund froze in the act of pulling her long hair out from between their bodies so he wouldn’t pull her hair. He wasn’t sure how he was supposed to react.

“I got married when I was 18 years old because I got pregnant. And Selah and I could have been happy…but I lost him. I lost our James. And then Selah lost me. March 23 was supposed to be my due date. This would have been his birthday.”

The story wasn’t particularly detailed, but tragedies never needed to be long. Edmund held her as close as he could while she cried anew, her voice raspy and broken from all of her weeping. After a few minutes, the taller man appeared from the hallway and leaned against the doorway. Edmund felt momentarily caught, but as Anna’s hand tightened around his neck, he realized he didn’t care. Not today.

“That’s the most she’s said all day,” he remarked. “Ben,” he said, pointing to himself. “The other one’s Caleb.” He did a vague motion to his face that indicated a beard.

“Edmund Hewlett,” he replied. They didn’t shake hands.

Anna’s cries had subsided somewhat, and Edmund was pleased to see her look around at Ben, trying to follow their short conversation. They fell silent at her movement, and Edmund was startled when he felt the rumbling of her stomach against his side.

“Have you eaten today?” he asked, and she turned to him; they were so close their noses were almost brushing. He blinked, trying not to blush in front of her friend.

She shook her head ruefully, and he smirked at her. “I thought we discussed that food is good, even when, and especially when, you are busy or sad. Want me to order your favorite?”

She didn’t answer him, but he wasn’t really asking for her permission. He nudged her off of him and pulled his phone out of his pocket. Ben had retreated to the entry.

“She won’t let us make her any food,” he confided in Edmund. “We’ve tried.”

Edmund frowned. “Let me try, and then we will commiserate with what she doesn’t eat.” He dialed
a number into his phone and spoke quickly with someone with a heavy accent on the other line. When he hung up, Ben watched as he slipped his phone back into his pocket and went, unafraid and confident, into the living room. He watched as Edmund Hewlett took Tammy out of the DVD player and replaced it with Firefly.

“Our Mrs. Reynolds should make you feel a little better,” he said sunnily to Anna, who hardly responded. “And if it doesn’t, at least it’ll put you to sleep.”

Ben watched as Edmund walked into the kitchen and pulled a glass out of the cabinet without having to rummage and filled it with water. He took it back to her and passed it to her silently asking hands. When she finished it, he refilled it halfway and brought it back.

“Not too fast,” he warned. “It’ll make you sick.”

Twenty minutes later, he was answering a knock at the door and carrying in a veritable feast of food into the living room. He set a Styrofoam box of rice and chicken in front of Anna with a fork sticking out of it and brought a stack back to Ben.

“I got some for everyone,” he said with a shrug. “It’s Indian food. You’re welcome to watch television with us. She seems a little better now.”

And Ben had to admit, she did. She ate very little, but she did eat without prompting, and she drank another two glasses of water before she slipped into a restless sleep, her hand tangled in Edmund’s.

Abraham refused to look in their direction, but he clapped Edmund on the back before he left. “Thank you, for what you’ve done for her,” he said. Edmund gave him a single nod.

When he and Anna were finally alone, he watched her peacefully sleeping face carefully. He could still see the traces of her grief in the slight lines of her face. When he felt sleep tugging at his own eyes, he scooped her up into his arms and very gently carried her back to her bed. He tucked her in, resisting the urge to kiss the top of her head, and settled in to sleep on the couch.

If her grief made a comeback in the middle of the night, he would be there.

It was only right; she had chased away his own homesickness, his own form of grief. She deserved to have someone willing to do the same thing for her.
Psychology 102: Avoidance

Chapter Summary

In which Anna and Edmund both question what their possible relationship would mean for their futures, and one decides it isn't worth it, while the other decides the opposite.

Chapter Notes

The next chapter will take place immediately after the end of this one. Consider this a part one of two.

Anna woke in the middle of the night, her eyes sore and all too comfortable remaining closed. She stayed in her bed, her eyes half-closed, and examined the streams of moonlight coming through her window. The day, the day, had become a blur of stinging tears and an ache that permeated her entire body. But it was over now – she breathed a quiet sigh of relief. She had survived another March 23. Just thinking about the ordeal made her feel some strange sense of pride in herself.

It took a few minutes for her to realize that she hadn’t fallen asleep in her bed. She glanced around the room, finally wrenching her tired eyes open all the way. Her head felt heavy, full of the tears she’d shed. She groaned and held her head between the temples, rubbing the soft skin there tentatively.

Water, she thought decisively. Water will help.

She padded quietly into the kitchen and filled her cup, left beside the sink. She considered its position curiously for a few moments. She never left her cup like that. With a shrug, she filled it with water and sipped quietly.

The sound of someone breathing almost made her drop her cup. She squinted into the liquid darkness and tried to make out the form of someone asleep on her couch; her tiny, uncomfortable couch.

Edmund.

A small smile graced her lips. So he had stayed after all. His methods of consolation had surprised her. The Edmund she was used to was constantly asking questions, making sure he had her approval whenever he did something that directly affected her. But last night, Edmund hadn’t offered up a question once if she approved or not. He ordered her food, placed it before her with a fork sticking out of it, and told her what she was going to watch, eat, and drink. At the time, when grief was weighing her down so heavily and the song of death was singing loudly in the hallways of her mind, she was incapable of making decisions.

She didn’t know what she wanted, or felt, or needed. So she listened to him.

She moved quietly into the living room, her movements silent on the plush carpet. She kneeled in front of sleeping Edmund and gently rested her hand on the side of his face. She wondered, briefly,
what Selah would think if he could see her now. Her previous relationships, with Abe, Selah, and the few boys she’d dated in high school and middle school that she’d all but forgotten now, were all feats of high passion – immediate, fleeting, strong.

She didn’t feel like that with Edmund. Could their friendship be even considered a relationship? They spent a lot of time together, to be sure, and they certainly came into physical contact more often than strictly necessary. And there was just something about the way he looked at her – with pride, with curiosity, with something close to adoration, that filled her chest with a delicious pain.

She gently let her hand ruffle his short hair, relishing in the quiet sound he made.

They had known each other over a month already, but to Anna, it felt like they had known each other and simply forgotten, only to meet again later, when they were both different people. There was something infinitely familiar about his kind soul, about his soft, large heart.

But even despite all of that, despite the thundering in her heart when his sleeping hand caught hers and pulled it close to his chest – he was a teacher, she a student. Their relationship, if she could call it that, could get him fired. Could ruin her reputation, not that the reputation part chapped that much.

She tightened her hold around his hand, and felt him stir. She considered, just for a moment, sneaking back to her room, but couldn’t bring herself to let go of his hand. His eyes fluttered open slowly, and Anna was struck once again by his eyelashes, the unfathomable darkness in his eyes that was somehow contradicted by the lightness of his soul.

“Anna…?” he mumbled quietly, releasing her hand to rub his eyes.

“You’re on my couch,” she pointed out softly, leaning her chin on her arm, putting her face close to his. He seemed momentarily lost in her close proximity, and sighed quietly before he allowed himself to speak.

“I wanted to make sure someone was here if you needed something,” he said. “Do you? Need something?”

She smiled at him, still charmed by his quiet sleepiness. “I do need something, actually.”

He immediately moved to sit up. “What is it?”

“I need you to follow me,” she held out her hand in the dark, and he stared at it, trying to figure out what she could possibly need.

As the silence stretched and he didn’t take her hand, she stepped closer to him. “Don’t you trust me?”

His hand landed in hers immediately after. She gently tugged him behind her, taking him past the front door, past the hallway, and into her bedroom. She pointed to her messy bed. “Get in.”

His eyes immediately rose to hers, questions lingering there. He was being cautious again, now that her grief wasn’t at the forefront. He didn’t want to break any unspoken rules.

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“You slept on my tiny, cramped couch for hours,” she explained. “Get in the bed.”

He still hesitated, and she sighed heavily. “Don’t make me push you in.”

“I don’t want to…make you uncomfortable,” he said softly. She went to his side, placing her hand gently over his heart. It was pounding.
“I’m telling you,” she said firmly. “Get in the bed. This is what I need.”

He didn’t seem to have any argument that he could articulate, and after another few moments of hesitation, he eased himself between the sheets, settling comfortably against the pillows. She slid in beside him, and faced him. His eyes were open, drinking in her face for signs of uneasiness.

She let her gaze fall to his lips for only a moment. Did she dare? They had, as far as she could tell, already crossed several lines of propriety. But did she want to consummate it, even with something as chaste as a kiss? He seemed to notice where her gaze was. She watched as his tongue darted out to wet his lips, and she clenched her jaw tightly. She felt him start to move and his hand landed softly, sweetly, on her cheek. Her eyes jumped to his – his eyes were locked onto her mouth.

But, she thought, if she kissed him, in her bed, in the middle of the night, would she be able to stop? Or would it be too easy to blame it on the day, on her frayed nerves, and on her raw feelings?

She took his hand from her face and held it in her own. The spell was broken.

His eyes were starting to drift closed again, and she filed the question away for another time. She scooted closer to him, laying her head on his arm. His eyes, already closed, stayed that way, but his arm snaked around her and pulled her closer to him, so her nose was barely touching his neck.

She felt him sigh contentedly, and let the sound of his breathing lure her to sleep.

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He was gone when she woke up the next morning, and she felt a sharp pang of disappointment until she found the note he left her on the bathroom mirror. “Class at 8 a.m.,” it read in his neat handwriting. “You looked too peaceful to wake up.”

She gently pulled it free of the glass and placed it on top of the middle drawer, where she kept hair clips and bobby pins. She couldn’t place why she decided to keep it, but it made her smile, knowing it was there. It lingered in her mind as she ate breakfast (a Poptart that she couldn’t find the energy to toast) and drank her coffee (with a little too much cream).

Would things between them be different now, she wondered? Or would they continue on much as they had before, their silence making their slide toward intimacy a much longer fall? Still, the question from the night before lingered: if what she felt for him was certainly something more than friendship, more than simply a closeness borne out of constant contact, how would that affect his job? Her education? His reputation?

Hers was already in tatters, and while that bothered her in reference to his own shiny blank slate, it didn’t truly mean much to her. But if she were honest with herself, having her by his side, in whatever capacity, would not help his standing at Setauket University. With Richard Woodhull as provost, it would keep him from advancing socially and academically. It would hinder his great mind.

She couldn’t bear that.

No, their relationship must remain professional, if not for his sake, then for her own conscience.

Saying the words to herself did not pose too much difficulty, but she knew that once she saw him, once she let the memory of his arm around her rise to the surface of her mind, the words wouldn’t mean much. In the wake of that smile he gave her when she used his first name, her own declarations would mean very little.
She sighed, letting her head fall to her hands.

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Edmund tapped his fingers idly by his keyboard. He should feel exhausted; truly, his body was aching and his neck was probably stiff, but his mind was working overtime. He had dreamt, hoped, of the day that he might be able to share a bed with Anna Strong, though admittedly only some of those fantasies were as chaste as his reality, but the fact that she had offered that intimate space to share with him, that she had basically ordered him to accept it – it was invigorating.

Still, he wondered if this was all some cruel joke, if he dreamed it all. But he remembered, with a vividness that was sure to last the test of time, the way her hair was strewn over his chest when he woke up, how she was turned away from him, her bare neck just barely visible beneath the curtain of dark hair. He remembered how he struggled to get out of her embrace without waking her.

He remembered her face, both in the dark and the next morning. He would never forget, no, he would curse himself if he ever lost this memory, how her eyes dropped to his mouth in the darkness. The moonlight provided him just enough visibility to see the telltale movement of her eyelashes, and he felt his stomach tighten in anticipation.

The air was almost suffocating with the static her gaze provided him, and he felt rather than saw her lean almost imperceptibly in before she hesitated. He should have, should have closed the distance between their mouths, but he couldn’t bring himself to do what he would later consider taking advantage of someone who was still reeling from tragedy. Their first kiss, if they got one, would not be tainted with that.

But still, he felt foreboding deep in his chest, where he knew, without any sort of bias, that what they were doing would get them into trouble.

Truthfully, however, he hardly cared. Not when he had the image of her jaw, shadowed by the moon, and the smell of her hair and feel of her skin in his mind. That was his own illness – his own taking. She was dangerous, and infinitely more deadly all for her obliviousness.

A knock at his doorframe shook him free of his memories; he felt his face warm as if the intruder could hear his thoughts. It was Baker, grinning at his expression.

“How can I help you?” he asked, sitting up a little straighter in his chair.

Baker waved off his professionalism. “Just came to inform you that the department is planning on going out for drinks tonight, and Woodhull is demanding your presence. He says you’ve turned him down too many times already.”

Edmund pursed his lips in thought. “Ah. Yes, well, I daresay I should be free tonight,” he said pensively. “Sounds like a plan.”

Baker tapped the doorframe twice with the palm of his hand and left, leaving Edmund alone with his thoughts once more. He didn’t have any plans with Anna tonight, which meant she might actually be at the bar when he was. The thought of the sneaky looks they could send each other sent a thrill through him.

He smirked and shook his computer mouse awake.

***
“Annie, I thought you didn’t want to go to the bar anymore,” Caleb pointed out as Anna’s hand closed over his arm and yanked him toward the door.

She ignored him. She didn’t, truly, want to go to the bar anymore – it offered her the opportunity to forget that she had homework to do, it gave her the alcohol necessary to make bad decisions, and she really didn’t need any more of those. But she had resigned herself, just this morning, to distancing herself from Edmund for the sake of his professional status, and the man seemed to sense that she had decided to do something he wouldn’t be fond of, because he had called her three times today.

She had ignored all three of them. He was probably only calling to check on her, or to reschedule their tutoring session that she had missed the day before, but she knew that if she heard his voice, if he asked her something thoughtful, she would be right back where she started. So no, she’d asked Ben, Caleb, and, reluctantly, Abraham, to meet her at the bar so they could drink.

And she intended to turn her phone off while she did it.

Ben and Abraham were already at the bar, holding beers. Ben offered Anna the seat beside him, which she gratefully took. The bartender hardly had to make eye contact with her before he was pouring her a glass of vodka and lemonade. She had been here enough, talked with the bartender enough, that he knew what she wanted and when.

It was probably the most stable relationship she had.

“How do you feel?” Abraham asked her, his eyes concerned. She could see just a hint of his former resentment there, but she was grateful he’d momentarily forgotten it. “Better?”

She shrugged. “As better as I can be, I suppose.”

He nodded, as if he’d expected that answer.

“And Mary?” she asked. He turned back to her, and she wished immediately that she hadn’t asked. His eyes were searching her face, looking for some hidden hint, a secret message that betrayed that she was, in fact, interested in dating him again. She struggled to keep her face impassive.

“Still with Robert Townsend?” Caleb laughed into the silence. “I’m amazed that she went from our dear sweet Abe to the most elitist and uptight history major.”

Abraham’s eyes left hers; Anna breathed a sigh of relief.

“She’s still with Townsend,” Abe confirmed.

Anna took a long drink from her glass and had to flinch away from the ice that almost assaulted her face. She turned her attention to Ben, who was looking out at the crowd. “You’re quiet,” she remarked.

He shrugged. “Aren’t I always?”

She leaned onto his arm and blinked her eyes up at him. “What’s wrong with you, Ben?” she asked. “You can tell me.”

His eyes flickered over to Abe for just a moment, and Anna understood. She kept her head on his shoulder but fixed her gaze forward, away from Ben’s face. She had always known that Ben was particularly protective of his friends, but he was always a perpetrator of goodness – Abe’s dishonesty when it came to Mary and Anna had pushed his morality to the point of break, especially when he felt compelled to keep it to himself.
Knowing now, that Abraham was acting like Mary leaving him made him a victim irritated him to no end. And knowing that Anna had invited him back into the fold, when the other two were leaving that decision up to her out of respect, had to annoy him just as much.

“He’ll figure out what he wants eventually,” she said quietly. “And if both of us have already decided that we don’t want him, he’ll have to grow up. Right?”

He shrugged, lifting her head with it. “We can only hope.”

“Annie, isn’t that your friend?” Caleb asked loudly, a teasing lilt to his voice. “The nerdy one?”

Anna felt coldness land in her stomach; she didn’t have to turn around to know Caleb had spotted Edmund. What was the probability that he would be at the bar that neither of them frequented on the same night? Ben was looking down at her now, his eyes quizzical. She avoided them. He could read eyes like books – she didn’t want to know what he’d find in hers.

“Don’t you want to say hi?” he asked quietly.

“Nope,” she replied immediately. “Especially if he’s here with other professors.”

Ben exhaled knowingly. “Well, would you like to dance, then?” he asked as an upbeat song started up. “That’ll take your mind off of it.”

She let him take her hand and lead her to the dance floor, but she couldn’t stop her eyes from rising to the table where she knew Edmund would be sitting. His eyes were surreptitiously following her.

Their eyes met – and Anna could already feel her resolve crumbling.

She could see the breathlessness in his gaze, the way he had been looking at her last night, when she was considering kissing him in the dark. She was suddenly forcibly reminded of his hand on her back, his large hands splayed across the expanse of her shoulder blades. Her nose in his neck, breathing in the scent of his expensive shirt and just a hint of his cologne.

His eyes left hers and he turned to someone, who had caught his attention. Anna followed his gaze, and felt her legs turn to lead.

He was talking to Simcoe.

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“It seems Anna Strong is here,” Simcoe said, his voice barely audible over the sound of the music. The mention of her name brought Edmund to a screeching halt. He turned his eyes to the detestable man across the table from him. He could see that Simcoe’s eyes were following Anna’s journey around the dance floor.

Against his better judgment, he turned his eyes back to her. Her hair was flying, her eyes alight with fun, her smile large and genuine. Ben, the one Edmund had only met the night before, would pull her close, their chests flush with each others, only to spin her away again. She would laugh in glee, her feet carefully and deftly moving without much thought.

She was graceful, a planet of beauty in orbit. Edmund couldn’t help but wish that he was the sun around which she revolved.

Ben pulled her close again, this time her back against his chest, and Edmund watched his eyes lower to her. Almost at the same time, her eyes rose to his, and he had the terrifying premonition that they
were about to kiss.

Jealousy, or disappointment, flared in his chest momentarily, and he clenched his hand tight around his glass of wine. He watched, unable to look away, as Ben leaned close to her, whispered something in her ear, and then spun her away. Their hands caught at the last possible second, and he brought her back for a low dip as the song ended.

She gave him one more look, this one full of fear and trepidation, and made her way back to the bar.

Simcoe rose from his seat. “I think I’ll get another drink.”

Foreboding settled once more into Edmund’s abdomen. He rose to follow him, but Richard Woodhull’s voice called him back.

“Edmund,” he was saying, his face already a little ruddy from a couple of drinks. “I heard that you have started tutoring students. Tell me, how is that going for you?”

One of his first encounters with Anna came to mind. Richard is going to get jealous, she’d said. He remembered Richard’s own gruff attitude when she was mentioned.

“It is certainly rewarding,” he said carefully, edging around the question. “I find it occupies my time in a – uh – productive way.”

Richard considered him for a moment, trying to find fault with his answer. “And the students are responding well?”

Edmund swallowed thickly. “Yes, I believe they are.”

After a moment of silence, in which Edmund started imagining in great detail how he would get fired for sleeping in the same bed with a student, how he would never see Anna again, how he would go back to England and have to become a lawyer again, Richard started to laugh.

“Well, good for you, man. You seem like you’re starting to get your feet under you!” he crowed, clapping Edmund on the back.

Edmund breathed a quiet sigh of relief and hid it with a long drink from his glass of wine.
Beginner's Self Defense

Chapter Summary

Anna's fear of Simcoe is justified.

Chapter Notes

This is from a recent post I shared on Tumblr:

The Plight of Anthropology readers:

Before I finish chapter nine and post it, I want to talk a little about where this chapter is going. I’ve mentioned a couple of times that part of this story is based in reality - my husband and I met while he was a teacher and I was a student (he was never my teacher, and while we loved each other desperately, we didn’t start dating until I graduated). He (and now I) had a theatre company that used student volunteers as actors, and he showed me how much I loved acting and how being a lost artist in college was not something that was unique to my own experience. He gave me a family of friends.

But I also knew some very problematic people - yes, Abe’s behavior, Ben’s, Caleb’s, Simcoe’s, and Richard’s are all based on people I knew. And though most of those people will not abandon Anna, all of them abandoned me.

But Simcoe has a special place in hell for me. Simcoe is based on someone that used to be one of my friends that decided when he met me that he was entitled to me, to my body, and to my love. And yes, the scene that borders on sexual assault that will be coming up in chapter nine is based on my own experience. Except, (spoiler alert) Anna has someone that can come to her rescue.

I did not.

I have never written about this experience before, and it has been a rough chapter to write, though not nearly as rough as the “March 23” chapter. So forgive me if my writing isn’t as vivid as you’d like. I’m doing my best.

And, if I might provide one more tidbit - Simcoe in this story is terrifying, at least to me, because of his predatory nature, but in my own experience, Simcoe was even more terrifying, because not only was he predatory, but he was my husband’s best friend. And no one saw that side of him but me. No one believed me for a long time that he was capable of the things he did to me.

So chapter nine has a sexual assault trigger warning. Please do not read if that triggers you.

Simcoe was drunk, Anna reflected with a barely hidden shudder. She could smell it on his breath,
but he was doing a remarkable job of making sure his movements were still steady. He didn’t knock anything over, he didn’t slur his words. But she could see, in his eyes, the lack of focus that she often saw in Abraham’s when he drank too much. He was leaning rather heavily against the wood of the bar, his eyes fixed on her.

“I’ve been impressed with your improvement in my class, Mrs. Strong,” he pointed out, bringing his glass up to his lips for a long sip. Anna watched the trajectory of the drink with narrowed eyes. “I trust your tutor has served his purpose?”

Anna cleared her throat, trying to shake free her fear. “Professor Hewlett has been very helpful.”

“Yes, I daresay he has,” Simcoe said quietly. His eyes roved over her face, his usual hidden desire made plain with the influence of alcohol. Anna struggled not to look for Caleb and Abraham, who had gone outside for a smoke. Ben was on the dance floor, invited by one of his classmates. She could feel his eyes on her, watching carefully for signs of distress, but it didn’t feel like enough.

Anna shifted in her seat like she was going to get up and Simcoe’s hand landed heavily on her arm, stopping her movement. She jumped embarrassingly, and felt her arm tense. His hand was warm, almost sweaty, and even when she stopped moving, he didn’t remove it.

“I wonder if it’s going to matter that you pass my class on your own merit when everyone finds out what you’re doing with Hewlett,” he hissed, his voice hardly audible above the music.

Anna felt a blush rising on her face and struggled to suppress her body’s natural reaction. She tried to wrench her arm back, but his fingers tightened around her arm painfully. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He almost rolled his eyes at her. He leaned closer to her, and the oppressive smell of alcohol almost made her gag. “You aren’t fooling me, Mrs. Strong,” he spat, and Anna flinched away from his flying saliva. He leaned even closer to her, and when she tried to lean back, his hand tightened painfully around her arm.

She abandoned all pretense of trying to appear unbothered. “Let me go,” she said firmly, but she could feel the muscles in her neck beginning to quiver with the force it took for her to stay calm. He was much too close, the room was too loud. Everything was closing in on her.

“Anna?”

And suddenly, Simcoe’s hand was off of her arm, and Anna turned shakily to Ben, who was approaching the bar. His eyes narrowed at Simcoe, who nodded at him in acknowledgment, like he hadn’t just been on the verge of leaving bruises on Anna’s arm.

“Something wrong here?” Ben asked, putting himself between Anna and Simcoe. Simcoe smiled at him in that quiet, terrifying way of his and rose.

“Of course not,” he said lightly. “We were just having a conversation, weren’t we, Mrs. Strong?”

Anna didn’t respond, but in the time that it took Ben to turn to her, Simcoe was already starting back toward his table of faculty members. Edmund was talking to Richard, his back to Anna. He had missed the whole exchange.

“Anna?” Ben asked, but his voice sounded like it had to travel through a tunnel of sound. Anna ignored him and raised her finger for another drink, chugging the whole thing the second it was in front of her. Immediately, she asked for another one. He watched her, the unspoken apology etched in the lines of his face. She rejected it without speaking.
She let him escort her onto the dance floor again, choosing the time to remain much closer to him than usual. Let Simcoe see that, she thought bitterly. His accusation of what she was “doing with Hewlett” rattled in her head as she struggled to hear only music. She felt Ben’s arms wrap around her waist and pull her closer to him, her back against his chest. It was an intimate gesture they had done a thousand times before, but even now, she hoped that Simcoe was taking it the wrong way.

Let him see her pressed against Ben; let him question his accusation. She turned her head to the faculty table, ignoring how the alcohol made her over-correct her head, and found Edmund watching her instead.

She had completely forgotten he was there. Their eyes stayed locked, her own anger, panic, and disgust only rising the more his face registered hurt and jealousy. Simcoe’s own eyes were watching her, but Edmund – Edmund wouldn’t understand.

The alcohol was starting to register in her system and she was forced to lean even more against Ben, who took her extra weight without problem. She looked up as she caught her balance. Edmund was getting up.

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Edmund’s feeling of disappointment had morphed into jealousy now; the way Anna was pulling Ben against her curves, the way her collarbone flushed dark pink – he didn’t want to watch this anymore, this show that she was conducting, but he couldn’t seem to look away.

He wondered if he had kissed her last night, if she would be doing this now.

Her hair was falling in her face, but her could see her large, soft eyes, hardened with something he couldn’t place, and the slightly open expanse of her mouth. Ben’s hands were low on her hips, his head bent toward her neck, like he was whispering in her ear.

She flipped her hair out of her face with a flick of her neck and her eyes were on his again, wide and suddenly tender.

He looked away; he rose from his seat and moved toward the bar to pay his tab.

He didn’t want to see this anymore.

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Anna watched him rise from his seat and go to the bar. She wanted, ached to go to him, to explain what she was doing, why she had let herself drink so much, but Simcoe’s eyes were still on her. He was watching, an amused smile on his face, like she had played right into some unknown trap.

She probably had.

When the song was over, she shoved her way back toward the bar, trying to decide if she was going for another drink or for Edmund, but by the time she reached it, he was gone. She groaned, leaning her head on her arm, feeling the room lurch as she did. She blinked several times and raised her head again. The bartender had already refilled her drink. She took it without thinking.

“Whoa, Annie’s drunk!” Caleb crowed, finally back from his smoke with Abe. Abraham’s eyes were concerned, but Anna avoided them with a scowl. Caleb pulled himself up onto the barstool beside her. “You change your mind about drinking?”

She shrugged. Drinking didn’t matter, she thought bitterly. Simcoe’s eyes were still on her, his
predatory gaze setting her nerves on fire. She couldn’t sit still, but her limbs, her head was so heavy with the alcohol, she was having trouble even sitting up at the barstool.

Ben leaned close to her. “If you explain to Edmund, I’m sure he’ll understand.”

He always knew. Anna felt a rush of drunken affection for Ben and squeezed his arm appreciatively. “No he won’t,” she shook her head. “Maybe it’s better this way.”

“You don’t mean that,” Ben countered, wrapping his arm around her waist to keep her from sliding off the barstool. “Let’s take you home, you can sleep this off, and you two will talk in the morning.”

She shook her head, but why she was still doing it, she didn’t know. She slid off the barstool and moved past Ben. “I have to pee,” she said like it was a secret. He chuckled at her and nodded, taking her seat to wait for her.

The bathroom was empty when she got there. She stared at herself in the mirror for a few seconds, remarking silently on how dull her eyes looked, how tangled her hair was. She hated herself – she couldn’t stop those feelings now that alcohol had already broken down the mental walls she tried so hard to keep up.

How was she supposed to explain this to Edmund tomorrow? Tell him that she was putting on a show for someone who shouldn’t be looking at her in the first place? And wouldn’t that put him in the same category? Would she tell him about Simcoe, about his advances? Would she explain how terrified she was of him?

No – she wasn’t sure she could stomach having that conversation. And he would do what Selah did, what Abe did: he would decide one day that she was too much trouble, and in this case, she was. She would be the reason he’d lose his job. She could be the person to ruin his career forever.

How was she supposed to explain to Edmund that she was the girl that was only good for temporary love? She was the placeholder. She furiously wiped away the tear that snaked down her cheek and sniffed.

The door to the bathroom eased open quietly, and Anna struggled to fix her face into something impassive. Drunk women, while the easiest to please and the nicest form of women, still asked too many questions for her taste.

But the hand around the wooden door wasn’t female.

She recognized Simcoe’s hand belatedly as it reached for her arm. How had she not noticed that he had followed her? Anna tried to retreat, to keep her arm out of his reach, but his fingers had already closed around her forearm.

“What are you doing?” she asked, but even as she heard the words, she knew it was a strangled kind of yell.

He pushed her against the wall roughly, her head slamming against the tile. Black dots swam in her vision, and she struggled against his other arm, now pressed against her neck. His eyes were angry, full of a tempest she had never seen before, and he was hungry. His body was pressed against hers so hard she could hardly breath, but even then, she could feel his arousal pressed against her thigh.

She struggled against him, her strength sapped by her lack of air in her lungs. She would not succumb to this, she thought. She shoved him back, only succeeding in moving him a few inches, and flinched away from him as he lowered his mouth to her neck.
She didn’t know how she managed to bring her knee up and hit him in the groin, but it gave her enough of an opening to run for the door. He doubled over in pain, grunting loudly, but before her hand could close around the door, he caught her again. This time, his arm tripped her up and she landed heavily against the floor of the bathroom, his hand around her ankle.

She kicked at him, her panic and adrenaline giving away to tears. Still, she couldn’t find her voice to scream. Terror had taken it from her, and she cursed herself more the longer she stayed silent.

“Come on, Anna,” he growled at her, and at the sound of her first name on his lips, Anna kicked at him, her foot landing in the juncture between his neck and his shoulder. She felt rather than heard the sound of his shoulder dislocating, and when he pulled his arm back to himself, roaring in pain, Anna barely managed to pull herself up and flee.

She had to lean against the wall of the hallway that led back to the bar. No one had even noticed that Simcoe was yelling. No one noticed that she had been gone. No one would have come to her rescue.

She couldn’t stop herself from vomiting onto the floor next to her feet.

Someone’s hands were reaching for her own, pulling her chin up, and she immediately reacted, wrenching herself away from them, falling against the wall. Ben’s eyes were wide and concerned, and he held up his hands in surrender to show her he meant no harm.

She threw herself into his arms, sobbing, and he held her there for a moment, his head cradling the back of her head. He still didn’t know what had happened. Anna didn’t plan to tell him.

How could she tell him how easily she’d left herself open to attack? How could she tell him that she couldn’t even bring herself to scream for help? How could she?

Her tears wracked her body like a ship in a storm, and Ben was whispering words of comfort in her ear, but it didn’t matter.

She felt nothing but fear.

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She found the bruises on her body the next morning when she realized that sleeping hadn’t spirited away the nightmares she thought she had only imagined. She could see the shape of his fingers around her wrist and her upper arm, and a dark bruise was spreading on her elbow and her ankle where he had grabbed her. She didn’t even want to look at her neck.

She hid them under a heavy sweater despite the weather, and long jeans. She flinched as she turned her head on her neck, trying to stretch out her tensed muscles. She could still feel that coiled fear in the pit of her stomach, the self-loathing that followed her every time she spotted a bruise.

She didn’t go to class. She didn’t cry. She spent the day staring at the television, not even bothering to turn it on. She couldn’t stomach food – she could hardly stomach her own thoughts.

She let her appointment with Edmund come and go. She ignored his phone call and his worried text messages. When he came to the door, she jumped in fear, but she didn’t answer it. Soon enough, he left.

Afternoon melted into night, and as darkness started to blur the edges of reality, Anna realized that she was scared. The night before, she’d had alcohol help her sleep – tonight, she had nothing but her thoughts. She had only the phantom fingers on her arm, his breath on her neck.
When the first sob managed to untangle itself from her alcohol strained throat, she reached for her phone. Edmund answered on the first ring.

“Anna?” his voice was worried, but she could hear a little of the remnants of uncertainty there. She considered hanging up. He didn’t deserve this – he didn’t need to know.

“Can you pick me up?” she asked, and she could hear him already getting up from wherever he was sitting, the jingle of his keys. His immediacy only made her cry harder.

“Where are you?” he replied, his voice hard. “I’m coming.”

She didn’t answer for a moment; she was caught up in her own tears, in her own panic, in the darkness of the room, the same darkness that haunted her every time she closed her eyes. She wrenched her sweater off of her body, her panic rising her body temperature too high.

“Anna!”

“Home,” she said softly, her voice thin.

She could hear the car turning on, the sound of him pulling out of his driveway. She clenched her hand into a fist around the cushion of her couch. How long would it take him to get here? How many questions would he ask?

She felt bile rise in her throat again at the thought of telling him the story. How would he look at her? Would he think she deserved it?

She covered her mouth so her cries couldn’t be heard over the phone. She regretted calling him now – she would have to explain herself, and Edmund, kind, sweet Edmund, would want to tell someone else. He’d say it was for her safety, but he would want to take her to the police, to a doctor. He’d want to do everything in his power to make her feel safe.

But he couldn’t. And she couldn’t stomach telling the story, seeing the pity in his face, seeing the pity in everyone’s faces. She couldn’t bear the ‘I told you so’s,” the hushed tones while they asked her how she felt.

She couldn’t bear any of it.

But he was already parking the car – she could hear the engine turn off, and climbing the stairs. She considered, irrationally, hiding in her room, or not answering the door again, but his knock was frantic, worried, and she needed someone to hold onto.

She opened the door and reached for him before he even registered that the door was open. She held onto him like she was drowning, and he tentatively wrapped his arms around her waist. She could hear him asking her questions, trying to make sure she was okay, but there was nothing for her to say.

“Anna,” he finally insisted, pulling away from her, trying to look at her face, to inspect her for trouble. “Anna, what happened?”

She tried to look away from him, but the movement brought his hand to her neck, where pain flared hotly where she knew there must be a bruise. She hissed and moved away from it. Edmund immediately retracted his hands, his eyes falling to her neck. She wished suddenly for the sweater again.

“Anna, your neck!” he exclaimed, tilting his head to see it better. She pulled away from him and tried
to find a way to hide it from his view, but he had already seen. “Anna, what is that?” his voice had lost its frantic edge and bordered on a growl. “Who did this to you.”

She stepped closer to him again, feeling desperation clutching at her with its slippery fingers. “Edmund, please.”

But there was a darkness in his eyes now, the color of danger, of protectiveness. She reached for his face, trying to keep him focused. “Take me away from here,” she said softly, her voice so soft and so broken she could see his resolve waver. He reached for her hand and she had to hide a flinch as his hand brushed over another bruise. “Please.”

He had seen her flinch but tried to keep the worry from his face. He nodded without speaking, and she closed the door to her apartment, leaving her phone behind inside. She let him lead her to his car, and they both stayed silent as he drove her to his home, a modest-sized house with a flowerbed that looked well-tended. He opened the front door for her, letting her go in first.

“Sit,” he offered, but it sounded like a command. She obeyed, feeling her panic start to abate now that she was out of her apartment. The lamp in the corner of the room bathed the couch in a soft light that eased her nerves. Edmund took the seat beside her.

“Now,” he said, jutting his chin at her bruise. “Who did that to you?”

She shook her head.

“Do not,” he said immediately. “I’ve been worried sick about you all day, despite your…behavior last night –”

She felt tears rising in her eyes.

“And you call me out of the blue and you’re crying, and you have bruises on your neck, and your arm. I would hazard a guess that there are more. I demand to know who did this to you, Anna.”

Her voice was small, and that, more than the bruises, seemed to frighten him. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing will happen to them.”

He scooted closer to her, and his eyes hardened a little when she flinched. “I will make sure something happens to them,” he promised, trying to catch her eyes with his own. “But you have to tell me what happened.”

“I can’t,” she whispered, tears sliding down her face again.

Edmund nodded absently, more an acknowledgement of her statement than an acceptance. He stood and padded into the kitchen, moving easily around in his home, and as he slipped out of sight, Anna could hear the faucet turn on in the kitchen. He returned with a washcloth, damp in his hands. He held it out to her.

“This will help the bruise dissipate faster,” he explained. “Just put it on the bruises.”

She put it on her arm first, where the bruise hurt the most, and Edmund examined it under the pretense of gently pressing the washcloth on it.

“Anna, these are fingers,” he said quietly, in horror. She could see what looked like realization dawning on him. “These are a man’s fingers.”
Having Edmund know that she had been attacked was bad enough, but having him know what Simcoe’s intention had been was intolerable. She looked away from him, trying to keep her face hidden in shadow.

“Anna,” he was saying her name so much tonight. “Did he…?”

She couldn’t bring herself to let him finish his thought. He didn’t deserve to be exposed to something like that. She shook her head, another sob escaping from her throat. “Almost,” she whispered.

She could hear the sharp inhale of his gasp, and let him pull her into his embrace, gently running his hands through her hair. “Anna, I’m so sorry,” he said softly, and she could hear the heart-wrenching hurt in his voice too. “What can I do?”

She was about to answer when his hands in her hair stopped.

“This happened last night,” he said, his voice growing icy again. “After I left.”

She didn’t answer.

“Who was it?” he asked, but by the tone in his voice, Anna could tell that he already knew the answer. “Simcoe?”

Her ragged inhale told him all he needed to know. She could feel the rage lingering just barely underneath his skin, simmering there. His hand, around her own, clenched momentarily before he let her go, unwilling to cause her more pain.

“You have to report him,” he said firmly. She shook her head. “Anna, he will do this again. He will do this to you again.”

She was shaking now, her whole body quivering with it, with fear and loathing, and he reached for her shoulder again, gently letting his fingers curve over the lines of her face. She could see tears in his eyes, empathetic emotions that threatened to overtake him. She shook her head again, frantically.

“Anna, I couldn’t save you last time, but I can keep it from happening again,” he promised. “But you have to tell someone.”

She let his hands gently start to ease her breathing into something more manageable, the smell of his cologne, of his home, slowly calming her. He pulled her in for another hug, and she felt him drop a soft kiss on the top of her head.

“I’ll tell,” she said finally, into the silence. He hugged her a little tighter, but didn’t push her into telling the story.

“I’ll go with you,” he whispered.

She let him lead her to his bed, curling into the cool navy blue sheets. He eased in beside her and cradled her against his side, his hands gently kneading her shoulders and back. His hands were soft and sweet on her skin, and as she started to drift off to sleep, she could hear him whispering words of comfort and protection into her ear.

She didn’t dream.
Claustrophobia, An Advanced Class

Chapter Summary

In which Anna does what she promised, and Abigail makes her first appearance.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter has taken so long for me to get up! I have been distracted and struggling to figure out how to follow the last chapter. Thank you, as usual, for all of the love you have given me. I appreciate all of you! If some of you don't follow me on Tumblr, I will be out of the country from June 5-12, so I will not be able to post during that time. Hopefully I'll be able to post something tomorrow as well, or I will just spend my free time on the cruise developing the next chapter.

Edmund sat beside Anna as she lived up to her surname and explained to the kind-faced police officer the bruises on her neck, wrist, and ankle. She had allowed Edmund, after much coaxing, to see all of the bruises she knew about, and every new blemish on her skin sent his blood into a boil. He ached to take matters into his own hands, to make Simcoe pay for what he did to her, but he knew that the consequences of those actions would only make Anna feel worse.

He held her while she slipped into a restless sleep, his hands pressing comfort into her skin, and he listened carefully to her even breathing before he could manage to sleep. He had been angry, jealous, and insecure when he had seen her dancing with Ben, and he had assumed that her behavior was her way of telling him that she was finished with whatever they were doing. His assumption had, he thought, been proved correct when she skipped their tutoring appointment, ignored his texts and calls, and even refused to come to the door when he went to check on her.

What else was he supposed to think? But hearing her voice come over the phone, so soft and so broken, asking him for help, for shelter, for solace, chased all of his doubts from his mind. She didn’t go to Abraham, to Ben, or to Caleb. She came to him.

The sound of her tears, of fear, had driven him crazy in the short time it took him to get to her. And when he saw her, her eyes wide and unfocused, her body shaking, he had known something was very wrong, and her silence only heightened his fear.

But the bruises. The bruises had changed something deep in his chest – he wasn’t afraid, he was livid. He could feel, even now, while she talked, that lingering feeling in his hands that just begged him to hit something. The energy hadn’t been exerted yet. He didn’t know if it ever would.

Would he carry this anger around with him for the rest of his life? Would she carry her fear with her?

“– he pushed the bathroom door open, and I thought he was just another woman,” Anna’s voice was losing its strength, and Edmund’s hand twitched. He wished he could hold her hand; she had made him promise not to, if only to protect his job. “I asked him what he was doing there, but he grabbed my wrist and pushed me against the wall –”
Edmund very carefully placed his hands on top of his thighs and tried not to clench his hands. He suddenly regretted not hearing the story before now – at least he would have been prepared.

“He put his arm against my throat and I could feel his –” Anna’s voice fractured, and Edmund felt his resolve waver. She cleared her throat and continued. “I…uh, kneed him and tried to leave, and he grabbed me by the leg and pulled me onto the floor. He…he said my name and I kicked him in the shoulder. And then I…I ran.”

The officer wrote something on the notebook. “You said that he’s been harassing you for a while, Mrs. Strong,” he said. “So why didn’t you report this sooner?”

“I didn’t – I didn’t think anything would happen to him,” she said softly, her voice so broken that Edmund turned to look at her. “He’s a professor, I’m just a student.”

“And you chose not to report this assault until two days after the incident,” the officer continued. “Are you sure that this is what happened?”

She suddenly went very still. “Why wouldn’t I be sure?”

“Are you sure you weren’t…inebriated?”

Edmund’s eyes snapped up to the officer’s. “It is a bar,” Anna clarified sharply, “of course people were drinking. That doesn’t make it okay.”

“Of course not,” the officer agreed, “I just want to make sure we have the full story.”

“The man was going to rape me,” Anna said firmly, loudly, and her voice hardly hesitated over the word. Edmund flinched. “That’s all you need. Now are you going to do something about it, or do you want me to come back after he’s actually succeeded?”

“Ma’am –”

“Officer,” she said in the same tone. Edmund glanced at her; her softness, her fear, seemed to have evaporated in the wake of this man’s hesitance to believe her story. He could see his anger in her face now.

“He’s been threatening my grade all semester, he knows where I live, and he has no problem walking into a public restroom and assaulting me. If you don’t do something about it, then I will be forced to.”

The officer leaned back in his seat. “Is that a threat?” he asked.

Finally, Edmund couldn’t endure it any longer. “Are you truly more worried about a woman threatening the man that has been harassing her and almost succeeded in sexually assaulting her over the man who actually committed crimes?” The officer finally turned his eyes to Edmund. “Because if he does succeed in hurting Mrs. Strong, the next time you see me will be in a courtroom. You and your tiny police station will have no money left to hide behind. Not that you have much to begin with,” he turned a distasteful eye to the crowded and dilapidated room.

“We will investigate the accusation,” the officer said coolly, directing his comments to Edmund. “In the mean time, I suggest you make sure your client doesn’t do anything that might impede us.”

Anna raised her chin at him, hardening the clench of her jaw. Edmund glanced at her and back at the officer. “Understood,” he said. Anna rose from her seat and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Edmund followed her, lingering in the hallway long enough to take note of the
officer’s name. Officer William Howe. He committed the name to memory.

She hadn’t bothered to wait for him or his car – when he finally caught up to Anna, she was stomping her way down the sidewalk, her hair flying wildly behind her.

“Anna!” he called, and she halted for only a moment before she continued. He jogged quickly, wishing he hadn’t decided on wearing a suit today, and had to grab her gently by the hand to stop her. He hesitated, his hand extended, before he reached for her fingers; he didn’t want to touch any bruises.

Her face was streaked with tears, but her chin was quivering with anger instead of sadness. She heaved a breath, a mirthless smile taking over her face. “I should have known that would happen,” she said brusquely. “We have the burden of proving assault even when we have physical evidence. Because how could an educated man do such a thing?”

He didn’t respond; he wasn’t sure what to say. Her eyes searched his face, searching for her next cue, but he sighed. He was still affected, more than he wanted her to know, by her story. It was her trauma, not his. He didn’t wish to claim it from her, even though the words that tumbled from her mouth would haunt him for the foreseeable future.

“Anna? Is that you?”

Anna’s eyes focused on something behind Edmund and he watched her face tense in the least sincere smile he’d ever seen grace her face. “Mary,” she replied stiffly. “And…Robert.”

Edmund, suddenly uncomfortable with the newcomers, turned to stand beside Anna. The woman Anna had called Mary was familiar to him – he had seen her with Abraham a fair amount of times. Her long, wavy blonde hair was pinned away from her face, and her white skirt reminded him of tennis whites. The man beside her, the one that Anna had called Robert, was dressed in a plaid flannel shirt and jeans so dark they were almost black.

An odd couple they made.

“I’ve been looking for you for hours,” Mary exclaimed, exhaling a breath that was supposed to make her look flustered, but her flawless makeup and untouched hair didn’t quite mesh with the gesture. “Here,” she thrust an envelope to Anna, who stared at it like it contained anthrax for a long while before she took it tentatively with the tips of her fingers. “It’s an invitation to the Student Government Association ball,” Mary explained. “Since Ben has to attend, as a delegate to the New England System, he asked that I snag you an invite too.”

Anna furrowed her brows at the envelope. “Uh, thanks, I guess,” she said hesitantly. Mary seemed to accept her thanks without much thought to her tone.

“Faculty are invited too, Professor Hewlett,” Mary directed at him.

The mention of Edmund’s name startled him. His confusion must have shown on his face, because Mary shrugged. “I make it my business to know most of the professors around here,” she explained. “It’s not a large school, and you’re one of the only ones I hadn’t met in person yet. I hope we see you there.”

And she was practically skipping away, her arm linked with Robert’s. Anna watched them go, her eyes narrowed in suspicion, like she was convinced that Mary was somehow playing a trick on her.

“That Robert guy doesn’t say much, does he?” Edmund pointed out.
She shrugged. “He mostly watches,” she noted. “And he’s incredibly smart, so don’t disregard him.”

Duly noted.

“So what is this…Student Government—”

“Student Government Association Ball,” Anna finished for him, tucking the invitation into her purse. “Ben has to go every year because he’s a delegate to the larger university system, kind of like a baby senator. And he always tries to get me and Caleb to go, but Caleb always finds a way to get us out of it.”

Edmund smirked to himself, already thinking about the ridiculous ways that the loud, bearded one of Anna’s friends would get her out of a social commitment.

“You should go,” Edmund said. “Have a fun night with your friends.”

“I can have fun any night,” Anna countered. “And I wouldn’t even have to wear a dress.”

She resumed walking, leaving Edmund behind while he tried to think of another way to convince her. It felt rather like a futile endeavor, but he wanted to see her do something other than go to the bar, other than fall asleep on his shoulder while watching Firefly again, though he wasn’t entirely opposed to that part. He wanted to help her have fun outside of her comfort zone.

“What if I decide to go?” he finally asked. “Would you go then?”

Her large, dark eyes were unfathomable, like she was trying desperately to keep the emotions from rising in them, and he found himself searching for some kind of clue in their depths. He considered him momentarily, her eyes dropping to his impeccable suit and tie and returning up to his face.

“I’ll consider it,” she answered.

It wasn’t a yes, but it did warm Edmund like an affirmative answer would. He hoped that was a premonition that would come true.

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“So you really aren’t going to tell me what happened at the bar?” Ben asked, his eyes straying down to Anna’s sleeve, tucked carefully over the bruise on her wrist. Anna didn’t bother answering; she had rebuffed the same question multiple times already, but Ben was not satisfied.

“When is this stupid ball?” she asked instead. Ben raised his eyebrows at her, telling her that he did not miss the fact that she was avoiding his question, but resolved to answer her question anyway.

“Friday night,” he answered, “Formal dress. Why, are you actually going to go this time?” He glanced down at her torn jeans and oversized hoodie, used strategically to cover all of her bruises. “I didn’t think you owned a formal gown.”

“I can get one,” Anna snapped defensively. “Besides, didn’t you want me to come?”

Ben gave her a smile that told her he was vaguely impressed with her. “I did, but I didn’t think you would.”

Anna shrugged, trying to be indifferent. Already, she was trying to figure out where to get a formal gown in the tiny town that surrounded Setauket University. She would have to ask Abigail for help. She ruminated in her thoughts for a few moments, indifferent to Ben’s own speculation.
“Oh my god, he’s going, isn’t he?” Ben whispered, leaning over the table.

Anna didn’t take the bait. “Who?” she asked nonchalantly.

Ben raised his eyebrow. “You know,” he accused. “He’s going, isn’t he?”

Anna felt a smile taking over her face that she couldn’t suppress. “He asked me to go,” she admitted. “We can’t go there together, obviously,” she continued, lowering her voice, forcing Ben to move closer to her. “But he just wants to be in the same place at the same time.”

Ben leaned back in his chair. “How romantic,” he said sarcastically, but his lips were still upturned.

Anna felt a blush color her face. It was romantic, at least, it was to her. She had made her own resolution, not long ago, that she was going to end whatever she and Edmund had, yet here she was, blushing over the idea of being in a formal gown in the same room as him. She couldn’t help but feel like they had crossed yet another line, a much more serious one, when he sat beside her in the police station.

Just thinking about it put the tremors back in her hands; she had been relatively successful pretending like nothing had happened with Simcoe, but every now and then, the pressure of his body would rush back to her, and she would struggle with the breath in her lungs. Most of the time, those moments came when she was alone, walking to class, taking a shower.

“You alright?” Ben asked.

Anna jumped slightly, wrenched out of her thoughts. “Yeah,” she said absently. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

She rose from her seat, scooping up her coffee cup, bought by Ben, and gave him a quick wave. “I have shopping to do,” she said as a good-bye.

“You got it bad, Anna Strong!” Ben called after her with a grin. She ignored him, but her stomach clenched in response. He was right; she had it bad.

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“I see how it is,” Abigail said with a playful smile. “You only visit me when you need help.”

Anna leaned on Abigail’s desk, set up in the library’s Undergraduate Writing Center. “Okay, I deserve that,” she admitted. “But I need your help with shopping. I need a gown, and last I checked, you’re pretty much the only woman I know that knows anything about gowns.”

Abigail smiled up at her friend and turned her attention to her computer, typing a quick sentence before lifting her eyes back to Anna’s. “Well, since you asked so nicely, and I’ve been trying to get you into a nice dress for years, I suppose I can help.”

A large smile took over Anna’s face, and Abigail observed it with curiosity. “You’re never happy to go shopping,” she noted. “Haven’t you had those pants since you were a freshman in high school?”

“Let’s not cloud the issue with facts, Abby,” Anna waved her off. “When are you done here?”

“You mean when am I done making sure freshmen like you don’t fail their writing intensive classes?” Abigail asked, clicking over to her schedule. “Actually, I don’t have any more appointments today, but I usually stay on for walk-ins until five. I’m sure I can leave a little early today.”
Anna clapped the tips of her fingers together happily as Abigail grabbed her purse, a dark grey designer something, and let it hang from the bend of her elbow. Her black slacks and warm orange shirt were fashionable without being loud or over the top, and she could just see the sparkle of that elusive makeup shining on Abigail’s perfect cheekbones.

“Come on,” Abigail prompted. “I’m parked out back.”

The ride to the small outlet malls was a short one; any drive in Setauket was short. Abigail left the radio in the car off, choosing instead to catch up with Anna. She left out Simcoe and Edmund, but regaled her friend with Abraham’s sudden nostalgia for their old relationship and his subsequent breakup with Mary, and Mary’s new relationship with Robert.

“Are Ben and Caleb together yet?” Abigail asked as they turned into the parking lot, empty except for about ten cars, scattered in different spots, all varying degrees of poorly parked.

Anna shrugged. “I’m not sure that Ben or Caleb would tell us if they were,” she remarked. “Ben’s father is a preacher, I’m sure he doesn’t want it getting back to him.”

Abigail made a noise that said she understood. “Okay, there should be some formal dresses here,” she said, ushering Anna inside. The bright white lights and soft pop music immediately sent Anna’s anxiety into overdrive, and she momentarily considered bailing on this enterprise and going home. But Abigail’s wide smile and encouraging eyes stopped her.

“What size are you?” Abigail asked, trying to eye Anna’s figure through her baggy clothes.

“Uh…” Anna hesitated. “Small? Medium?”

Abigail laughed. “That’s not how dress sizes work,” she said, shaking her head. “What’s your bra size?”

Anna felt the urge to cross her arms. “Why?”

“Anna.”

“34C.”

Abigail considered Anna’s chest for a moment, hidden in her baggy sweatshirt, and gave an approving nod. “You’re probably a 4 or a 6.”

And she was off, grabbing different dresses off of the racks and folding them gently over her arms. Black, green, white, blue, pink, yellow – no colors were apparently off limit, but Anna found herself grimacing at the yellow and pink in particular. She followed listlessly, but Abigail’s excitement sparked a small smile that she couldn’t banish.

“Here, try this one,” Abigail thrust the black dress at Anna, the one she’d been eyeing in silence, and she took the silky fabric into her hands easily, feeling the luxuriousness of the fabric. She let Abigail lead her into a dressing room, where she settled onto the little couch in the corner, like she used to do when she and Anna would sneak into the malls when they were teenagers. Abigail found so much joy in clothes, in having her friends try on clothes, and Anna could not deny her the joy.

That childlike nostalgia lodged firmly in her throat, Anna tossed the black dress at Abigail and lifted her sweatshirt over her head, discarding it in the opposite corner of the dressing room nonchalantly. The cool air that hit her skin after hours of being hidden beneath her sweater soothed her. She fiddled with the zipper of the black dress, oblivious to Abigail’s horrified gaze, until her voice reached her.
“Annie.”

Oh Lord. The sound of her voice told Anna all she needed to know. The bruises.

She’d seen them.

“Annie, what are those?”

Without realizing it, Anna was reaching for her sweatshirt again, resigning herself to the inferno of her fear, her embarrassment, her humiliation. Abigail’s eyes were huge, wide as saucers, and her hands were reaching for her friend. So Anna did what she did best.

She fled.
“Annie,” Abigail caught up to her too fast, much too fast, and Anna felt the room closing in on her the closer her friend’s voice got. Abigail’s hand closed on her upper arm, and even though there weren’t any bruises there, Anna flinched horribly, and Abigail released her immediately, confusion contorting her face.

The fluorescent lights seemed to grow even brighter than usual, blurring the edges of Anna’s vision. Abigail’s worried face swam before her, and Anna felt her primitive instincts kicking in. She closed her own hands around her neck, protecting the more tender bruises, a tell that Abigail immediately picked up on. She gently peeled Anna’s hands away from her neck and pulled the neck of Anna’s sweatshirt down, revealing the discolored parts of her skin.

“Who did this to you?” she asked, her dark eyes full of sympathy. She was using the same hushed tone of voice people were using with her now, soft so they could be sure she wouldn’t break. Anna looked away from her, letting her eyes roam over the beautiful, silky dresses that would expose all of her bruises to curious eyes just like Abigail’s.

“It doesn’t matter,” she muttered, feeling suddenly like everyone was looking at her. She pulled her long hair over her shoulder, adding yet another layer that would cover her bruises.

“Anna, it does –”

“It doesn’t matter,” she insisted, even louder, and Abigail flinched away from her. “Can we go? I need to go.”

Abigail’s eyes were still wide and worried. “I thought you needed a dress.”

Anna shook her head vehemently, her panic starting to make her head swim. She felt rather than saw Abigail grab her arm and lead her from the dress section. “It’s okay Annie,” Abigail said quietly to her. Anna hardly heard her over the sound of her pounding heart, of her harsh breathing. “Here, sit here, and I’ll get you some water.” She practically fell into a chair, in a new space that looked like a small café. “Oh, honey, don’t cry.”

She was crying? She touched her face in amazement, and it came away wet. The sounds of the café, more raucous than the empty store, pressed roughly against her ears and Anna tried, desperately, to stay aware of her surroundings.

It seemed like nothing would be the same – even as she tried to move past her assault, it kept yanking her back. There would always be people asking questions, bringing the horrible memory back. Would she react this way forever? Would she ever heal?

“Annie –” Abigail was back, pressing a bottle of cold water into Anna’s clammy hand. She pushed
some of Anna’s hair out of her face, tucking it gently behind her hear.

Anna sipped the water, her eyes on her friend, who was still worriedly glancing where the bruises were hidden. Without realizing, she pulled her sleeves down over her hands.

“Does Ben know?” Abigail asked. “Does Caleb?”

Anna shook her head. Abigail let out a breath that told Anna that she was seconds away from texting them both. “It doesn’t matter.” She felt like she had said that too much lately, but she couldn’t stop herself. She didn’t want to talk about it anymore, she didn’t want anyone to mention it anymore. She couldn’t think of anything else to say except ‘it doesn’t matter.’

“Annie, it does matter,” Abigail began, but Anna cut her off.

“I already reported it to the police,” she blurted.

It seemed to confirm whatever Abigail suspected. She leaned forward in her chair, trying to catch Anna’s eyes without actually touching her. “Will you at least tell me what happened?”

Anna felt a lump forming in her throat, and after a long moment, she blinked and looked away. “I can’t.”

Abigail reached for her hand, and Anna let her take it, watching their fingers intertwine with a kind of detached affection. “Will you tell me eventually?” Abigail finally said, watching their hands. They seemed to get lost in each other for a moment, their hands tangled together. It was a soft reminder of an easier time, when they were children, before they started to grow into who they were.

They were so far from that time.

***

“Did you see those bruises on Anna’s wrist?” Ben asked, surveying Caleb in the reflection of the mirror while he dragged the razor over the stubble on his neck. Caleb, lounging on his bed, watched the motion of the razor and waited until it was off of Ben’s skin before he responded.

“She won’t tell me where they came from,” he replied, leaning farther to the left as Ben leaned more heavily against the dresser. “Me neither,” he said, dragging the razor over the last strip of hair on his neck. He wiped at the remaining shaving cream with the wet towel he had hanging from his shoulder and turned back to Caleb, who tried to pretend like he hadn’t just been caught staring at Ben’s bare legs. “She was crying when I found her at the bar. Near the bathroom.”

He wished suddenly, with a great force, that he had managed to find her before then. He had realized she had been gone too long too late, and his nonchalant search for her had been half-hearted. He figured she was throwing up, based on all the alcohol she had consumed. But he found her in the hallway that led to the bathrooms, clutching her wrists, flushed red, crying hysterically. She had thrown herself into his arms; he had chalked that up to drunken hysteria.

Now, he wasn’t so sure.

“What should we do?” Caleb asked, opening his arms and motioning for Ben to fall into them. Ben smirked at him and took the bait, reclining on the bed so that his back was leaning against Caleb’s arm. Caleb’s hand splayed out over the bare skin of Ben’s back, tracing nonchalant circles onto the
broad expanse of skin.

“We could ask Abraham,” Ben suggested, and Caleb’s hand halted in its ministrations. He let out a
day laugh behind him.

“The only person more likely to not know anything about Anna’s current life is Abraham,” Caleb
pointed out.

“Well, there’s…” Ben trailed off. Caleb’s hand tensed on his back, like a tiny spider.

“There’s?” Caleb prompted, leaning forward, pressing his chest against Ben’s back.

“There’s Edmund,” Ben said tentatively, wondering if Anna ever talked to Caleb about him. True,
he had been present when Edmund comforted Anna on the infamous March 23, but had Anna told
him that she was considering wearing a formal gown for him? That they watched movies late into the
night? That the mention of his name brought out a smile Ben hadn’t seen in years? Did Anna tell
Caleb things like that?

“That’s that professor guy, right?” Caleb asked, his mouth resting nonchalantly on Ben’s shoulder. “I
knew she liked him. She smiled at him way too much.”

Ben let his laugh move through him like a bolt of lightning, frightening Caleb’s intimate lean against
his shoulder. “She smiled at him too much?” he chuckled, glancing over his shoulder at Caleb,
bearded and smiling in spite of himself.

“Yeah, you little shite. Even when he isn’t looking at her, she’s always smiling at him. She looks at
him like she does when she wakes up and it’s raining outside. You know how she does, when her
eyes get all big and she does that little smile?”

Ben’s laughter dissipated. “Wow, that’s…that’s actually pretty insightful.”

“Yeah, I hear that tone of surprise, Tallboy.”

Ben tilted his head back and offered his lips to Caleb, who gave him a grudging kiss that they broke
with a laugh.

***

After a few more minutes of silence and coaxing, Anna finally suggested that she and Abigail leave
the store. There was no way she would be able to get a dress, much less wear one. She would just
have to tell Edmund that she couldn’t go. Abigail took her arm and held onto her hand, like she was
afraid Anna would bolt again. Anna feared that too.

They walked in a companionable silence, Abigail not speaking because she wasn’t sure what to say.
The café was a new addition to the little series of stores, set way in the back, and Abigail had to lead
Anna through the men’s department, children’s department, and the intimates. She didn’t remember
any of those.

Finally, as they reached the cosmetics department, Abigail spoke.

“I have an idea,” Abigail tugged on Anna’s arm on their way through the dress department. Anna
paused in their exit. “Look.”

She was pointing at some advertisement featuring a tall, tan woman with tattoos. Kat Von D, she
read at the bottom. Lock It Foundation.
“Covers tattoos,” Abigail said, moving toward the counter. “That will probably cover some of those…” she trailed off, her voice getting soft and hushed again. Anna waved off the rest of the sentence. “If you still want to get a dress, we can use this.”

“Foundation?” Anna asked hesitantly.

“I’ll show you,” Abigail motioned for the woman behind the counter, who was inspecting her nails closely. “I’m looking for the Kat Von D Lock It Foundation in her skin tone,” she indicated Anna, who was trying not to look frightened by all of the fake eyelashes, different tubes, and weird contraptions underneath the soft glow of lights.

The woman behind the counter squinted at Anna, inspecting the color of her skin while she muttered to herself.

“Number 41 might work,” she said quietly, tapping her long, acrylic nails against the counter. Abigail smiled at Anna, who let her lips twitch upward in a smile that didn’t look genuine.

“Anna, look,” Abigail pointed to a tube of what looked like dark red hell. “You need some.”

“I don’t wear lipstick,” Anna pointed out matter-of-factly.

Abigail smirked at her. “Well, for that SGA ball, you do.”

Anna grimaced, wrinkling her nose as the woman with the loud nails returned, holding a small box in her hands. “Do you want to come sit on this chair?” she offered a white chair to Anna, who carefully and anxiously took it, hoping against hope that the women wouldn’t accidentally reveal the bruises carefully concealed by her sweatshirt.

The first press of the sponge made Anna flinch, but the woman gave her a soothing look that clearly said she understood her anxiety. She relaxed, letting the soft sweeping motion of the sponge lull her into a soft reverie.

Maybe if this thing worked, she could actually attend the ball and see Edmund in his element. Maybe if she could pull this off, she could have an evening where she could forget everything.

“Looks like it matches,” the woman was holding a mirror in front of Anna’s closed eyes, and when she opened her eyes, she was assaulted with her own reflection, her skin silky and even.

“We’ll take it,” Abigail chirped, smiling at Anna. “And this,” she passed over a tube of that dark red lipstick that she had been eyeing. When had she managed to get her hands on that?

“I think this red lipstick would look great with that green dress,” Abigail said conspiratorially over her shoulder to Anna as she paid for the foundation and lipstick. Anna stared suspiciously at the red tube and did not respond.

Their cosmetics bagged, Abigail swept back into the dressing room and grabbed the green dress they had left behind. “It’s a size four,” she noted, glancing at Anna. “That should fit.”

“I’m not trying it on,” Anna said firmly, and Abigail nodded like she suspected as much. She folded it over her arm and went to the abandoned counter, in the middle of the silky dresses, and waited for the cashier to make her way through the maze of prom and cocktail dresses to the register.

“Abby, you aren’t buying that for me,” Anna insisted, trying to shoulder her friend out of the way. Abigail glared at her, her manicured fingers already curled around her wallet.
“Anna Strong, you shut your mouth,” she replied sharply, pulling out her credit card. “Besides, Akinbode is paying.” She held up the credit card that Anna did not recognize as her own.

“I swear, you have that man wrapped around your finger,” Anna retorted, grabbing the hanger containing her dress.

Abigail laughed. “And when you put that dress on, you’ll have every man wrapped around yours.”

Anna glanced down at the dress and didn’t answer. She didn’t want every man. She wanted one man.

***

“Anna Strong, if you don’t sit still, I swear I’m going to burn your ear,” Abigail snapped, clapping the straightener together. Anna, who was fidgeting with her robe, stopped all movement immediately. “Good,” Abigail soothed, running the hot iron through another lock of dark hair.

“I don’t understand why we have to do this,” Anna whined, resisting the urge to move her head as the residual heat of the straightener landed on her back.

“Because,” Abigail said, reining in another chunk of Anna’s hair, “whatever man you’re going to see needs to be knocked sideways by how beautiful you are.”

“Who says I’m going to see someone?” Anna protested. “Can’t I want to look beautiful for myself?”

Abigail patted Anna’s shoulder with her hand full of hair. “Sweetie, you’re beautiful all of the time. You believe you are beautiful in jeans and a sweatshirt. You went out to buy a dress and let me buy you makeup. That is a sincere effort to impress someone else. I’m not knocking it. I’m rather impressed one man,” here she paused, “or woman could make you do all this.”

Anna shrugged. “Maybe I’m doing this for Mary.”

Abigail chuckled. “Please. You aren’t trying to impress Abe, which also means you don’t care about Mary. Besides, she’s dating Robert Townsend, which is a rather big step up from our Abe, don’t you think?”

“He’s not ‘our Abe,’” Anna snorted as Abigail released her hair.

“So who is he?” Abigail asked, a warm smile on her face. “The man you’re going to see.”

Anna did not respond, but moved toward Abigail’s vanity, full of makeup and the elusive red tube Abigail promised to use on her. “Is this the next torture?” she asked coyly, letting her fingers linger on the soft desk.

“Avoiding the question in favor of makeup?” Abigail noted, her eyebrows raised. “Wow, he must be a big secret.”

“If tonight goes well, I’ll tell you about him,” Anna promised. “It’s…complicated.”

Abigail smiled at her friend. “There’s nothing complicated about that smile.”

Anna turned away from her friend, feeling a blush creep up her cheeks. “Come on then,” she said over her shoulder. “Use that witchcraft stuff on me.”

An hour later, Anna’s face felt significantly heavier than before, particularly her lips. Abigail smiled at her discomfort and motioned for her to look in the mirror.
“My witchcraft is particularly potent today,” she said proudly as Anna surveyed her face in the mirror. Her eyes were as dark as ever, her eyelashes curled and thick. Her lips were painted that same dark red, and the tops of her cheekbones glittered with that same magic that she often saw on Abigail’s face. Her bruises were gone; not a trace of them could be seen. She stared in awe at herself, her eyes rather locked on her collarbone, where Simcoe’s bruise had blossomed into shades of lighter purple and green.

It was like it never happened.

“Wow,” she heard the word leak from her mouth on a breath, and Abigail clapped excitedly.

“I’m so glad I got to do this,” she said happily, moving to her closet. “Here, time for the dress.”

Anna, more at ease now that the hair and makeup portion of the evening was complete, gladly took the dress and slipped out of her robe. Abigail zipped it up, and as the cold metal zipper settled on Anna’s lower back, she realized that the dress had a low back, and a significant slit up her leg. The silk flowed over her skin, cold to the touch.

“This dress has no back,” she pointed out.

Abigail nodded. “I know which dress I picked,” she replied slyly. “Here, you’re borrowing these,” she thrust a pair of black pumps at her. “They buckle, so you shouldn’t have any trouble keeping them on your feet.”

“Just staying on my feet,” Anna muttered, grabbing them and sliding her feet into them.

She wobbled her way to the full length mirror, trying to gather her footing on the carpet. Abigail followed her. She surveyed her appearance in the full mirror, smiling as Abigail’s face filled with self-satisfaction.

“You look like a princess,” she said with a smile.

“I never wanted to be a princess,” Anna remarked.

“Well, you are one tonight,” Abigail retorted. “So get over it.”

***

The Student Government Ball was the most formal thing Edmund Hewlett had attended since he moved to the States. He adjusted his tuxedo jacket on his shoulder and nodded at Richard Woodhull, who was talking closely with Mary. Robert Townsend, the silent boyfriend of hers, was lingering at her elbow, smiling down at her with something that looked like reverence.

“Professor Hewlett,” a masculine voice that Edmund recognized passed him a glass of wine. “Nice to see you here.”

“Ben,” Edmund acknowledged, admiring the tailored cut of his tux and the dark blue tie that matched his eyes. “Where’s Caleb?”

The sound of the other man’s name brought a slight pink blush to his cheeks. “Caleb and Anna are coming together,” Ben said, taking a sip of his own wine. “I’m surprised they decided to show up.”

“I’m sure that your own persuasion had something to do with it,” Edmund replied. “I do thank you for that.”
Ben stepped closer to Edmund. “For the record, I didn’t have to convince Anna to come. That was all your persuasion.”

Edmund felt his blush before Ben acknowledged it. “Oh, excuse me,” he said, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. “They’re here,” he said with a hint of a smile.

Edmund immediately raised his eyes to the door, and Ben smirked at him for a moment before doing the same.

In the moments following Anna’s entrance, Edmund remembered very little of what happened around the room. In fact, he hardly remembered what Caleb looked like. All he remembered was the curve of her smile, the shine of her eyes, and the glimpse of her leg from her dress.

As it happened, he felt his hand slacken around his glass of wine, and had to steady his fingers around the stem. He must have made some sort of noise, because Ben turned halfway to him, a broad smile covering his face. Her eyes were on his, her hand resting in Caleb’s arm. Her lips, painted that dark red that reminded him of sinfully delicate chocolates, champagne, and rose petals, curled to reveal her winning smile, the one that danced in his vision like constellations. Her hair, silky and dark, was pulled over one shoulder, longer than he remembered it.

Her bruises were gone, he realized almost belatedly. Her collarbone, which he had only seen bare once before, was immaculate and exposed to his hungry gaze. He wanted to trace the curve with the tips of his fingers.

“Caleb,” Ben acknowledged, smiling almost as broadly at him as Edmund was at Anna. “You clean up nice.”

“You act like you thought it was impossible,” Caleb retorted, finally releasing Anna’s hand. “I might be insulted.”

Anna’s eyes were on Edmund, but they roamed over his throat, the white pocket square, the glass of wine in his hand. Her eyes rose to him.

“You are resplendent,” he breathed. “Just…look at you.”

If Anna hadn’t felt beautiful before, she certainly did now.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last chapter I will be able to post until I return from my Central America cruise on June 12. Please be patient with me while I’m away from the Internet! Next up is our SGA ball, so gear up for some cute fluff and a whole lot of drama! Comments are appreciated, and I promise to respond to them when I get back to the States.
Ballroom Dance

Chapter Summary

In which Anna and Hewlett are allowed a chance to explore the depths of their lust for each other with very little contact, in which Robert Townsend reveals just how sneaky and sly he can truly be, and, finally, in which the shit truly hits the fan, featuring: Tallster, Mary/Robert, Richard, and Simcoe.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this took me a little while to get right, and I do apologize in advance for the shit about to hit the fan!

He was staring at her, his eyes were alight with wonder – with love. Anna realized suddenly, with prompting from Ben’s smiling gaze that seemed to grow wider, that Edmund was waiting for her to speak. She cleared her throat, trying not to muss Abigail’s handiwork, and surveyed him anew. His smile, the most beautiful feature of his, was wide, the crinkles hugged his warm eyes. He looked… amazed, like he couldn’t believe she was real. She returned that same smile; she wanted him to know that she was just as amazed as he was – that he was just as unbelievable, just as ethereal, just as beautiful. Her smile grew easily into giggles when his high cheekbones flushed red.

“You look…” she let her eyes fall to his suit again, the glass of wine in his hand, his barely exposed throat. “…great.” She was suddenly aware of listening ears; her eyes jumped to the growing crowd around them; staring at Edmund was like standing on a planet alone with only the man that mattered, but the reality of the situation stampeded into their tranquility, their awe. He seemed to understand her volume; he gave her another once-over, this one so heated it made Anna’s chest flush. Gone was the wonder; it was replaced with a much more primal hunger. His eyes rose to hers again and he raised one eyebrow before excusing himself to the bar, putting precious space between them.

Anna felt a breath break free in her throat, and let the loud exhale escape. Ben smirked at her revealing gesture and gave her a wink before turning back to Caleb, who was looking around the room with a critical eye that clearly said he wasn’t quite comfortable here.

Edmund’s text came a moment later; the vibrating against Anna’s hip startled her. She fished her phone out of the tiny purse Abigail had lent her and opened it.

“Meet at your place after?” it read. “I’d like to tell you how splendid you look without being overheard.”

Anna felt her cheeks warm again. She knew that Edmund wasn’t the type of man that demanded some sort of physical affection, but the intimacy of the question, the implication behind it, made her stomach tighten in what felt simultaneously like fear and anticipation. Another text replaced that one.

“Not that I mean, that is, I am not asking for – oh, bugger. I only want to be able to tell you how beautiful you are. Really. That’s all.”
That drew a laugh from her that caught his attention. Without moving her head, she brought her eyes up to seek him out. He had a bashful smile that somehow made his bumbling even more endearing, and Anna felt a giddy laugh sneaking up her throat. She looked away from him and covered her mouth delicately with her fingers, trying not to smudge her makeup.

“Anna!”

Mary was waving at her, her dress a sweet baby blue, Robert at her side. “You look much too pretty to be staring at your phone.”

Anna smiled awkwardly, trying to figure out if Mary was complimenting her or giving a backhanded insult that many women like her used as their primary language. But the blonde girl seemed genuinely happy to see her. Anna slipped her phone back into her tiny purse, and let her smile grow into something more sincere.

“Thank you,” she replied, her fingers fiddling with the clasp of the clutch. “I love your dress.”

Mary’s hand rose to brush the material affectionately. “Once I saw the color, I knew I had to have it,” she said almost breathlessly. Robert, beside her, pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder. Without taking her eyes off of Anna and without ruining the flow of conversation, she leaned her head back, resting it against Robert’s forehead. The gesture was so casually loving Anna felt like she was intruding.

She cast around for something else to talk about – there was so little that she and Mary had in common. She heard the words that seemed to be coming from her own mouth before she could stop herself.

“You seem happy,” she blurted. “I’m glad…you know, after Abraham…”

Mary’s smile grew suddenly tight, and Robert took an almost imperceptible step away from her. “Yes, well…that –” Mary fumbled.

“I’m sorry,” Anna interrupted, feeling rather unwieldy, “I didn’t mean to bring up weird…tension…”

“Anna, truly,” Mary’s hand settled over hers, “It’s okay. Abraham and I are over.” Her eyes left Anna’s for a moment, and she seemed to struggle over her next words. “If you two want to –”

“Oh, no,” Anna cut her off immediately, and Mary’s eyes were back on hers, surprised. “Abraham and I aren’t – I mean, we hardly even talk anymore.”

Robert’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Oh,” Mary seemed both relieved and confused. Her eyes spotted something behind Anna’s left shoulder. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I must go say hello to President Washington. I’ll be right back,” she kissed Robert softly, sweetly for just a moment, and left him with Anna, who suddenly realized that this might be only the first or second time he had ever spoken to her.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, lowering his eyes to his own glass of wine. Anna was momentarily taken aback at the smoothness of his voice.

“W-wh…huh?” she stumbled over the perfect confused sound to make while he surveyed her reactions carefully. Anna suddenly felt like she was in a high stakes poker game – every face she made, every muscle that moved, was revealing something.

“You think that Mary is, for lack of a better term, using you. Trying to get information from you,
secretly making fun of you, watching you fumble through a formal affair all while noting all of your little faux-pas so she can recall them later.” Anna tugged at the strap of her dress self-consciously. “And while Mary may be caught up in Abraham’s motives with you, she is not using you.”

“I never thought she was using me,” Anna protested weakly. Robert smirked at her pitiful attempt. He took a sip from his glass that didn’t look like he actually ingested any and took a step closer to her.

“But while she might be blind to your relationship with Hewlett, I am not.”

Anna felt the floor tilt beneath her and had to take a clumsy half step to the side to keep her balance. “What?” she whispered, entirely unconvincingly. “We-we don’t have a-a relationship.”

Robert waved off her objection nonchalantly. “Make no mistake, I don’t plan on telling anyone,” he reassured her. “but if I find out that Abraham makes any headway in his campaign for Mary’s affections, I might be coerced into telling.”

Anna gaped at him. “Are…are you blackmailing me?” Her eyes rose, unbidden, to Edmund, who was chatting with Andre, his eyes still angled in her direction.

Robert gave Anna a smile. “Of course not,” he said softly. “But, in pretending to blackmail, I just got you to confirm my suspicions.” He raised his glass of wine at her but didn’t drink it. “I learn many secrets, Mrs. Strong, but I rarely decide to share them.”

The emphasis on the prefix of her name was not lost on her. “Then, why…”

“If I know, then others do too,” he answered her question before she could ask it.

She let her eyes find Edmund again, and felt that guilt build heavily in her chest again. If Robert knew – Mary would know soon enough. And if Robert already knew, how many others suspected them? How many more harbored their own whispers of impropriety, of infidelity, of corruption? Anna cast an uncertain eye around the room. Ben and Caleb were at the bar, their shoulders brushing against each other affectionately. Mary was still chatting with the distinguished man that Anna recognized from the painting around the campus. That must be Washington, his wife’s hand settled into the crook of his arm. All around her were faces she didn’t recognize, people she didn’t know.

“Hey, I got you a drink,” Edmund’s voice was as welcome as it was dreaded; it still had that husky quality that it had developed when he spoke to her earlier. He held out a glass of red wine to her, letting his fingers brush against hers deliberately. Her body’s reaction was instinctive, and instant. She felt that telltale breathlessness in her chest, the pooling of desire in her abdomen. The gesture was so familiar, the same thing she had done to him that first night in the bar, when she flirted with him against her better judgment. It was the first step down the slippery slope from which she was rapidly sliding. Robert, still standing beside her, raised his glass at Edmund, who followed his movement, prompting Anna to do the same. They all took a drink silently, the quiet stretching thin and stressed. Robert gave her one more lingering look before he slipped into the crowd to find Mary. Edmund seemed completely oblivious; he smiled at her over the rim of his glass, his eyes full of heat and unspoken words and she felt the same breathy sigh building in her again.

There was an intention in his eyes that his mind hadn’t caught up to, and again Anna felt that same wild recklessness she had been chasing since she lost Selah. That same feeling replaced the doubt she had been drowning in since Robert’s fake threat. It was Edmund, time and again, that extinguished those doubts.

“Welcome Student Government, faculty, and distinguished students, to the annual Student
Government Association ball. I am Benedict Arnold, the Dean of Students, for those of you who don’t know,” a tall, burly man was addressing the crowd from a small stage at the front of the room. A diminutive woman with curly blonde hair was standing beside him. “Please enjoy the food, provided generously by the Loyalist catering service, and the open bar. Tonight is a thank you for your hard work. And, when you’re done with that, feel free to take over the dance floor.”

The clapping that followed the introductory speech gave Edmund the opening he needed to move closer to Anna. “Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?” he asked, the lapel of his jacket brushing against her bare arm. She could feel his breath on her neck. Against her will, and much too obviously, goosebumps erupted on her skin.

“Someone will see,” she replied, embarrassed at the hitch in her voice. Edmund cast his eyes around the room, looking for anyone paying attention to them.

“The dance floor is pretty full,” he noted. His eyes slid back to her.

Anna felt mischievousness pull a smile free from her lips. “Meet me in the middle of the floor,” she whispered, taking care to put her lips as close to Edmund’s ear as she dared. When she pulled away, his eyes were half-lidded, his hand half-risen to her hip. She slipped out of his almost-embrace into the crowd, keeping her eyes on him.

He followed.

The music was some slow kind of waltz, the strings gentle and lilting. Anna could feel her heartbeat calming as the cellos stepped in, deepening the soft sound so that she felt it deep in her chest.

She turned toward the stage, aware the most of the people on the dance floor were coupled up while she stood alone. But the music lulled her comfortably, and she reveled in it; that is, until Edmund’s hand took her own.

Immediately, her heart rate spiked. She turned into his embrace, already prepared for a waltz, and gently dropped her hand onto his shoulder while his settled on the curve of her hip.

She tried to think of something to say, but his eyes were boring into hers again, and everything she thought of felt trivial. His hand on her hip tensed for just a moment and the focus of his eyes shifted to something behind her.

She furrowed her brows, but as soon as she thought she saw his attention shift, it was back on her again, his reverence replaced with something darker. His hand, cradling her other one, turned slightly in her grip so he could interlace their fingers.

“Are you alright?” she asked, her voice almost lost to the sound of the swelling instruments.

He stepped closer to her, so their mouths were almost aligned with each other’s ears. “I just can’t believe I’m here with you.”

She laughed, a breathy chuckle that made him shiver and almost lose the rhythm of the song. His hand on her hip dipped slightly lower of its own accord. After a few moments, he realized the movement and brought his hand back up to her waist. Anna could still feel the pressure of his hand, low on her hip, burning into her skin.

“I didn’t know you could dance the waltz,” Edmund finally said, pulling away enough to look into her eyes again.

“I can’t,” Anna admitted. “I’m just following you.”
He chuckled in surprise, glancing down at their feet. “You’re doing great,” he pointed out. She mimicked his movement, watching their feet as they swept across the dance floor. His eyes were on her.

The song was ending; Anna could hear the diminishing sound of the violins, and the rising sound of people talking. Knowing that they would have to be more careful when the song ended, Anna pulled Edmund flush against her, relishing in their closeness before she stepped away from him, giving him an almost sarcastic and mischievous curtsy.

He blushed dark red and adjusted the collar of his shirt, pulling it away from his throat like he was having trouble breathing. Her sarcastic curtsy drew a strangled laugh from him that only served to make her smile even wider. That is, until his eyes found something behind her again.

The smile that charmed her so easily faded immediately from his face. He extended his hand to Anna, ignoring that the dance floor was clearing. She moved to turn around, to find what had startled him so much, but he caught her arm and pulled her toward him. The music was picking up again, this time a much faster song, and the dance floor filled quickly.

“What are you doing?” Anna hissed as Edmund pushed her gently back into the crowd of dancers.

His eyes, still locked on something, or someone, behind her, slammed into hers, and she almost stepped away. They were wide, full of something that looked like protectiveness.

“Just dance with me,” he pulled her body close to his, much like she had just done to him.

“Edmund –”

“Anna,” he answered immediately. “Just stay with me. Even if it’s only for the length of this song.”

Something in his voice was dejected, already readying himself for something he knew he didn’t want to hear. Anna wanted to protest, wanted to demand the truth, but he was pleading with her, his brown eyes full of sadness and a little fear.

So she clung tightly to him and let him lead her around the dance floor. And for the entire song, she never looked away from his eyes. He led her expertly around the floor, his eyes locked on hers.

She could see love, anger, sadness, frustration, reverence, peace, and all of it at once. His eyes were a raging storm of emotions she couldn’t begin to unravel, and she could feel it leaking into her. They had somehow managed to lose the careful flirting they had mastered, the sneaking, lingering touches. Edmund was tense, his shoulders squared and his chin raised high. Their first dance felt like a long time ago, lost in some sort of alternate universe they would never get back.

He lowered his mouth to her ear. “When the song ends, I want you to leave.”

She tried to pull away from him, but his grip on her waist held her in place. “You’re starting to scare me.”

“I’m trying to protect you,” he said firmly. “When the song ends, leave. Meet me at my office.”

His hand momentarily left her hip and slid into his pocket. He slid a gold key into her hand. She lifted her eyes to his, their noses almost brushing. A few minutes before, that would have thrilled her. But now, she was looking for answers in those same eyes.

“Go,” he whispered as the song started to fade. He pushed Anna toward the door, where Ben and Caleb were leaning against the door frame, their heads bent close to each other. When they saw her
approaching, they stepped away from each other.

“Annie,” Caleb acknowledged with a grin, “you looked like you were having fun.”

“Who do you see behind me?” she asked without responding to Caleb. Ben furrowed his brows at her, but Caleb immediately lifted his eyes to the crowd.

“Mary, Townsend, Hewlett, Washington, Shippen, Richard, Washington’s wife, Arnold,” he squinted, going momentarily onto his tiptoes to see better. “Oh shite, is that Simcoe?”

Anna froze. Ben’s eyes never left her.

“Anna,” he said carefully. “Why do you want to know who is behind you?”

“I have to go,” she replied, trying to push past them both to get out the doors. Ben caught her arm and halted her escape, but panic was starting to take over. She wrenched her arm out of his grip and kept going.

She could hear them following her; she cursed herself and paused long enough to unbuckle the heels Abigail lent her so she could walk faster.

“Anna, stop!” Ben shouted, his voice echoing in the empty, dark hallway.

“I can’t,” she stumbled, trying to slip the other shoe off her foot.

“Annie,” Caleb protested, jogging to catch up to her.

She could feel him catching up to her, but her feet continued to carry her down the hall toward the glass doors that would deposit her into the Common, and closer to Edmund’s office.

Ben’s voice was quiet, but Anna heard his quiet question all the same, like he had shouted it at her. “What did Simcoe do to you?”

The rumble of thunder lengthened the silence that stretched after the question. Anna finally paused in her escape, her hand on the door. She turned back to Ben, who was staring at her, dumbstruck. He asked a question he must already know the answer to.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she chastised, pushing on the door to lead her outside. “You don’t get to look at me like that.”

“Like what?” he asked.

“Like I’m a victim!” she shouted, the cooling air ruffling her hair and her dress. “If you look at me like that now, you’ll never stop.”

“Are you?” Ben finally asked after a long silence. “A victim?”

“Did I miss something?” Caleb asked, stepping between Anna and Ben.

“He didn’t succeed, if that’s your question,” Anna spat, gathering up her skirt so she could walk easier. “Now, if that’s enough for you, I’d like to leave.”

“Let us walk with you,” Caleb insisted, stepping up beside her. Ben, whose face was pale, his hands clenched, didn’t respond, but fell into step beside Caleb.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” he asked, his voice quiet, that same hushed tone that Anna got from
Abigail. She suppressed her angry reaction.

“I didn’t want to relive it,” she admitted. “Edmund took me to the police.”

“What did he do to you, Annie?” Caleb asked. Anna turned to Caleb, her closest childhood friend, aside from Abraham, and let him read the answer in her face. The tears, lingering at the corners of her eyes, the clenched jaw, the trembling chin, he took them all in. Slowly, deliberately, he raised his eyes to Ben.

“I have to go,” he said, stepping away from Anna.

Ben narrowed his eyes. “Don’t do what I think you’re going to do.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Caleb snapped. He paused long enough to squeeze Anna’s hand. “I love you, Annie,” he said fervently. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t there to protect you. But I’m going to protect you now.”

***

“Professor Hewlett,” Richard Woodhull’s voice was sharper than Edmund remembered. He gave his professional friend a half smile that was marred by the man standing beside him.

“Richard,” Edmund replied. “I hope you’re enjoying the ball.”

“I was,” Richard admitted. “I was, until Professor Simcoe delivered some grave news that I am afraid I must address.”

Edmund’s eyes finally rose to the man he had so hoped to avoid seeing. “Did he now?”

Simcoe showed no signs of injury from Anna’s struggle to defend herself; it angered him knowing that Anna could hardly wear a t-shirt without revealing the bruises he inflicted while he could walk around unscathed, unpunished, unimpeded. Thinking about it sent his hand into a tremble of anger, and he had to clench it tightly to keep it still.

Was it possible that Simcoe had been forced to tell Richard about his assault of Anna? Had the police contacted him about the report she’d made? A faint glimmer of hope flashed before Edmund, and he almost smiled.

“There have been rumors circulating for a while that I have chosen to ignore,” Richard began, and Simcoe’s face twitched into something akin to a smirk. It chilled Edmund enough to still his shaking hands. “I thought it was just a misunderstanding, but it has come to my attention that you and Anna Strong are in a relationship.”

Caught completely off guard, Edmund stumbled. “Uh, well, I mean, I don’t understand—”

“There’s no bother in denying it, Edmund, Simcoe tells me that you have been privately teaching her for months now, showing her preferential treatment because of your romantic entanglement,” Richard’s voice was growing harder, but Edmund was growing less interested. His sole interest was in Simcoe, standing beside Richard like a dutiful wife, who had only done what was expected of her.

“I do not have a romantic entanglement with Mrs. Strong,” Edmund insisted. “Despite what Simcoe may misconstrue, I have only been tutoring her so that she can pass her classes. He’s only trying to accuse me of misconduct now because he assaulted Mrs. Strong in a bar a few nights ago, and she filed a police report against him.” He paused long enough to look at Richard in triumph. “Did he forget to mention that to you?”
Richard looked, infuriatingly, unsurprised. “No matter his motives, we have found plenty of others who have voiced their suspicions about your conduct with Mrs. Strong. And until we can verify just how severe your infractions are, you are hereby placed on leave. We will have someone take over your classes. You are not to be on campus after tonight until your hearing.”

Edmund felt a defeated sigh working its way up his throat, but he suppressed it. His anger was too important. “And what will you do with him?” he asked, thrusting his finger in Simcoe’s direction.

“I’m not the one violating the students,” Simcoe hissed.

“Not for a lack of trying,” Edmund spat, stepping closer to him. Richard stepped between the two men, putting his back to Simcoe.

“We will investigate your accusation,” Richard said fairly.

“So I can tutor a student and get placed on leave, but he can assault one, and you’re going to ‘investigate it?’” Edmund snapped. “Make no mistake, I was still a lawyer before I got here, and if justice isn’t doled out as it should be, I will be happy to become a lawyer once more.”

Richard blinked, glancing away from Edmund’s face. “I’m sorry that it had to come to this, old friend.”

“You are no friend of mine,” Edmund snapped. Without giving Richard or Simcoe a chance to respond, he held his head high and left with dignity, hoping that Anna was still waiting for him in his office.
Advanced Subtext

Chapter Summary

The end of the ball, so to speak.

Lightning was dancing across the sky when Edmund pushed open the door that led to the Common. He had been walking fiercely, fueled only by his anger, but the lingering threat of rain, the hopelessness of his situation, finally sucked the energy out of him. He paused in the doorway, his eyes rising to the dark sky, trying to decide where the night ended and the storm began.

He was being, effectively, fired. If his relationship with Anna, if he could call it that, had garnered this much attention already, he could feasibly say that he wouldn’t be getting his classes back after the semester ended. He would have to go back to England, back to law, back to a career he didn’t like.

He heaved a deep breath. Anna was waiting for him in his office; she would be worried that he hadn’t appeared yet. Without even realizing it, he quickened his pace.

He would have to decide what to say to her. Would he tell her he had seen Simcoe, could he manage to keep his anger in check long enough to say those words to her? Did he want to see that horrified look cross her face again? Would he tell her that he was being suspended? He groaned heavily, rubbing his hand over his face and letting it run through his hair.

He decided, suddenly, forcibly, not to lie to her. Abraham had lied to her enough, Selah had abandoned her enough. He would not be those things.

But could he tell her the reason?

They didn’t talk about their friendship, about their relationship. They didn’t talk about the way they felt about each other, even though they had crossed so many lines together. Even when they were lost in each other, they took great care never to say it out loud. They had adopted a holding pattern; they leaned on each other, they supported each other, but they never gave it a name. Would they have to now?

What would she say?

He quietly pushed open the door to his building, relishing in the smell of the halls, the bookshelves along the walls. This would be the last time he saw them for a long time. The reality of his situation weighed him down again, and he sighed, his shoulders rising and falling with the force of it.

As cavalier as he was being about it, as much as he wished he could pretend like it didn’t bother him, it rankled to know that he was being punished for something that didn’t harm anyone, while Simcoe could assault a student. Nothing would happen to happen to him; he knew the world well enough by now.

He could see that the light to his office was on. He stared at it for a moment, knowing that everything would change when he opened the door.

Still, he knew that the longer he delayed the conversation, the more worried she would be.
He knocked quietly on the door and readied himself.

She was just as beautiful as he remembered; her red lipstick had faded only a little at the crease of her mouth, where she had worried her lips with her teeth. The bright, fluorescent lights did nothing to diminish her beauty; he could only see her better now. The bare skin, revealed to his eyes at her thigh and her back, sent his heart rate to dangerous heights.

“You are so beautiful,” he breathed, unable to stop the words from tumbling out of his mouth.

She let out a surprised chuckle that was too low to be a giggle. It made his palms clammy; he was not used to being so affected by her. It made him feel almost dizzy every time his eyes met hers.

“I thought we were supposed to get to my place before we got to that,” she said quietly.

Edmund worried sincerely for a moment that he was going to faint at the sound of her voice. He let out a weak laugh that didn’t convince her. She furrowed her brows, moving toward him. He had given himself away. She was concerned now, reaching for his hand.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Is this about Simcoe?”

He tensed. “What about Simcoe?”

She gave him a half smile that held no actual pleasure in it. “I know that Simcoe was behind me; Caleb told me.” She paused, her eyes drinking in his face. “Thank you, by the way, for telling me to leave.” Her hand, resting on his arm, lowered to his hand and grasped it tightly. “You are too good to me.”

“I have something I have to tell you,” he said in a rush, knowing that all of this touching, all of this affection, would be gone when she realized what all of this had brought upon them.

The smile that covered her face faded. “What’s happened?” she asked.

“I’ve been put on temporary leave,” his voice was quiet, almost ashamed, like hearing that would change her opinion of him. Anna blinked slowly, letting his words register; he watched her closely, looking for that shift in her that meant that she was leaving. She was such a flight risk, one foot out the door to keep herself safe.

“On what?” she asked, her face frozen somewhere between crushed and livid. He repeated himself, and she settled on crushed. He felt his chest tighten in panic; this was not what he wanted. Her eyes glanced around his office, looking for something, anything to anchor herself, but she couldn’t settle on anything; he stayed anchored on her, her dark eyes, the curtain of hair that fell in front of one of her eyes.

“Why?” she asked, her eyes hard. She was asking as a formality; she already knew.

“I think you know,” he said quietly. She shook her head, sending her straight hair into disarray.

“Say it.”

“Because of us,” he motioned between their bodies. “…this.”

She fell silent for a long time. “What does that mean for you?” she asked finally, her voice quiet. He motioned for her to take the seat across from his desk, but she ignored him.

“I am temporarily relieved of my classes,” he said, “but the department chair and Richard will
determine if I’ve done anything to warrant termination at the end of the semester. If not, I get all of my classes back.”

“And if they fire you?” she asked.

He didn’t answer. She seemed to see all she was looking for in his face, though what that was, Edmund couldn’t say. Her large eyes searched his, and roved over his books, his desk, his pile of ungraded papers. His life.

“This was a mistake,” she muttered, crossing her arms awkwardly to cover her bare skin. “This was a mistake.”

“Anna –“

She was moving toward the door of his office now, shaking her head.

“Anna, come back –“

“No, don’t, don’t touch me!” she exclaimed when his hand brushed her arm. “This is what got you here!” she motioned to herself, to them. “You’re going to be fired, Edmund. You need to come to terms with that. Richard will never let you have your job.”

Edmund desperately wanted to say that he didn’t believe her, but he couldn’t.

“I should have just – I could have handled it on my own,” Anna seemed to be talking to herself now more than Edmund, but he tuned in just the same. “I never –”

He reached for her, grasping one of her hands that she almost pulled away. “Simcoe was behaving inappropriately, and you were fearing for your safety. I did what I had to do.” He cleared his throat and shook his head slightly, like he was starting over. “All I did, besides tutoring you and being your friend, was make sure that you were safe and give you the counsel to go to the police.”

“Did you?” she asked, a kind of cruel smile on her lips. “Is that all it was? Some honor-bound duty?”

He felt the pulse in his throat quicken. They were getting to it again; that spark between them they never spoke of; the way she would lean on him at the end of a movie, or the way they shared drinks and picked off each other’s plate; the longing way his eyes would linger on her and the sneaky, sweet way she would brush her fingers over his hand.

“Anna –”

“Professor Hewlett,” she answered, reverting back to formality. “Save your job. It’s all you have.”

And she wrenched her hand out of his, too forcefully, and left him in the doorway of his office, his hand still outstretched. It had started to storm outside, the clouds finally giving way to rain. He could hear the automatic door at the back of the building opening and closing repeatedly with the wind. He barely heard her footsteps as she descended the three short steps to the sidewalk.

Did he really believe all of his actions, his purposeful movements to keep her enrolled in college, to help her pass her classes, to protect her from Simcoe, were for honor? Duty? Were they all in the name of chivalry? It certainly wasn’t ownership; respect, he thought confidently. He respected her, he relished in her presence. He didn’t want that to go away. Her bravery, stubbornness, and even the way she constantly decided that she didn’t deserve someone to love her, they had turned Setauket University into something more than a job. It had been a home.
But had it been the university? Or her?

He shed his coat and went after her.

She was strategically using the awnings of other buildings to keep herself dry, but Edmund could already tell her dress was soaked. He called her name and watched as her shoulders stiffened, but she quickly ignored him and kept moving. She was holding her heels in her hand, pulling her hair over her shoulder with the other. She could walk home, she didn’t live far from here, but she wasn’t even going in the right direction. She was going aimlessly, driven by emotion and too lost to care.

Edmund was not a tall man, but she was still shorter than him. He caught up to her quickly.

He could see the difference between the rain and the tears on her face. She didn’t stop until he grabbed her arm and gently tugged, asking rather than making her turn around.

“I did it for you,” he said simply, as if that would explain everything. She looked confused; he wiped at the rain that was pouring down on him, hindering his vision of her, and started again. “I mean, all of the things I did. I didn’t do them for honor, at least, not exactly. I did them because you needed someone’s help. You needed me. And I wanted to help you.”

“I didn’t need you,” she protested.

“You did,” he replied simply. “It’s not an insult to your own self-preservation. Just an observation, if you will. But if that means I can’t have my job…if I have to pick –”

“Edmund –”

“Anna, to hell with my job,” he exclaimed into the rain, finally letting go of her hand. “I don’t have to teach at this tiny university. I did this as a favor, as an experiment. I don’t care about whether or not I work here. I care about you.”

The thunder rolled in the distance and the sky lit up with lightning. Anna’s face, for a moment, was illuminated clearly, her own brow furrowed in disbelief. Her makeup was starting to smudge under her eyes, but most of it remained intact. He considered brushing her tears off her face, but she shifted weight from one foot to another and more rain poured on to her. He gave it up.

“I know you don’t believe me,” he continued, mostly because she hadn’t spoken. “Because of Abraham. Because of Selah. I’m not asking you to believe me,” he gently reached up for her face and took it in his much larger hand. “I’m just asking that you give me a chance to prove it.”

Her eyes had fallen to his lips, and he took that as his permission. Finally, after months of dancing around it, he kissed the student he had longed to kiss since the day he knocked her over in the Common. Her lips were wet with tears and rain, and her hands immediately went to his waist, clutching at his now-soaked shirt.

They were in full view of anyone passing by, but Edmund let all thoughts fly from his mind as Anna made the quietest moaning sound at the back of her throat. He pushed her back under the awning of the building beside his own and against the wall, finally releasing her lips and dropping smaller, chaste kisses on her cheeks. Her eyes were closed but her hands were tight in his shirt, clutching it like she was afraid to let go. She pulled his chest flush with hers and kissed him, her mouth moving languidly, lazily, over his. It was a kiss of time, a kiss they would have the chance to repeat. Carefully, with the smoothness of an animal of prey, she moved from his lips to his neck, where one of her hands finally released his shirt to move his collar out of her way. Her other hand came to rest around his tie, which she yanked when his hand brushed her bare thigh.
He immediately snatched it back, fearing that he had crossed some unspoken line. He let his hand settle on her hip, getting lost in the feeling of her lips on the tender skin of his throat. Her teeth just barely brushed the spot that was usually protected by his collar, and he let out an embarrassingly loud gasp, pulling a low laugh from her. Her hand snuck down to his hand on her hip and gently cradled it, the pressure of her lips on his neck lightening long enough for her to seal their lips together again. With a sense of walking too close to danger, she directed his hand back to her thigh, sighing against his mouth at his touch.

Edmund felt like he was rapidly spiraling out of control; his hand tightened around her thigh, the other hand getting impossibly tangled in her wet hair. He pulled back, trying to catch his breath, but opening his eyes to see Anna’s eyes still closed, the rain making her dress cling even tighter to her body, didn’t help him keep breath in his lungs.

“We probably…I mean,” he cleared his throat and tried to start over, “I mean to say, we shouldn’t be doing this here, in public,” he finally said, noting rather embarrassingly that he was out of breath.

She laughed, a full laugh that almost startled him, her hand coming up to cover her mouth once more, and glanced around. “Probably not,” she said, her voice raspy. He almost closed his eyes at the sound. So that was what Anna Strong sounded like after she had been thoroughly kissed. He had wished for this knowledge for so long, he found it hard to believe that he was actually experiencing it.

“Well, my place isn’t far from here,” she said finally, tugging on Edmund’s hand. “If you still wanted to come over, that is.”

She must have seen the fear in his eyes, because she stepped closer to him. “I don’t mean…for that. Just to get out of the rain.”

Edmund let out a breath that sounded like relief. “It’s not…it’s not that I don’t want to…you know,” Anna smirked at him, and he felt, for a moment, like his knees were going to buckle. He was becoming such a cliché. “I just…I don’t want to move too fast.”

Her smirk grew easily into a smile. “You don’t have to explain,” she said, pulling him toward the building. “I already know.”

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Caleb made it back to the dorm before Ben, moving with such furious purpose that Ben couldn’t catch up to him after he escorted Anna to Edmund’s office. He returned to the ball long enough to scan the crowd and make sure that Caleb hadn’t returned to enact physical revenge on Simcoe.

He was surprised, but proud, to find that Caleb had, for once, decided to forgo violence for something else.

He had gone to the bar after that, just to cover his bases, before he returned to the dorm. The light bleeding in from under the door pulled a sigh of relief from him. He didn’t bother pulling out his key; the door would be unlocked. He nudged the door open and took a moment to take in Caleb’s appearance, lounging comfortably on his bed, the sheets pushed to the floor.

“What are you planning?” Ben asked, shedding his jacket and hanging it on the hanger he had discarded on his bed earlier. Caleb was dressed in his usual cargo pants, his suit tossed haphazardly onto the floor of his closet. Ben naturally moved toward it and hung it up, placing it beside his own suit in his closet. Caleb looked up from the book he was reading, and held up the cover.
So, it turns out that if a teacher is convicted of a crime any more serious than a traffic violation, he is supposed to be terminated from his position,” Caleb said proudly. “And if he’s accused, he’s supposed to be placed immediately on suspension.”

Ben nodded. “I could have told you that.”

“So why hasn’t Simcoe been suspended yet?” Caleb asked, jabbing the air with his orange highlighter. “If Anna made the police report on Sunday, as a guess, Simcoe would have been notified of the ongoing investigation by now. That is, unless the police have no intention of doing anything at all.”

“And if they don’t?” Ben asked, sitting on the edge of the bed Caleb was occupying. “Take any action, that is.”

Caleb raised an eyebrow. “I figure, a riot worked once before, and it’ll work again.”

Ben paused and frowned. “I don’t know if a riot is the way to go.”

Caleb shook his head. “Look, I know that the last one went bad, but it won’t happen this time.” He closed the book in his lap, careful to mark his page, and opened his arms, inviting Ben into them. He obliged, laying his head on Caleb’s chest. He seemed to feel Ben’s tension, held tightly in his shoulders. He kissed his forehead. “I’ll make sure it goes okay,” he reassured him. “Now sleep.”

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“I think I have some clothes that Ben left here,” Anna mused as she tossed a towel in Edmund’s direction. He caught it and set to drying his hair, sending the short brown tufts into little spikes. Anna smiled warmly at it before padding into the spare room to find something for him to change into.

“They’ll be too big on me,” he answered, his voice muffled by the towel.

“Would you prefer something of Abraham’s?” she replied.

He said nothing.

“Okay then, Ben’s pajamas it is,” she said, coming back to toss a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt at him. “At least you’ll be comfortable.” He considered them for a moment, but decided that wet clothes would be far less comfortable than wearing pajamas in front of Anna. He stood up to go change, but she called him back.

“Wait, before you go, can you help me unzip this?” she asked, turning her back to him. His eyes fell to the low back of her dress, still wet and clinging to her body. He groaned, closing his eyes.

“Must I?” he asked, his voice strangled. Anna pulled her wet hair over her shoulder and tossed him a glance over her shoulder.

“Scared?” she asked.

There was a challenge in her voice, and for a moment, for his own sanity, he considered not taking it. He let his eyes unapologetically rove over the expanse of bare skin, marred only by goosebumps and the occasional freckle, and reached for the zipper. Getting a grip of it sent the cold metal pressing deeper into her skin, and she jumped a little at the temperature, the smallest of gasps taking him completely off guard.
He slowly, tantalizingly, undid the zipper, trying not to look at the skin he was revealing. The air was thick, heavy with subtext, and he found that Anna had stopped breathing. He released the delicate zipper, letting his fingers just barely brush the newly exposed skin at the small of her back.

The breath she was holding shuddered out of her, and she offered no witty rebuttal to her original challenge. She left him standing in the hallway, clutching Ben’s clothes, and closed the door to her bedroom, presumably to change her clothes. He supposed he should follow her example.

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Anna leaned heavily against the door of her bedroom and tried to step free from the whirlwind that was rapidly sweeping her up. She hadn’t expected to get so...involved with this sudden turn of events. She had thought her first kiss with Edmund, if they ever got to have one, would have been painfully awkward, something that took practice. And, to be sure, they had bumped noses at least once out in the rain, but she was shocked at how easily they responded to each other, how intoxicated they both seemed to be.

There was no imbalance, there was no miscommunication; they were in sync, reading each other’s minds, drawing up quiet gasps they couldn’t suppress, drinking in the words they hadn’t realized they needed to say.

The reality of Edmund’s situation, of his job, floated up toward the front of her mind, but she shoved it back. Tomorrow, she promised. They would worry about it tomorrow. Tonight, they only needed to worry about each other.

She slid the dress from her shoulders, hanging it from the towel rack in her bathroom, listening to it dripping onto the tile for a moment before she pulled on a pair of shorts and a sweatshirt with the printed words “A woman’s place is in the House and the Senate.”

When she left her bedroom, closing the door quietly behind her, she could hear the television on. She padded into the living room, a smile taking over her face when she spotted Edmund, sitting in his usual spot on the couch, looking thoroughly uncomfortable in Ben’s too large shirt and sweatpants.

“I don’t think I’ve worn sweatpants since college,” he admitted, pointing the remote at the television and turning on Downton Abbey. She ignored the sound of the television and took the seat beside him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“I find it hard to believe that you ever wore sweatpants,” she replied, letting her hand land on his thigh, feeling the material. She suppressed a smirk when she felt the muscle of his leg tense. “Relax,” she admonished gently, tapping his leg with the tips of her fingers.

“Relax,” he protested, his leg still tense.

She sighed. “Would it make you feel better if I refrained from touching you?” she asked, reclaiming her hand from his leg.

“Tell that to your leg,” she pointed out.

He paused, trying to find the words to explain that he was on edge in a deliciously good way, not a bad one. He struggled over the words for a while, flipping through his vast vocabulary frantically before settling on, “My leg does not speak for me.”

That drew a laugh from her, a surprised giggly one that bled into him, and soon, they were both
laughing, clinging to each other, and he was relishing in the sound of her delight, in the feeling of her hand on his arm, of the warmth she sent through him. After a few moments of sweet oblivion, lost in each other, their giggles dissolved into a companionable silence.

“Edmund?” her voice was quiet, the remnants of her laugh still lingering there.

“Anna?” he replied, glancing down at her.

“What’s going to happen now?” she asked. Her eyes were larger than usual, staring up at him, and he was suddenly struck by how young she looked. She had been through so much, dealt with so much trauma, and she was still strong, still standing. Still inspiring.

He couldn’t bring himself to tarnish tonight with talk of his possible termination. He tilted her chin up to meet his mouth and planted a small, chaste kiss there.

“Don’t worry about it tonight,” he said. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

That seemed to be the right answer; Anna pressed her lips to his again, firmly but not aggressively, for a moment. Even with his eyes closed, even swept up in the feeling of her again, Edmund was aware that she was distracting him with a kiss to move without his notice.

Before he could figure out what her endgame was, she was on his lap, pinning him in place with her thighs. He had enough breath left in his lungs to gasp in surprise before she caught his lips again, this time abandoning her firm kiss for one that slowly pulled him impossibly close to her. Her hands were running through his hair, tightening almost painfully when his hands came alive and ran up her back, in the inside of her sweatshirt. She scooted closer to him, if that were possible, and the pressure of her body against his, her legs around his waist, her hands in his hair, was starting to steal his breath.

He freed his lips from hers, trying to get control of himself, trying to breathe.

“What are you alright?” she asked him, kissing the top of his head. It seemed that once he broke the dam of kissing her, she couldn’t stop herself. He smiled softly, feeling incredibly lucky.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he answered. He untangled one of her hands from his hair and kissed it, his eyes staying locked on hers.

The tender gesture put a soft smile on her face, and she had just moved toward him once more when the sound of a key in the lock startled them both. Instead of moving apart, they stayed frozen while someone unlocked the front door.

Caleb’s voice preceded the sight of him.

“You got fired?”
Chapter Summary

In which Caleb has an idea to save Hewlett's job and take down Simcoe. Served with a side of origins and painful pasts.

“You got fired?”

Caleb, his words preceding his entrance to the room, froze when he took in Anna and Edmund’s position. Ben, following behind him, ran right into his back.

“Oh, what the hell are you—hey, you two,” Caleb’s look of surprise quickly melted into amusement. “We can uh…we can come back later if you two are, you know, in the middle of something.”

Anna scowled at them both and slid off of Edmund’s lap and onto the couch. “What are you two doing here? Shouldn’t you be off enjoying the magical ball?”

Ben immediately went into the kitchen and opened the fridge. “Well, after your…announcement,” he tilted his head at Anna, who averted her eyes, “Caleb went back to the dorm to look up the protocol for a teacher accused of a crime.”

Caleb grinned at her for a moment before turning his gaze to Edmund. “Do we need to have a talk about your intentions with our Annie?” he asked.

“Caleb.”

The bearded man raised his hands in mock surrender and retreated, but it still drew an embarrassed smile from Edmund. Of all of Anna’s friends, he felt most comfortable with the crass and impulsive Caleb, who often didn’t bother to hide his feelings or his intentions. He liked knowing exactly what Caleb thought of him; he found he was often intimidated by Ben, whether physically or by his relationship with Anna. Abraham was a completely different animal.

“And what did you find out?” Edmund finally asked. Anna’s hand, covered by one of her couch cushions, snuck onto his leg again. He flinched in surprise, turning his eyes to her in half-hearted admonishment.

“Simcoe should have been suspended the second Annie made that police report,” Caleb supplied helpfully while Ben filled the kettle with water. “Oi, make me a coffee while you’re in there.”

“Make it yourself,” Anna and Ben shot back at him.

“Anyway, the book says that he should be suspended for now, fired if the accusation is true, which, we know it is,” Caleb indicated his own neck and pointed at Anna. “Your bruises are showing up now, by the way,” he said.

Anna’s hand on Edmund’s leg retreated so she could self-consciously trace the bruise on her neck. He gave her a sad smile that she returned.
“But enough about that, what’s this text you sent me about getting fired?” Caleb waved his phone at Edmund as if he could read the glowing screen if it kept constantly moving.

“You texted Caleb?” Anna asked him.

Edmund didn’t get a chance to respond.

“Oh yeah, Hew and I text all the time,” Caleb told her with a smile. “Worried that I’m gonna steal your man from you?” he asked with a playful smile.

“Has he been drinking tonight?” Anna directed the question to Ben, who shrugged.

“There’s a possibility he got some in before I found him, but the likelier suspect is the coffee pot that was still warm when I got there,” he answered, dropping some teabags in a few cups. “Who wants tea?”

Everyone murmured something that sounded like assent, and Ben took another cup out of the cupboard.

“Coffee,” Caleb repeated.

“You’re getting tea,” Ben replied.

“He didn’t get fired,” Anna jumped in before Ben and Caleb could start bickering.

“Suspended is the word Richard used,” Edmund added helpfully. “For uh…inappropriate behavior with a student.”

Caleb chuckled. “Well, from what I saw, she liked it, so –”

A flurry of couch cushions flew from both Anna and Edmund, and he retreated again, his hands in the air.

“Alright, alright, everyone relax and drink your tea,” Ben ordered, passing mugs around to the group. “Now, good news and bad news. From what I remember about the Code of Conduct, there is no rule against teachers and students dating, just that it is rather frowned upon. So long as Anna was never your student –”

“Nope,” Anna supplied.

“Then there should be no reason to terminate your position,” Ben finished. “However, if Richard can find evidence of preferential treatment, in Anna’s essays or her grades, then you could be fired.”

Anna frowned, still warming her hands on the cup of tea. “But I wasn’t his student, how could he give me preferential treatment?”

“Let’s say he wrote your essays for you,” Ben said, taking a sip of his tea, “or at least, wrote a chunk of it. Based on your previous grades, your professors could wave a red flag of plagiarism, which would, by law, have to be reported to the departmental chairs and the deans. If any of that has happened, or if they go back into your essays and determine that he wrote any of it for you, he could get fired.”

The tea was no longer calming Anna. “But he didn’t, he just helped me fix them.”

Edmund took a sip of his tea and remained silent, dropping his free hand on top of Anna’s arm.
“I’m not saying that he wrote any of it, but if we know Richard Woodhull, we know the truth is only consequential so long as it perpetuates the narrative he wants portrayed,” Ben explained. “We all remember what happened with your father, Anna.”

“What happened to your father?” Edmund turned halfway to Anna, whose eyes were on her mug.

“Later,” she promised, removing one of her hands from her mug long enough to grasp Edmund’s. Edmund’s eyes slid to Caleb and Ben, who both looked away.

“But, luckily, Caleb has a plan,” Ben interjected into the silence with a tone that clearly said he didn’t believe the plan was going to work. Caleb, identifying the tone, shot him a glare. Anna and Edmund both turned to Caleb, who sighed and clasped his hands together.

“A protest,” he said simply.

Edmund could feel Anna go very still. “No,” she said firmly.

“Annie—”

“No!” she exclaimed. “Did you forget what happened last time?”

“Of course I didn’t forget,” Caleb retorted. “Just because all of you think I’m dumb doesn’t mean I am. It didn’t work last time because it got out of hand. We just have to do it right this time.”

“Do it right?” Anna repeated.

“Yes.”

“Do it right?” she repeated again, this time with a laugh at the edge of her voice. “Caleb, we can’t. I can’t.”

“I’m sorry, but what is going on?” Edmund asked, leaning forward to block Anna’s furious eye contact with Caleb. “What have I missed?”

Anna, instead of answering, leaned back into the couch cushions and crossed her arms. Caleb, frustrated, stood and moved into the kitchen, where he fidgeted with the coffeepot like he couldn’t decide if he actually wanted coffee. Ben, sitting effectively between the two of them, took a deep breath and addressed Edmund.

“A couple of years ago, when we were all still freshmen, Anna’s father, William Smith, worked at the university. He was a political science professor. He and Richard Woodhull were good friends.”

Anna scoffed into her tea. Edmund’s hand closed around her wrist gently and stayed there as Ben continued.

“The year that me, Caleb, and Abe came into school, financial aid got severely restricted. Many of us knew friends and students that could no longer come to school because they didn’t have funding. Dr. Smith thought this spelled the end of the university. ‘What else is left, if we are going to restrict admittance to those who can afford it on their own, for this university to do—’”

“‘but die?’” Caleb and Anna finished, Anna softly, Caleb firmly.

“Exactly,” Ben agreed. Edmund began to see that this was going to end poorly. “So he told his classes about what an injustice it was, as an example of the government choosing to fund things that furthered death rather than life. I was in that class.”
Ben took a sip of his tea and smiled nostalgically.

“I remember telling Anna how amazed of her father I was, how much I admired him. And I told Caleb, and Abe too, what Dr. Smith had said. And Dr. Smith told us, well, if you don’t want it to happen, then protest. You must protest what you do not want, in every mode of life. Don’t let life just happen to you. Happen to life instead.”

Edmund turned to Anna, who had a quiet smile on her face. “Now I know where you get it.”

She nodded proudly.

“So we did. We protested,” Ben paused again, and Edmund could see he was gathering the strength to continue. “And it all went wrong. Someone, we don’t know who, called us communists, and someone else retaliated, and soon, it was a full-blown riot. Everyone was fighting, shoving, punching.”

Anna looked away from them, into the dregs of her tea. Gently, she took her hand out of Edmund’s reach.

“Abraham’s brother, a senior at the time, was pushed into the street beside the Common. He was struck by a car and died at the scene.”

The silence rang heavy; Edmund furrowed his brows as Caleb, Ben, and Anna all exchanged glances. They all didn’t seem to know where to go from here. Finally, Anna sighed.

“Selah was driving the car,” Anna added. “It was an accident, but…he was the one that was driving the car.”

Abe, who had invited his brother to the protest in the first place, felt responsible, Anna felt responsible, we all felt responsible, and Selah ran from the scene,” Ben jumped back in, his voice quiet and respectful, as if at a funeral. “Richard was heartbroken, and he took his grief out on the person he deemed responsible.”

“Dr. Smith,” Edmund said with finality.

“Exactly, so Dr. Smith got fired for inciting a riot, or so Richard claimed, and no school would hire him after that,” Caleb spat, finally deciding against the coffee and returning to the living room.

“And where is Dr. Smith now?” Edmund asked.

Everyone fell silent, their eyes asking Anna who should respond. Finally, she took it upon herself.

“He passed away last year,” she answered. “Complications from a heart attack.”

He reached for her hand again. “Oh. Anna, I’m sorry.”

“He died unable to do what he loved because he took a stand at the wrong time, the wrong way,” she clarified, her eyes searching out Caleb. “I won’t let the same thing happen to Edmund.”

Caleb kneeled onto the floor in front of her. “This isn’t the same thing. We were protesting something we never could have changed, not in our small town. But this…what Simcoe did to you, what Richard is doing to Hew, we can fix that. We can prevent it. All we need to do is draw attention to it.”

Anna furrowed her brow. “You want me to tell people what Simcoe did to me?” Her hands
immediately rose defensively to her neck.

“Annie, this is about making Simcoe pay and helping Hew get his job back,” Caleb explained gently. “The police aren’t doing anything about that, as far as we can tell. We have to do something.”

Anna clenched her jaw, the muscles jutting out as she did so. “No,” she said firmly, shaking her head. “I can’t. I can’t tell people.”

Edmund moved to speak, but Caleb cut him off. “I know it’s hard, okay, I know how hard it is to tell people something that you thought you could keep in forever;” he paused long enough to let his eyes slide over to Ben, “but if you stay silent, he will do this to someone else.”

She let out a shaky breath that was halfway between a laugh and a sob. “I can’t have people look at me like I’m something to be pitied anymore,” she said softly to him, and Edmund’s hand came back to take hers.

“Then don’t let them,” Caleb responded, his voice the same volume. “Take back your strength. Prove to everyone that you aren’t a victim. Take Simcoe down, and make Richard pay for what he did to your father.”

Anna’s eyes left his to focus on something far away. She wanted justice, and she wanted Simcoe to pay, but the humiliation, the pain that came with telling people what he did to her, how much he got away with, was almost unbearable to even think about, much less voice aloud. She could see, even in Ben and Caleb’s eyes, the pity that lurked just beneath the surface. For so many people, she would just be that girl that got assaulted. She would be a cautionary tale.

And when her relationship with Edmund, if it even was a relationship, came out, she would be the girl who still slept with a teacher, even after she was assaulted by one. Wouldn’t that hurt Edmund more than it would help him?

She let her eyes drift over to him for a moment. He was dutifully holding onto her hand, his thumb absently brushing soft circles over her knuckles. He hadn’t been the one that saved her; she had done that herself, but standing beside her while she did it was invaluable. He didn’t deserve what she had accidentally brought to him.

She sighed, loud enough that she caught Caleb’s attention. “I’ll do it,” she said firmly, slowly, like she was testing how the words tasted in her mouth. She took a sip of her tea to wash it out. “But I need to talk to Abraham first. I want him to hear from us that we’re planning a protest.”

Ben and Caleb exchanged a look. “You want to include him in this?”

Edmund hadn’t said anything, but his hand had loosened around Anna’s. She renewed her grip on it. “Not necessarily,” she corrected, “but I do want him to know that we’re going to do another protest when the last one killed his brother. He deserves to be warned, I think. And if he decides to stand on our side, then that will be just another stab for Richard.”

“You’ll have to tell him about Hew,” Caleb pointed out, nudging his chin at Anna and Edmund’s connected hands. She dropped her gaze to their fingers and squeezed.

“Abe is my friend,” she said confidently, but she didn’t quite believe her words. “If he is truly my friend, then he’ll support me.”

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“No.”
Anna inhaled sharply through her nose, trying not to let her displeasure show on her face. “Abe, I know this is hard—”

“No,” he shook his head adamantly. “No, I don’t think you do.”

Caleb held up his hands. “Don’t get mad at Annie, Woody, this was my idea.”

“Don’t think I don’t know that,” Abe turned his furious eyes to Caleb. “I can smell half-baked coming off this from a mile away.”

“Okay, let’s not get petty,” Ben’s voice, from the kitchen again, was stern, and Anna could see Edmund’s head nodding in agreement.

Abe whirled around to find Ben. “How could you think this was a good idea? You said yourself we were never going to do another protest, not ever, but suddenly your boyfriend suggests it and you’re fine with it?”

The room rang with the aftermath of Abe’s statement, the angry emphasis he put on the word. Ben’s face went very still, very white, and he turned away from the group, sitting on the couch and around it. He started busying himself with the kettle on the stove, unnecessarily fixing it. Edmund patted Anna on the hand gently and stood, stepping over Caleb to get to the kitchen. Anna watched him gently place his hand on Ben’s back and talk to him quietly, the murmur of their words unintelligible.

“First of all, if I ever hear you say that word with that kind of disgust again, I am going to knock you back to the Revolutionary War, Woody,” Caleb growled at Abe, who seemed dumbstruck by the reaction his word had garnered. “Second, my relationship with Ben is none of your business, just like it’s nobody’s fuckin’ business, alright? And third, we’re doing this with or without you. Annie just wanted to make sure you had warning.”

Abe turned his eyes to Anna, the only one left who was still looking at him. “I didn’t…I didn’t know.”

She blinked. “Yes you did,” she replied softly. “Because you wouldn’t have said it if you didn’t.”

Abe sighed heavily, trying to find someone in the room that would listen to him. “Look, no matter the reason, a protest on this campus is a bad idea. People got hurt last time, in case you forgot.”

“Of course we didn’t forget,” Anna snapped. “You lost a brother, Abe, but I lost everything too. Don’t think I just forgot. But this is a necessary risk.”

“There has to be another way,” he insisted. “Surely we can think of another way.”

“If we can think of one, we’ll take it into consideration,” Anna replied stonily. “But until then, this was my assault, and this is my relationship, and if their legitimacy is being threatened, then I will protest it. I would like for you stand by me, as my friend. If not, then I understand.”

At the mention of her assault, Abe’s eyes left hers and settled on the floor. “I don’t understand why you didn’t tell me, Anna.”

She laughed, a loud, almost hysterical laugh that held no pleasure in it. “Why, so you could try to beat up Simcoe yourself and end up cell mates with Selah? No, what happened to me wasn’t about you, or your manhood. It was about me and Simcoe. I didn’t need to be saved. I just need support.”

“And you have it—”
“Just not if I want to protest the lack of justice,” she finished for him.

“My brother died —”

“And so did my father, and my child, and my husband is in prison,” Anna shot back. “You don’t have a monopoly on sorrow, Abe.” She stopped there, looking like there was so much more she wanted to say. Instead, she placed her teacup on the table by her right hand and stood. “I’m going to go to bed,” she said to the room at large. “You guys can feel free to stay as long as you like. Ben, lock the door when you leave.” She stopped by Caleb and kissed the top of his head. “Thank you,” she whispered.

There was a long silence left in her wake. Ben and Caleb studiously avoided Abe’s gaze, and Edmund stood between them all, holding an empty teacup, at a loss. Finally, Caleb spoke.

“Go after her, Hew,” he said, tilting his head toward Anna’s bedroom. “You look beat.”

Edmund smiled at Anna’s friend, no, his friend, he corrected himself, and gently placed the cup upside down on the counter, beside the sink. He gave a single nod to all of the men, including Abe, and did as Caleb was told.

“Were those my sweatpants?” he heard Ben ask as he opened the door to the bedroom.
Edmund’s first knock on Anna’s bedroom door was quiet and tentative. She knew it was his immediately – Abraham would have barreled in while Ben and Caleb waited in the living room for her to return. She muttered a “come in,” that matched his knock in volume and intensity. He eased the door open, his eyes searching the walls and floor. She was about to ask him why he was so curious, since he had obviously slept in her room before, but realized belatedly that he was trying to avoid looking directly at her.

“I fear I ruined the mood,” he finally said, looking particularly sheepish in a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt.

She smiled weakly. “Yeah, but if you hadn’t, Caleb might not have consulted us at all.”

“He certainly is a headstrong one,” Edmund agreed, coming further into the room and shutting the door all the way behind him. “I see why you two are such good friends.”

Anna shrugged, feeling her wet hair shift on the back of the damp shirt she was wearing. “He had to be that way,” she explained. “We were all picked on when we were kids. I think Caleb still thinks about it a lot.”

Edmund sat beside her on the bed, his presence coming in close beside her. “I can relate.”

“I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about Selah,” Anna blurted, finally gathering the courage to say it. “And my father.”

Edmund’s hand snuck around to take hers. “You told me before that your father wasn’t with you, and uh…I figured that something…dramatic must have taken place to have you forsake your husband.”

“My life is full of dramatics,” she answered solemnly. “You sure you want to be a part of it?”

He dropped a kiss on her shoulder. “I don’t see how I couldn’t be, at this point,” he admitted. She shifted slightly beside him, allowing him more access to her neck. He peppered absent kisses up her shoulder as he considered how to explain. “You are a siren song, my dear.” She let out a sound of
protest, slightly breathless as his lips halted against her skin. “My ship is already headed to ruin. Though, I suppose, a siren that takes pity on the ship could save its captain.”

“So I’m your downfall?” she asked.

His lips were under her ear now, his breath soft on the tender skin of her throat. “My temptation, dear Anna. Temptation doesn’t beget loss.”

“In this case, it could,” she answered. “If Caleb’s plan doesn’t work.”

He paused in the motion of moving her wet hair to her other shoulder. “Why don’t we save the rest of this until tomorrow, like we originally planned? I, uh, my message to Caleb, that is, ruined the mood, but it doesn’t have to ruin the night completely.”

Whatever was going on in the living room momentarily spiked in volume, “I am not discussing this anymore, Abraham,” and Anna and Edmund froze to listen.

“Maybe we should be moderating,” Anna suggested, moving to get up. Edmund’s hand caught her and pulled her gently back to the bed, shaking his head.

“I don’t think anything you have to say is going to make Abraham feel any better,” he intoned, tracing small lines into the skin of her arm with the tip of his finger, “and I think that would only make you angry.”

Anna sighed heavily, falling back onto the bed in exasperation. Edmund watched her dramatic motion with a trace of a smile. She looked up at him, with the t-shirt that was obviously not his, the sweatpants he wasn’t comfortable in, his mussed hair (she took great pleasure in knowing that was her doing), and the tender expression on his face.

“You are beautiful,” she breathed, reaching her hand up to trace the lines of his face. His face contorted in disbelief at her words, but that only brought a soft chuckle to her lips. “Your eyelashes,” she passed her thumb close to his temple, as close as she wanted to get to his eyes without poking them and truthfully ruining the mood for the rest of their lives, “your cheekbones,” she traced them with the tips of her fingers, “your lips.” Her fingers paused over his mouth, and he puckered his lips, gracing the pads of her fingers with a kiss.

“Men can’t be beautiful,” he protested, but his eyes were brimming with acceptance of what she assumed was a huge compliment. “Especially me.”

She let out an aggrieved sound that brought a smile to his lips. Her nimble fingers reached for him and took hold of the front of his shirt; she yanked him forward, pulling him effectively on top of her. Her lithe legs framed his hips, pinning him in place. He was too surprised to be alarmed at their newest precarious position, this one the most indecent of them all.

“If I tell you that you’re beautiful, then you are,” she said firmly, taking his face in her hands.

He stared at her for a long moment, his eyes clouded with wonder, and in his moment of weakness, of immobility, Anna pulled his mouth down to hers, bringing his body fully flush with hers. He responded almost immediately, his hands bracing himself above her, kissing her with a fervor that left her breathless.

He lowered himself to the bed beside her, his hands now free to pull her closer, and let them resume their place underneath her sweatshirt, tracing the bare skin of her back. She hiked her leg over his hip, the heel of her foot pulling him impossibly closer to her. His legs were tangled with hers, his hands landing dangerously on her bare waist, his thumb brushing up her ribcage, toward her breasts.
Her breath staggered in his mouth, and she separated their lips.

“I thought you didn’t want to do this yet,” her voice was raspy again, and he felt his body’s reaction immediately. It thrummed through his body like a guitar chord, and he closed his eyes, trying to control himself.

“You’re right,” his voice was impossibly soft, the opposite of hers. Her voice was sharpened on the edge of arousal while his was weakened. He marveled, even then, at their incredible differences that somehow melded together.

“I mean, I’m open to you changing your mind,” she nudged his nose with her own, her left hand settling low on his hip. He clenched his jaw against the wave of heat that threatened to overtake him.

He released a breath, hoping he could steady his voice. “You truly are a temptress, my dear Anna, but –”

“No rushing,” she agreed, pulling her leg off of his hip. Her lips, in the dark, aimed for his lips and landed almost on his chin. He let her adjust and pulled her lower lip into his mouth, sucking gently on it, pulling a ragged groan from her.

He filed that away for later.

Her hands found his hips again, but this time the tips of her fingers slid below the waistband of his sweatpants, on the valley of his hipbones. His breath all but stopped, his hand in her hair tightening to almost a fist. She laughed into his mouth, the sound devilish and delighting.

“We keep saying stop,” she whispered, “but –”

“You’re impossible,” he breathed against her skin. His statement coaxed a laugh out of her, and she relaxed against him, turning in his embrace so his chest was against her back.

“Tomorrow will be hard,” her voice was almost lost when it was projected to the rest of the room. Edmund tightened his hold on her momentarily, enough to show her that he heard.

“We’re going to make it,” he promised, his voice muffled against her hair.

Anna slipped into sleep with that notion in her head.

***

“I can’t believe him,” Caleb grumbled furiously, his hand tight around Ben’s. “I cannot believe him.” Ben shrugged, his shoulder jostling Caleb. “I can.”

Caleb’s eyes met his, and Ben gave him a sad smile. “I mean, Abraham isn’t nearly as blind as we give him credit for, and when he feels threatened, his usual battle strategy is to attack the other.”

Caleb scoffed. “Calling me your boyfriend isn’t an attack,” he muttered. “It’s saying it with that tone.”

“I know.”

Caleb turned toward him, his beard rustling roughly against Ben’s arm. “You know that I’m not ashamed of you, right?”

Ben nodded, his fingers barely brushing Caleb’s beard. “Of course.”
“I mean, even though I never want to go to your Student Government stuffy parties and I talk a lot of shite –”

“Caleb –”

“And I leave my clothes all over the floor –”

“You do –”

“And I probably pick too many fights with Woody and I just can’t get serious most of the time –”

“It’s okay –”

“But you know that I love you, right?”

Caleb’s warm brown eyes were full of uncharacteristic seriousness, searching for the answer in Ben’s blue ones. Ben allowed him a soft smile that reached all the way to his eyes, the first of the evening, and kissed him slowly, sweetly, for a long time.

“I love you too.”

***

Anna woke before Edmund the next morning, opening her eyes against the rising sun blearily. He was still sleeping peacefully beside her, his hand draped nonchalantly over her hip. She turned carefully so she was facing him and allowed herself a few moments to watch him sleep.

His eyelashes were so long, she marveled, trying to resist the urge to touch him and wake him up. His lips were just barely parted, and after a few moments of consideration, she gently kissed them, immensely pleased with herself when it didn’t wake him.

Carefully, slowly, she eased herself out of bed, looking forward to coffee. She pulled the blanket a little higher up his body in wake of her absence and smiled as he settled into it.

She crept toward the door, and screeched to a halt when his sleepy voice stopped her.

“You better not be sneaking out on me,” he murmured, his eyes still closed.

“Sleep,” she commanded. He raised one eyebrow, trying to show defiance, but his arm was now thrown over Horseradish, her turtle pillow pet, and his eyes were still, mercifully, closed. She chuckled and slipped out the door.

She brewed a pot of coffee, letting the percolating of the machine soundtrack her reverie. The light of the day didn’t diminish the severity of her and Edmund’s situation, but it also didn’t dull the thrill in her chest when she saw him sleeping beside her, when she felt his hands on her skin. She felt...a strange sense of peace, a calm before the storm that eased her nerves even as she knew, with a certain dread, that things were not nearly as easy as they seemed.

Knowing that she had Ben and Caleb’s support, even their rage, bolstered her in a way that she didn’t expect. Their defense of her and Edmund last night, Caleb’s quick research, and even Ben and Caleb’s admittance to their relationship, however abstract, brought a momentary smile to her face.

With a surge of affection, she went to her couch, where her phone had been discarded the night before. She pressed and held the three button down, and pulled the phone up to her ear.

“What happened?” Ben’s voice was ragged, full of sleep.
“Breakfast,” she chirped. “Get your boyfriend and bring him too.”

“Anna, it’s seven in the morning,” his complaint was so reminiscent of Caleb’s from so long ago that it drew a nostalgic laugh from her. “What is wrong with you?”

“You have an hour,” she commanded, hanging up immediately after. As her phone registered that the call was over, she scrolled through her contacts and pressed one she didn’t call nearly often enough.

“Abigail,” she said as her friend picked up, sounding just as groggy as Ben. “Family breakfast in an hour at my place.”

“Anna, it’s –”

“Seven in the morning, I know,” she assured her. “But I have someone I want you to meet.”

Abigail’s voice was suddenly much more awake. “Oh, do you now?”

“See you soon,” Anna promised.

As almost an afterthought, she shot two texts into the dark, wondering if they would go unanswered. To keep herself from second guessing her decisions, she abandoned her phone on the kitchen counter and poured two cups of coffee into her mismatched mugs and added some sugar and milk. Edmund was barely stirring when she opened the door. She pressed the mug into his hand, smiling fondly as he tasted the coffee with a tentative sip.

“Anna, that’s hot.”

“Do you want to be my boyfriend?” she asked plainly, smirking when he choked on the mouthful of coffee he had just braved drinking. His eyes, suddenly alert, met hers, full of fear. She almost retracted the question, but left it hanging in the silence, waiting. Finally, as he still didn’t respond, she added, “I know that sounds like a really stupid term to use, and I’m still married, but fuckbuddy just doesn’t sound right –”

“Anna!”

“Right, sorry,” she waved off the word that had slipped out of her mouth, the same word she used to assign to Abe, “but I want to introduce you to my friends, and I just…need something to call you.”

He sighed, running his hand through his hair, looking so delectably domestic, lounging in her bed, his hair in every direction, her blanket around his waist, that she moved toward the bed, sitting on the edge.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to,” she said, letting her hand settle on his chest like a flighty butterfly. “It was a stupid impulse, and –”

“And you’re impulsive,” he agreed, smiling up at her, squinting past the sunlight. “If you need a noun to attach to my name, I can’t see why any man, especially myself, would decline ‘boyfriend.’ But before you give me that honor, I would like to take you on a real date.”

She smiled at him. “So…is that a yes or a no? Your thesis isn’t clear.”

He poked her in the side playfully. “If you need to introduce me as your boyfriend, then I approve of the moniker,” he amended, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “But I would like to reserve truly calling myself your boyfriend until I take you on a date and you don’t decide that you loathe me after.”
His explanation earned him a tantalizing kiss that ended with her sweet laugh. She pulled away, careful not to jostle his cup of coffee.

“I’m going to make breakfast,” she announced, “everyone will be here soon.”

He nodded, getting up to follow her. “Wait,” he stopped in the doorway of her bedroom, “Who is everyone?”

“Everyone.”

He clucked in disapproval. “That doesn’t tell me what that means,” he whined, following her into the kitchen, where she pulled bacon, sausages, eggs, and rolls of croissants out of her fridge and passed it to him, followed by cheese, onions, tomatoes, spinach, and, as an afterthought, potatoes that she pulled from her pantry.

“I’m just…” she paused, trying to find the right words to describe why her whimsy had led her here. “I know that things are going to be hard, and I want everyone to know how much I appreciate what they’ve done for me.”

He nodded understandingly as she started chopping potatoes.

“When things get bad,” she said carefully, trying to get the words right, “when the protest starts, when I have to tell people about what…what Simcoe did, when Richard comes for us, I want to remember today, and last night, and I want to know that our sacrifices are worth it.”

She was still chopping, but he could feel the subtle change in the atmosphere that told him she was trying to rein in her emotions. He hugged her gently, low on her waist, from behind, laying his chin on her shoulder. She didn’t need to explain anymore.

“How can I help?” he asked.

***

“Here, put these plates on the table and on the TV trays,” Anna passed Edmund a stack of paper plates and a handful of silverware. “I’m going to make more coffee.”

He wordlessly took them and started setting them carefully in front of chairs.

“Anna,” he said with the tone that said a question would soon follow, “why are there eight plates?”

“I said everyone, didn’t I?” Anna asked, cracking an egg into the pan as someone knocked at the door. “Can you get that?”

He glanced hopelessly at the door and back at her for a moment before he gave up and went to answer it. A beautiful woman was on the other side, her hair in a ponytail that looked far too perfect to have been done this early in the morning. She raised her eyebrows at him, giving him a once-over that made him very aware that he was still in Ben Tallmadge’s damn sweatpants.

“So you’re the guy,” she said. It was not a question, but a statement.

Edmund moved aside to let her in. “I am. I am the, uh…the boyfriend,” he said, trying the word out in his mouth.

He had only been someone’s boyfriend once before this, and the word still sounded as weird to him now as it did then. The woman’s response was instantaneous; she practically darted around him to
get to Anna in the kitchen, who was scrambling eggs with expert precision.

“Anna, boyfriend?” she asked.

Anna let out a bark of laughter. “Abigail, meet Dr. Edmund Hewlett, professor of law.”

Abigail turned back to him, giving him another once-over. “Professor?” she asked.

“Indeed,” he answered, somewhat proudly.

“Abigail is my best friend,” Anna called from the kitchen. “She’s the one that found me the dress I wore last night.”

Edmund turned back to her. “You picked that dress? From the bottom of my heart, thank you.” Abigail crowed with laughter, her softly manicured hand landing familiarly on Edmund’s shoulder.

“Oh, I like him!”

Ben and Caleb’s arrival was a pleasant surprise to Edmund, who found that his social anxiety was even more troubling than usual with the vivacious and unforgiving Abigail, who seemed intent on asking Edmund every question a best friend should ask to vet a new boyfriend. While he appreciated her tenacity, he couldn’t help but feel like he was answering them all wrong.

“Oi, Abby, leave the poor bastard alone,” Caleb laughed, clutching his coffee cup possessively to his body. “You’re going to give him an asthma attack.”

“I don’t have asthma,” Edmund protested.

“You will,” Caleb replied easily, slapping Ben’s behind without looking as he passed by. Ben flinched comically, and even Edmund laughed.

But there were still three plates left unfilled. He considered them for a few moments, trying to figure out who else was possibly coming. A quiet knock seemed to directly answer his question. Anna got the door this time, and the arrival of two new people sent a ripple through the group.

It was Robert Townsend and his girlfriend, Mary, who looked particularly uncomfortable. Anna hugged her and, after a moment’s hesitation, hugged Robert too.

“Coffee?” she asked.

“Please,” Mary answered breathlessly, her hand still tight in Robert’s. Anna took her into the kitchen and passed her a mug, filling it easily with coffee. Robert looked rather lost without her.

“It’s a lot to take in,” Edmund confided, and Robert smirked in agreement. “Edmund Hewlett.”

“I know who you are,” Robert answered, shaking his hand. “Robert Townsend.”

Another knock startled him. Who else was left? Robert seemed to be thinking the same thing; his eyes searched the now veritable crowd of people that occupied the different spaces of the apartment. Anna was moving toward the door again, but even Edmund could see, from his position across the room, that her hands were clenched in fists.

Abraham Woodhull pulled a quiet “you’ve got to be kidding me,” from Robert, and Edmund released an affirmative, “exactly” as Abraham surveyed the rest of the group. His eyes landed on Edmund, then Robert, and he turned back to Anna, who motioned in exasperation toward the door.
He didn’t leave.

Anna closed the door, her face at least partially triumphant. She spotted Edmund through the crowd and gave him a full, sunny smile that banished his initial irritation at seeing Abraham once more. She came to his side and curled her hand around his.

“Abraham?” he asked quietly, and she smirked.

“I didn’t want to exclude him, but I honestly didn’t think he’d come,” she admitted quietly. “If we’re up front with him, he’ll come around. I believe in him.”

Edmund had nothing to say to that. Anna was not a particularly forgiving person, and her judgment of people was often correct. If she believed in Abraham Woodhull, then so did he…from a distance.

“Now that everyone is here,” she called out, silencing the multiple conversations happening around the room. “We have a couple of announcements.”
Anna, Edmund, and their crew take their first shot in their active fight to save his job.

The room was silent, eyes focused on either Anna and Edmund’s joined hands or on Anna’s face. Edmund was a member of the first party; his eyes were locked on their interwoven fingers, trying to impress the feeling of pride and fear into his long-term memory. They were going head first into the fray, standing surrounded by her friends, some of them beaming, others glowering. He would be lying if he said the thought didn’t terrify him. Nonetheless, he tightened his hold around her fingers in a show of solidarity as she faltered.

“S-since I can see you asking with your eyes, yes, Edmund and I are together,” Anna finally said in a rush of an exhale. Robert Townsend smirked and looked down at his hands. Her eyes landed on the movement of his head but she ultimately ignored him. “I assume everyone here is aware of his job title?”

There was a murmur of assent; Anna breathed a small sigh of relief; her voice had taken on the authoritative tone that Edmund had only heard her use on Ben and Caleb; no one else looked surprised by the commanding woman standing before them. Edmund felt pride surge in his chest once more.

“Did you call us all here just for that?” Abraham’s voice wasn’t full of malice, but it was cold enough to send the room into an eruption of quiet whispers. Anna’s eyes darkened as they moved toward her ex-boyfriend. Mary shifted uncomfortably on the couch.

“Of course not,” Robert answered easily. “They’re being forced to confirm this for us before someone else does. Who?”

Mary furrowed her brows and turned to her boyfriend, confusion written all over her pretty face. As Anna considered how to respond, Robert leaned toward her to explain in quiet whispers, his raised eyebrows telling Anna that she could continue. He was still listening.

“Robert is right,” Abraham scoffed, but Anna pushed forward. “We’re telling you this because last night, Richard Woodhull suspended Edmund for an inappropriate relationship with a student.”

Abigail’s quiet gasp was the only sound in the room now. Anna gave her a grateful look and turned her gaze to Edmund, who had dropped his own gaze to the floor.

“But the Code of Conduct has no rules against teachers and students dating so long as the teacher in question has never been in a place to change the student’s grades,” Ben supplied helpfully as Anna hesitated.

“Which means this suspension is bullshite,” Caleb threw in. The room’s whispers grew in intensity. It was, as Anna smirked, the beginning of a mob. Edmund’s gaze lifted from the floor and caught Caleb’s. He smiled gratefully.

“Meanwhile, Professor Simcoe has been allowed to keep his position, despite his own
transgressions,” Anna’s eyes were closed now, and her hand so tight in Edmund’s that it was starting to hurt. He felt his knuckles give slightly as she squeezed.

“His transgressions?” Mary prompted softly.

Anna’s eyes fluttered open, the rapid movement keeping her tears in her eyes, and she very carefully pulled the collar of her t-shirt down, revealing the healing bruise across the expanse of her collarbone. It had faded to a sort of light blue that looked green, but its severity had not yet lessened.

The room erupted.

“Anna, what is that?” Mary was on her feet and standing in front of Anna before the rest of the wave of sound washed over her. Her cold fingers pressed gently on the skin of her collarbone. “Simcoe did this to you?”

“Simcoe? You mean the anthropology professor?” Abigail’s voice was an infuriated screech.

“He’s keeping his position?” Robert’s voice, quiet but distinct, was the one that sounded the most dangerous. Anna’s eyes landed on his, and his jaw worked furiously, the muscles protruding.

“You told someone, right?”

“Where is he right now, I’m going to go kick his ass.”

“We’re proud of you, Annie.”

“Did you go to the police?”

“God, Anna, did you go to the doctor?”

“Let her explain,” Edmund’s voice was the one that silenced everyone else’s cacophony. Mary retreated back to the couch, where Robert wiped away a tear that had snuck down her cheek. He took her hand and held it tightly between both of his own. Anna had to look away from them both.

Now that they were at this point, telling people was proving to be more difficult than she anticipated. She could feel the words in her throat, crawling up her esophagus, but the idea of opening her mouth and letting them free made her feel like she was going to be opening her mouth and throwing up instead. She could feel Simcoe’s body pressed against hers, his arm against her throat, his hand around her ankle, her body hitting the tile, the screams that somehow died in her throat.

She must have given something away on her face, because Edmund was suddenly directing her to a chair, whispering encouraging words to her. He kneeled beside her, his hand clasped in hers, and brought her eyes to his. The room had gone silent now, her friends of varying degrees watching intently as she struggled to keep herself together. She wanted to find Abigail’s eyes, to see Ben’s, even Abraham’s, but Edmund’s hands kept her in place.

“Just say it to me,” he said softly. “No one else is here. Tell me what happened.”

She didn’t believe him – she knew where she was, she knew who was there; but somehow, his quiet confidence, his strong support, was enough to draw the words from her mouth. He let her talk, his eyes full of the rage she had seen at the ball, the fear she had seen when she called him after it happened, the unspoken apology that he could never seem to shake.

He was ashamed that he hadn’t stayed long enough to help; he was horrified that he had let appearances chase him from her side.
“Simcoe is still teaching?” Robert finally asked, his arm around Mary’s shaking shoulders now.
Anna turned back to the rest of her friends, a captive audience in different phases of angry, sad, horrified. Robert’s face was tight, cold. He was livid; she could see it pouring from the gaze he fixed on her.

“Yes,” she answered simply.

“And Edmund is not.”

“No.”

Mary’s eyes, fixed on her lap, on hers and Robert’s joined hands, rose to Anna and Edmund. Anna could see the wheels turning there. Robert blinked slowly and nodded, his lips pursed. Ben, Caleb, and Abraham all stayed silent.

“So what are we going to do about it?” Robert finally asked, his eyes rising to the rest of them.

“Protest,” Caleb answered, his voice taking on the serious, dark timbre that he so rarely allowed to seep into his voice. Ben’s hand brushed his. Robert’s gaze turned to Caleb; he scrutinized his scruffy appearance, the leftover croissant crumbs lingering in his beard and his defiant stance.

“Okay,” he agreed quietly. “We protest.”

“Anna,” Abigail’s voice was softer than Anna remembered. “That means everyone will find out. About…”

“I know,” Anna confirmed.

Abigail gave her friend an encouraging smile that could not be summed up with supplementary words. In it, she gave her support, her love, her awe, and her strength to her best friend, the one she had stood beside since they could stand at all. Anna smiled back at her, tears brimming in her eyes.

Edmund’s voice broke their reverie.

“Mary,” he prompted. Anna turned her eyes to the slight blonde woman, who had her hand in the air. “What is it?”

“I have an idea,” she said breathlessly.

***

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Anna’s voice was shaking, and she realized that it was her whole body that was quivering as Mary’s hands landed firmly on her shoulders to still her.

“Yes, you can,” Mary replied softly, pulling some of Anna’s hair in front of her shoulder. “He’s just going to ask you a few questions. I’ll look over everything he writes, and then we’re going to start this campaign.” The smaller woman gazed up at Anna, much taller than her in heeled boots. “We are going to win this.”

“I’m not sure how this will help, Mary.”

Mary smiled, and Anna could see her slipping into her element. “Richard, if I know him at all, is
going to try to keep this quiet; he’s going to say that he’s doing it out of respect, or that he wants to
preserve the university’s name, but he really wants to make sure no one realizes that Edmund isn’t
actually breaking any rules. It keeps Richard safe. The first point of attack is to move the both of you
to the public eye. Then, the public needs to see how much you care about each other. The public
needs to care about you. So when we protest, the public will come.”

“Do we have to talk about –”

“Not yet. Not today,” Mary’s hand landed gracefully on Anna’s shoulder. “We’ll save that for later.
We’ll let you prepare for that.”

Anna nodded gratefully. Mary cleared her throat once more and brought Anna’s gaze back up to her.

“I know that we’ve had our…issues, with Abraham,” she said awkwardly, her voice finally slowing
down to her usual speed. “But I want you to know that…I am happy. With Robert. And you seem
happy with Edmund. I don’t – I mean, I don’t feel those things anymore. I would like to be your
friend. If that’s okay with you.”

Anna felt a smile break over her face like the sunlight of early dawn. She took hold of Mary’s hand
and squeezed once before knocking on the door. Mary smiled back at her, taking that as an
affirmative.

Gilbert de Lafayette was a slight, sprightly man with incredibly expensive taste in suits. He was
seated at a desk that featured the largest computer screen Anna had ever seen when she entered the
room, his right leg propped up on the knee of his left one, exposing a single, baby blue sock to her.
At her knock, he turned expectantly in her direction.

He beamed at her, setting some of her nerves at ease, and rose to shake her hand.

“You must be Anna Strong,” his French accent was thick but manageable, and Anna found herself
smiling at his easy nonchalance.

“Lafayette,” she answered with a dip of her head.

“Please, call me Marquis,” he waved it off. “An ancient nickname, but one that I’m fond of.”

She nodded as he directed her to a chair. “Now, my dear Mary tells me that we’re doing a feature
story on you and your new beau.”

Anna felt the blush creep up on her face before he even recognized it. “Oh, he must be something, if
he can make you turn that shade of red.” He got momentarily serious. “I understand that your
relationship is…somewhat taboo here. Mary told me what the aim of this piece is, and since Richard
Woodhull has been trying to pull the communications and journalism departments out of the theatre
department and put it in his own, I have no problem writing it. So, let’s just have a conversation
about you and…Edmund, I think his name is, and we’ll see what kind of piece we can put together.”

She felt a smile tugging at her lips. “Okay, let’s do it.”

“That’s my girl,” Lafayette grinned at her and pulled his phone out of the inside pocket of his blazer
and put it on the desk, face down. “Give me a love story.”

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The Law of Love
If you’re not a law student at Setauket University, then you might not know the name Edmund Hewlett. A new professor that hails from Scotland, Edmund Hewlett once practiced corporate law in England, a position that he enjoyed for several years before he decided to venture into teaching. According to his previous teaching records, Hewlett is particularly successful in the realm of teaching law; in fact, his evaluations as a professor are the only thing more impressive than his law record.

But if you aren’t careful, you might never have the chance to learn under the expert tutelage of Edmund Hewlett.

His decision to tutor students outside of his classroom was a selfless one, one that he found almost more rewarding than spending his extra time grading papers. And, as luck would have it, he found the woman that would make his emigration to America worth it.

“He was tutoring me in anthropology,” Anna Strong admitted with a blush, “He found out that I was on academic probation and decided to help me stay in school.”

Richard Woodhull, provost of the university and professor of law, divulged to Hewlett that Strong was struggling in her classes, and Hewlett, instead of taking that as simple small talk, decided that it was his duty to help.

“He taught me to appreciate the opportunity I’ve been given,” Strong said.

But as their tutoring sessions continued, both Hewlett and Strong had to admit that they were more than just friends.

“He is the only reason I’m still here,” Strong said through tears. “He is a kind and decent man.”

Their friendship grew outside of the classroom, and Woodhull decided that it was inappropriate. He suspended Hewlett from his two classes, claiming that his relationship with Strong was breaking rules of the Code of Conduct. Here’s the rub: there are no rules in the Code of Conduct that expressly forbid relationships between teachers and students. And, Strong insists, they were not in a relationship when the punishment was dealt. But, with the odds stacked against them, this unlikely couple has decided to take the plunge: the relationship plunge, that is.

“Why shouldn’t we?” Strong said. “How do you not have feelings for someone that stands beside you through the toughest times of your life? How do you not have feelings for one of the only people in your life that makes you feel like you can actually accomplish something worthwhile? I’ve had a lot taken from me, most of it from this city, and Edmund [Hewlett] is the only person that reminds me that there are better things to come.”

“I’m dismayed to see that the law department has lost such a good addition to the faulty,” Garreth Baker, graduate teaching assistant, said.

“I hope that Mr. Woodhull understands that Hewlett’s place at this university is not temporary, nor is it expendable,” Mary Smith, public relations major, said.

A petition is currently circulating to submit to the president of the university, asking to have Hewlett retain his position. For information on said petition, please email marquisdelafayette@setauket.email.com.

“She can’t do this,” Richard’s hand tightened around the newspaper, sending Lafayette’s byline into wrinkles. “She can’t do this, right?”

Andre’s eyes were fixed on his own copy of the paper. “Technically, she can.”
“Whose side are you on?” Richard’s voice hardened to a point, and Andre let the paper flutter to his desk.

“I try not to pick sides,” he said easily, taking a sip of his tea. “I do believe that your preemptive move was a smart one, but I don’t think it was well executed. Did you truly not check the Code of Conduct when you decided to suspend him? Or were you just itching to get rid of him?”

Richard growled and swept the paper off of Andre’s desk, gathering both copies into his fists and forcibly crumbling them. “Do you have any idea what kind of havoc she caused last time she opposed something?”

“I’ve heard the stories, but never with her at the helm,” Andre admitted. “You are holding the child responsible for the sins of the father.”

“Well her father is dead,” Richard spat, punctuating the statement by throwing the newspaper into the trash. “And so is my son.”

Andre sighed, an exasperated sigh of someone who was struggling to reword his thesis for the benefit of someone much less intelligent. “You have a son that is still alive, and yet you seem to dwell almost obsessively on the one you lost.”

“You’ve never lost a son,” Richard argued. “You’ll never understand.”

Andre nodded. “True, but I can also see how dwelling on the past will make your present and future uncertain. But since you took such an offensive stance, this Anna Strong will be able to mount a counter-attack. You showed your hand too soon, Richard.”

The older man groaned, collapsing into the seat in front of Andre’s desk. “What do you propose I do, then?” he asked.

Andre shrugged. “At this point, I would take action against the other professor. Simcoe? A detestable man as it is, and if this assault accusation proves to be true, you’ll be crucified for punishing one but not the other. And I would talk to Abraham, see what kind of insight he has.”

Richard nodded thoughtfully, tapping his index finger against his bottom lip. “You might have a point,” he muttered.

***

Abraham fished his ringing phone out of his back pocket, anticipating a call from Caleb, or even Anna. After their “family” breakfast yesterday, which was more like a battle strategy, he expected to be on call at all times. But no one had said anything after he left; and he felt more excluded than ever.

“Father,” he said flatly. “What can I do for you?”

“You can come to my office. Immediately,” his father’s voice was irritated, stressed. Paranoia momentarily took over him. What had he done recently that would make his father seek contact with him voluntarily?

“I’m busy,” he hedged.

Richard sighed. “It wasn’t a suggestion, Abraham. Five minutes.”

With a sigh that seemed to only beleaguer him further, Abraham turned on his heel and started trudging toward his father’s office, dragging his feet unnecessarily. He arrived three minutes late, and
the moment he opened the door, he knew his father had kept time.

“What took you so long?” he asked gruffly, swiftly buttoning his jacket and then unbuttoning it again. Abraham noted the nervous tic as he nonchalantly took the seat across from his father’s desk.

“I told you, I was busy,” he replied. “Now what’s going on? You look…”

He didn’t have to answer; his father reached into the trash can and took out a crumbled newspaper article. He tossed it in his son’s direction. Abraham caught it with one hand and smoothed it out over the surface of the desk.

The Law of Love.

He almost laughed out loud. He knew, instinctively, that this was Mary’s doing. And, as he scanned the article, his eyes lingered on her name at the bottom. She wanted his father to know where she stood.

“What do you know about this?” his father asked impatiently. Abraham studiously rearranged his face into one that didn’t look amused and lifted his eyes to his father. “What is Anna Strong playing at?”

“Well, I imagine that she’s protecting her boyfriend,” Abraham’s mouth almost hesitated over the word, but he knew that using it would only provoke his father more. He was not disappointed; Richard graced him with an unseemly twitch of the face that almost shattered Abraham’s carefully arranged facial expression.

“Do not call him that,” Richard huffed.

“That’s what she’s calling him,” Abraham shrugged. “Honestly, Father, they weren’t dating before you threatened his job.”

“So you do know something about it?” Richard snapped up the information rabidly.

“I knew that he was tutoring her,” Abraham carefully tiptoed around the question. “I knew that they were close, but that was it. Now, I know that they’re dating, based…based on this article.”

Richard took the seat across from him, the desk between them both. “I know that you know more than that, son. You have been pining after Anna Strong since you were fourteen years old.”

“Right, and you pushed me to date Mary, and that was that,” Abraham countered. “I care a lot about Anna, that much is true. But I will not be some spy on your behalf. She hardly speaks to me anymore, and neither do the rest of my friends. If there’s anything I need to focus on, it’s getting my friends back, not banishing their chances of happiness.”

Richard reclined in his chair, his hands folded over his stomach. “So you’re going to pick your friends over your family.”

“When you decide to start treating me like a son, maybe I’ll consider you family,” Abraham took his father’s lax position as an opportunity for escape. When Richard did not respond, he capitalized on the silence and slipped out the door, closing it loudly behind him.
Astronomy

Chapter Summary

In which Anna and Edmund have their first date. Mary reveals a secret to Robert.

Anna watched anxiously as Edmund’s eyes ran expertly and thoroughly over the article. Knowing that he was reading her words, what Marquis had embellished, and what she still considered to be too forward of an attack set a twitch in her right leg, her foot tapping incessantly on the tile floor of his kitchen while he brewed tea. She could smell the leaves, steeping in the hot water, trying to use that scent to soothe her. But, as a smile bounced over his visage momentarily, she felt her stomach clench. What was he reading that had amused him? Was it her words?

With Selah, they so rarely told each other how they felt; their relationship had been immature, between two people so young that they let actions speak for themselves because they weren’t quite sure which words to attach to their feelings. She loved Selah, she could see that now, but at the time, she hadn’t quite known what love was. She and Abraham had purposely avoided words; words could easily be overheard, misinterpreted, and most of the time, they found that their feelings were not on the same wavelength as the other.

Yet another reason why they weren’t compatible, ultimately.

Edmund smiled fondly at the newspaper, placing it gently on the table, and let his eyes lift to hers. She was momentarily staggered by the warmth filling his eyes, affection and adoration and all the words she always thought would be attributed to a woman much softer than her, a woman much more pliable, more agreeable.

It was an archaic way of seeing herself, but after years of living in a small town, with women who were comfortable learning how to sew, crossing their legs at the ankle under their skirts, and painting their nails and faces in their free time, Anna knew, and felt, keenly, the differences between herself and her more feminine counterparts.

“It certainly does the trick,” he mused, turning to the kettle and pouring the tea into the small cups that always made Anna feel rather unwieldy. “Mary must have a very defined battle plan. I imagine this is only step one.”

“To make people care about us, so that when we protest, they will come,” Anna parroted Mary’s explanation back to Edmund, and he nodded understandingly.

“Public relations is certainly a perfect major for her,” he said softly, concentrating on the pouring.

His eyes had betrayed warmth, but he seemed to be studiously avoiding Anna’s role in the article. The title “Law of Love” alone put butterflies low in her stomach. She had been more open with Marquis about her feelings for Edmund than she had ever been with anyone else, arguably even more than she had ever been with Edmund. And yet, he had nothing to say about it?

“Did you not like the article?” she asked as he passed her a warm teacup. The perilously breakable porcelain warmed her hands as she studied his face, searching for an answer.
He looked momentarily taken aback. “Of course I liked it, my dear, of course.”

Anna grimaced. “You’re not a very good liar, Edmund.”

His eyes roved over her face, probably betraying the hurt she felt, and he reached for her hand, taking it gently between his much larger ones. “Oh, Anna, it isn’t the article,” he explained, catching her eyes for only a moment before dropping them to their hands. “I just…I spent the entire day here, in my house, while you were off at school, and I…well, I had to come to terms with what this suspension is. You see, I – I have spent a long time – that is, my entire professional career, completely defining myself by my occupation. And right now – I’m afraid, I’m rather afraid of what I am without it.”

Anna’s smaller hand, cradled in his, tightened. “We’re going to get you your job back, I promise.”

He smiled sadly at her vehement tone, his eyes still, mercifully, avoiding hers. “As much as I appreciate it, you can’t promise me that.”

He released her hands and reached for his teacup, taking a long sip. Anna watched the movement, her eyes focused on him while her mind stampeded on somewhere else. He had been stuck in the house all day, ruminating on the possible end of his career, the one he worked so hard for, and now they were…what? Drinking tea in his house?

“Edmund,” Anna shook him from his reverie gently. “Do you want to go on a date?” He furrowed his brows momentarily, and Anna quickly continued before he could object. “We can get out of the house, go to this little burger place that I know, watch the football game, and when we get bored, I can take you to the park that I used to go to when I was a kid.”

A small smile started to take over his face, and Anna nudged him with her elbow. “We can look at the stars,” she teased.

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“That article was masterful,” Robert noted, folding the paper carefully and adding it to his small stack of them, already housed at the edge of his desk. Mary smiled at his compliment, in the middle of pulling her long hair into a ponytail.

“You like it?” she asked, her eyes alight with happiness. Robert smirked at her, at the small bit of skin exposed by her shirt as she reached for her hair tie, falling down her wrist.

He perched his glasses on the edge of his nose. “I think that Richard Woodhull is probably panicking right now, and rightfully so.”

Mary let out an angry sigh that sounded almost like a growl. “I can’t believe him. I mean, sure, if you think something untoward is going on, do something about it. But why must he behave so rashly, so impetuously? There was no need to suspend him. And what about Simcoe?”

Robert held out his hand for his girlfriend to take, pulling her gently to his side. “Deep breaths, Mary,” he chided softly, curling a piece of her hair around his finger.

“I can’t believe Anna told us what Simcoe did to her,” Mary mused, calming slightly as Robert’s fingers brushed the small, sensitive hairs at the back of her neck.

“Why?” Robert asked. “She needs help to fight it. It seems in keeping with her character.”

Mary shrugged. “I mean, we aren’t really friends, you know?”
Her crestfallen face made it impossible for him not to kiss her cheek softly. “I think that after today, she considers you a friend,” he intoned. “Anna Strong doesn’t seem like the girl that refuses to consider people friends because of past conflicts.”

“We hated each other.”

Robert shrugged. “But not anymore, right? You both have moved on from Abe, and hopefully Abe will move on too.”

Mary fell silent, as she always did when Abraham was mentioned. Robert resumed his gentle stroking of her hair, relishing in the little sighs she set free as he calmed her. She was so high strung, especially when there was a perceived slight against herself or her friends, that he often felt like it was his duty to make sure she could relax.

“I need to tell you something,” she said quietly, her soft voice thick.

“Alright,” Robert replied.

She sighed, but her breath was shaky, nervous. He straightened up. This was important.

“My first semester here, I was an anthropology major,” Mary said slowly, her voice still quiet. Robert tensed at the mere mention of the subject. “And I had Simcoe for the entry level class.”

“Mary –”

“Abraham and I had a fight, and I went to class crying. When class ended, Simcoe asked me to stay after. I thought he was just going to ask me if I was okay, but he was…intrusive.” She sniffed, and wiped at her eyes, but a tear hadn’t fallen yet. “And he asked me to pass him the pop quizzes on the desk behind me. When I turned, he…” she paused, and Robert felt his heart rate triple. “He grabbed me by the waist and pulled me onto his lap.”

Robert exhaled sharply, both infuriated and relieved that her story wasn’t as severe as Anna’s.

“I shoved him away immediately, and I left but –”

“But you never told anyone,” Robert finished for her. “Not even Abraham?”

She shook her head, and finally, a tear snuck down her cheek. “Robert, if I had said something, he might not have been able to do what he did to Anna.”

Robert blinked slowly, letting his gaze fall to his lap. “Is that why you want to help her so much? Because you feel guilty?”

She sniffed, casting her eyes to the ceiling. “I don’t know, probably, but I… I just – I don’t have any friends now. Abe was all I had, and I don’t want to just be the woman that lives for her significant other anymore.”

He gave her a comforting smile that didn’t quite meet his eyes. “You aren’t that person anymore.” He kissed the top of her head. “You’re my smart, fierce, independent partner, and together, we’re going to make this right.”

She threw her arms around his middle, burying her face in his chest. “Do you think Anna will hate me?”

Robert truthfully didn’t know, but he couldn’t tell Mary that. “If I know anything about Anna, she’ll
stand by you the way you stood by her.”

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“I’m not sure I understand,” Edmund said, squinting at the large television perched above the booth he and Anna occupied. “So we like the Patriots because –”

“Well, most people here like them because that’s the team that’s housed closest to us,” Anna explained, munching on a french fry. “That’s why that’s the only game that’s on right now. Personally, I’m a fan of the Ravens, but mostly because my father liked them.”

“So why are we rooting for the Patriots to win right now?” Edmund asked, with the air of someone trying tremulously to grasp something he truthfully didn’t care much about.

“Because they’re playing the Cowboys,” Anna said with a sneer. “And that means we want them to win.”

Edmund let out a quiet “ahh,” that drew a giggle from Anna. She took a swig of her beer and leaned more into his embrace, his right arm over her shoulders. His eyes were dutifully raised to the television, but even as Anna cheered for what she declared was a “wicked pass,” he pursed his lips in consideration.

Sports were not his bag, he noted. But Anna’s smile was bright, her eyes alight with excitement, and that was better entertainment.

“I had no idea you liked football,” he said when a commercial break brought her attention back to him. She blushed a bright, embarrassed red, and ducked her chin to hide her smile.

“A shameful secret to someone as intellectual as you, I’m sure,” she said sheepishly, swiping another fry off their shared plate.

Edmund smiled at her response, his insides warmed and charmed by the woman who wanted to be his girlfriend (his girlfriend, he couldn’t believe it) showing him new things that brought her pleasure.

“I mean, I wasn’t particularly sporty when I was a child, that’s true,” he admitted with a laugh.

The game had resumed behind them, but Anna ignored it. “For someone who didn’t play sports, you still have quite a physique,” her hand landed on his stomach, just below his chest bone, and he jumped, rather violently, at the feeling of her hand.

“Anna!”

His jaw clenched, trying to banish the blush sneaking up his cheeks, but Anna still caught it, her smile full and mischievous. It was the same smile she’d given him when she made him try that shot in the bar the first night. It was nostalgic, but not altogether different. Her eyes practically glittered at him, reminding him, once more, of the stars.

“Yes?” she battied her eyes innocently, but her hand didn’t move. His abdominal muscles, not nearly as defined as they could have been, as they used to be, tensed. Her eyes dropped to her hand and the jolt of his muscles she must have felt. He blushed, if possible, even more.

“You’re going to need to learn how to relax, my dear,” she murmured, finally pulling her hand away.

He let out a long breath. “I could relax if –”
“If what, exactly?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. She was suddenly that enigmatic woman that always seemed to ask the questions that took away his ability to speak, the woman that he was infatuated with before he knew, truthfully, who she really was.

He cast his mind about for a correct answer. He studied her eyes; was there a correct answer?

The bar erupted in cheers as the Patriots scored, but Anna’s eyes never left his.

“If we went to that park you promised,” he said finally, and Anna’s smirk melted into a happy smile. He could see that she was trying to be the contagious kind of happy, hoping it would leak into him, but even as he smiled back at her, he still felt sadness taking up residence in his chest.

He was so happy, so elated, when he was with her, but the burn of sadness still stung, deep down.

She took his hand and pulled him up from the booth, tossing a twenty on the table despite his protestations. He couldn’t help but feel a little thrill as she led the way to his car, reaching dangerously into the front pocket of his slacks for his keys. She delighted him with a quiet, deep chuckle, low in her throat, at the strangled sound he made as her fingers brushed his thigh.

“I thought I told you to relax,” she admonished lightly, sliding easily into the driver’s seat.

“I wasn’t aware you could drive,” he said, trying to change the subject before he allowed even more teasing.

She swiftly turned the car on and put it in gear. “Of course I can drive, Edmund, I’m not completely useless,” she said, practically peeling out of the parking spot. Edmund’s hand landed on the bar of the car door, close to the button for the window and clenched tightly. “I just don’t own a car,” she explained, turning onto the almost empty street without so much as a turn signal. This was not promising to be a relaxing car ride. “I sold mine and Selah’s cars to help pay for my living expenses.”

Edmund furrowed his brow as she turned sharply down a street he didn’t recognize. “And now?”

She shrugged, but he could see the sadness sneaking into her eyes again. “My father left me a decent sized inheritance when he passed, and after it finally went through, I started investing it. I have enough for now.”

He felt that burning at the tip of his tongue. He wanted to ask about Selah; he wanted to know things about him, about her son, about their life before tragedy struck. But again, he saw the possibility of their momentary happiness sliding away. Again, he chose the fleeting happiness, if only for her sake.

They were slowing down; Anna’s lips turned up at the corners as he ducked his head to view the sky from inside the car. It was pitch black outside, and the stars twinkled invitingly above them. It would be better with a telescope, but perhaps an observatory was a second or third date activity.

She parked in front of a swing set, tossing him his keys as she opened the door, the wind taking her hair in full, wild flight. Her loose cardigan, one of his, blew in tandem, and suddenly she was an ethereal sprite, queen of the woods, pulling yet another sorry soul to their death.

She tossed a glance over her shoulder at him, her eyes wide with adventure, wildness, and mischief. She bounded over to the swings, settling herself between the rusted chains, her boots pointed slightly inward as she gazed up at the sky. Carefully, so as not to destroy her reverie, he sat on the other swing, noting uncomfortably that the rubber was not exactly the most supporting material. But, nonetheless, he grabbed the rusted chains and looked up.
The sky wasn’t as lit as it could be, in the middle of a small city, but the stars were still there, smiling down at them. It was a comforting notion, knowing that the universe hadn’t changed even while all of Edmund’s had shifted considerably. He smiled at the constellations, easily identifying one, then two, then three of them as his eyes lazily read the language of the gods.

He heard the creak of the swing set and hardly had time to acknowledge it before Anna’s hand came and took his, interlacing their fingers together so their hands were extended over the empty space between the swings, lingering there like seatbelts, protecting against some unknown threat.

They said nothing for a long time, choosing instead to find solace separately in the stars, in the sound of the wind gently blowing over the un-mowed grass of the park. Her breath was the symphony that accompanied the orchestra stretched above them both, and time passed fluidly, unnoticed, while they sat in silence.

“My father used to bring me here,” Anna finally said, her voice faraway and lost. “I would sit on these swings and have him push me.”

“They haven’t updated these swings since you were a child?” Edmund asked, momentarily alarmed.

She chuckled, but it was an absent laugh, a distant amusement. “They haven’t changed much about this place since I was a child.”

“Does that comfort you?” he asked, letting his eyes leave the sky to land on her.

She shrugged. “It’s still home, but I don’t reckon it will be home forever. You can’t live your entire life and never change.”

Edmund nodded.

“Was leaving Scotland scary for you?” she asked, her voice small, and she sounded impossibly young.

Her eyes were back to him now, and he smiled slightly as he considered how to answer the question. “At the time, I wasn’t frightened,” he admitted. “I thought it was going to be easy, just sliding into a new room, a new table. But once I got off the plane, and I heard the sounds of the city, of the new country I was in, I was terrified.”

She scooted closer, the swing almost resisting her movement, and he could see she was braced against gravity.

“Sometimes it still is scary,” he noted quietly.

Her hand tightened around his. Their silence stretched once more, but this one was comforting, easy. After a few minutes, Anna stood from her swing, letting it settle in her wake, and pulled him up with her.

“Show me some constellations,” she demanded gently, pulling him toward an old picnic table. She sat on top of it, leaning back so she was lying on it, her hair splayed out below her. He could see it falling through the cracks of the wood. He hesitated, and after a moment, she sat halfway up, glancing toward him again.

“Edmund,” she motioned him to come closer.

“I think I love you.”
The words slid easily and unprompted from his lips, and he knew, in the silence that followed, that he had irrevocably, undeniably, fucked everything up.
Intermediate Coping

Chapter Summary

In which Anna and Edmund talk to everyone but each other about his revelation. Also, special appearances by Simcoe and Andre.

Anna’s breath was cold in her lungs; it was agony trying to breathe. The park was dead quiet, the sound of the wind momentarily halting in the wake of Edmund’s statement.

“I think I love you.”

Oh God, what was she supposed to say? She sat up straighter on the top of the picnic table, feeling the pull of her hair in the fracture of the wood, and yanked it free, hoping the pain would ground her. But no – he was still staring at her, terror written all over his face, waiting for her to say something.

They must look a fright, staring at each other like their precious spell had just been broken. Anna forced herself to take a painful breath in through her nose, wincing at the pain as the air turned colder. Breathing was a chore – it was almost impossible.

“Edmund –”

“No, no, I shouldn’t have – I didn’t mean to –” he was giving her an out, a free pass. It didn’t seem like he had an end to that sentence planned; he trailed off into silence, his eyes rising to hers earnestly. Exasperation, annoyance settled on her shoulders. How hard would it be for her to say the same words back? They could easily slide from her lips, but were they the truth? Were they honest?

He deserved honesty.

“Oh,” she breathed, at a loss. Where did they go from here? It felt like she and Edmund were standing at a crossroads, and one was looking right while the other looked plaintively left.

“Perhaps we should… I should, that is, perhaps,” he cleared his throat and started again. “Perhaps I should take you home.”

She wanted to banish the insecurity in his voice; she wanted to reassure him. She didn’t.

“That’s probably a good idea,” she murmured, leading the way to the car. He trudged after her, and she could feel his eyes on her, watching her carefully, looking for signals. She wasn’t sure what kind she was giving, but if her own mutinous thoughts were any indication, he wasn’t going to be soothed by the look on her face.

He drove her home in silence.

She didn’t realize that she was crying until he pulled up in her parking lot. She furtively wiped at the tears, hoping he wouldn’t notice, but she heard his intake of breath when her movement caught his eye. His sigh was heavy, defeated.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, his voice almost a whisper. Anna turned her eyes to the ceiling of the car, trying to keep her tears in. But, as she turned her eyes back to him, a tear defied her and slid down
her cheek.

Sadly, he reached up to wipe it away.

She fled.

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“You ran from him?” Ben’s voice was almost accusatory. Abigail, hearing the tone, smacked his arm. “I’m sorry, I just…you ran from him?” Sitting in a semi-circle around the coffee table in the middle of Anna’s living room, she, Abigail, Ben, and Caleb were suddenly younger versions of themselves, their problems somehow still the same.

Anna buried her face in her arms. “I can’t believe this.”

Abigail rubbed her friend’s back reassuringly. “Honey…if you love him, you should tell him.”

“But I don’t!” Anna protested. Caleb snorted loudly; at Anna’s glare, he buried his face in his beer, his eyes sliding sheepishly to Ben’s. “I mean…I don’t know if I do.”

Ben sighed patiently. “You could have told him that,” he said. “He would have appreciated the honesty.”

“Oh sure,” Anna replied facetiously, “I know that you think you love me, Edmund, but I don’t know if I feel the same way. Is that cool?”

“I’m sure that beats not saying anything,” Caleb pointed out.

Anna whirled on the smaller man. “I know that I messed up Caleb, stop reminding me!”

“Alright, let’s just take a deep breath,” Abigail narrowed her eyes at the two men. “Why don’t you just sleep on it and talk to him tomorrow? Obviously, you have some thinking that you need to do.”

“Assuming he wants to talk to me tomorrow,” Anna muttered darkly, swirling her beer in her hand.

“Annie, the guy is head over heels for you,” Caleb said confidently, “and you agreed to do a protest for him even though that meant you’d have to tell everyone about your assault. I think that means you have at least some pretty strong feelings for the man.”

Anna sighed heavily. “And what if I’m wrong?” she asked, almost hysterically. She couldn’t explain her sudden paralyzing indecision but struggled to find the right words. If only she could tell them what she meant, then maybe she could tell Edmund. “What if what I think are strong feelings are just infatuation again? Just like Abraham?”

A collective groan tore through the living room, and it was Abigail that spoke next.

“Annie, dear, anyone that’s spent more than five minutes in your and Edmund’s presence can tell that what you feel for him is nothing like what you felt for Abraham,” she said gently. “Even Abraham knows that.”

Ben and Caleb made quiet sounds of assent.

“But I thought that my relationship with Abraham was world-ending,” Anna explained, feeling a demanding sort of pressure to explain what she meant. “And I don’t…I don’t feel like that with Edmund.”
Ben’s eyes settled on hers, a soft smile gracing his face. “Love doesn’t always feel the same way it felt before.”

“How do you know that?” she pleaded.

He reached over the flat of the table to grasp her hand. “Because I can see it on your face,” he said firmly, delicately. “I can’t tell you if what you feel is real, only you can tell yourself that, but I have never seen you protect or covet someone the way you do Edmund. And I think,” he took a moment to clear his throat, “I think that you’re worried about what will happen when Selah gets out of jail. About what will happen when his suspension is either overturned or finalized.”

“Of course I’m scared,” she said quietly.

“Annie, it’s fine to be scared, but you can’t let it rule you,” Caleb interjected. “Besides, if you didn’t love Hew, or at least, really like him, wouldn’t you have stopped hanging out with him once you knew he could get in trouble?”

Anna considered the question, pulling at the skin of her lip between her teeth. She had told herself, time and again, to leave her infatuation with Edmund behind because of what it could do to his career. And yet, here they were, neck deep in a relationship she promised she would let go. That had to speak to some depth of her feelings, right?

A loud buzz jolted her, and the entire table’s eyes fell to Caleb’s phone, lit up. He scooped it up and the phone illuminated his face, his eyes wide.

“What is it?”

Caleb’s eyes rose to his boyfriend, brow furrowed thoughtfully. “Um…”

“Caleb –” Anna’s voice held a warning in it. “What’s going on?”

“I uh – I just got a text from Hew,” he said slowly, his tongue curling over his lip while he replied. “I…I think I have to go.”

“Wait, Edmund texted you?” Anna asked, reaching out her hand for the phone that Caleb quickly held close to his chest. “What did he say?”

“Oh uh, none of your business,” Caleb admonished her, rising from his spot on the floor. “My buddy needs me, so I’m going to deliver. You think he likes scotch or whiskey better?”

“He likes red wine,” Anna corrected easily, and Caleb’s smirk was enough to make her blush. “Don’t get him drunk,” she ordered, pointing at him like a scolding mother. “He doesn’t cope like you do.”

“Sometimes, everyone needs to cope like I do,” Caleb noted smugly, kissing the top of Ben’s head on the way out.

***

Caleb’s knock on his door almost knocked Edmund off his chair; he had almost forgotten that he had texted him at all. But the exuberant knock, loud enough to startle him, told Edmund who was at the door. He hadn’t been sure who to talk to, since he oftentimes talked to Anna, but decided to simply reach out to the next person on his recent text list. Reaching out to someone at all was a foreign and panic-inducing concept, but the longer he continued to go over their last conversation in his mind, the closer her would get to complete madness.
“Oi, Hew, I brought you your favorite!” Caleb was barreling into his house before Edmund even managed to open the door all the way. “Cabernet, right?”

“How did you know I liked cabernet?” Edmund asked, pleased. He led Caleb into the kitchen, where he retrieved his corkscrew from the drawer and got to work on the bottle.

“Well…”

The cork popped, Edmund poured himself a glass and one for Caleb. “Well what?” he asked, curious.

“Truth be told, I was at Annie’s when you messaged me,” Caleb admitted. “She’s the one who told me what you like.”

Of course she did, Edmund thought darkly.

“So I guess this is about the uh…premature I love you, then?” Caleb asked as delicately as he could, taking a hearty sip of the wine. He grimaced only slightly.

Edmund sighed heavily. “She told you, then,” he said heavily.

“Not so much about the incident, exactly, just that she…well, that she ran,” Caleb tried to skirt around the statement as best he could, but that didn’t halt Edmund’s flinch. “If it makes you feel better, that’s pretty much her default response to anything.”

“It doesn’t particularly make me feel better, no,” Edmund noted, taking a long drink from his glass. He paused, the wine perched in his mouth, before he swallowed, considering the possibilities for his next question. “What…ah, what did she say?”

Caleb’s eyes moved away from his. Edmund sighed; he supposed he should have expected that reaction. Caleb was still Anna’s friend first, and his allegiance lied with her.

“Never mind,” he waved off his question as if it had lingered like smoke. “Forget I asked.”

“Hew, she’s scared,” Caleb said earnestly, sitting at his dinner table, fiddling with the maroon napkins, always folded neatly with napkin rings around them, “and when she’s scared, she runs. That doesn’t mean –”

“That she doesn’t love me?” Edmund finished for him, draining his glass of wine and filling it anew. “But doesn’t her fear reveal something else to you? If she might love me, even if it was deep down, would she still feel scared?”

“I can’t tell you what she feels, Hew,” Caleb said with a shrug. “But I can tell you that being with Annie, in any capacity, requires patience. And every day of patience will bring you a much better reward.”

“Very astute of you to say,” Edmund acknowledged, bringing his glass to his lips once more, “however, there’s also the matter of her husband.”

“Selah isn’t an issue,” Caleb dismissed Anna’s husband with a shake of his head. “He and Annie got married because she was pregnant, and they were well on their way to divorce even before he went to prison.”

“She was almost a mother,” Edmund breathed, his breath fogging his glass, resting on his lower lip. He drained it again.
“She’s almost been a lot of things,” Caleb admitted.

“That’s the problem,” Edmund said, pouring another glass while Caleb watched, eyebrows raised. “I don’t want her to be another ‘almost’ for me. I don’t want to walk away from her being yet another ‘almost.’”

“Then don’t,” Caleb shrugged. “It’s that simple.”

“I can’t stick around if she doesn’t want me to,” Edmund pointed out, the defeat in his voice bringing a frown to even Caleb’s lips.

“She wants you to,” Caleb promised. “I saw her today; she thinks she messed up, that she messed up bad. She’s terrified that you’ll never want to see her again.” Edmund sighed, taking another long drink from his glass. The room was starting to tilt. “Look, Hew, I can’t promise you that Annie is head over heels in love with you, but if I had to guess, just from lookin’, I’d say she’s mighty well close. And if you let this keep you two apart, you will be another almost. In the same boat with Selah, and Abraham.”

The sound of Abraham’s name drew a growl from Edmund’s lips and he drained his glass yet again, setting the delicate stem on the counter of the kitchen a bit louder than he intended.

“You want me to tell you a secret?” Edmund asked, leaning against his cabinets and sliding down to the floor. The world tilted a little less down here, and he noted with an absent sort of amusement that he was getting just a little drunk. Caleb watched him, still holding his own half-full wine glass in his hand delicately, like he wasn’t quite sure what to do with it.

“What is it, Hew?”

“I’ve never been with a woman before,” the words slid out of his lips easily, just like his love declaration had, but he felt no embarrassment. He felt no terror. Alcohol had numbed it all.

This was nice, being truthful.

“Never?” Caleb’s voice was not altogether surprised, and Edmund felt a momentary stab of offense before Caleb started laughing. “Not even in college?”

Edmund shook his head and slid lower on his cabinets, his neck bent almost painfully to keep his head up; otherwise, he’d be lying flat on the floor. “Nope.” He closed his eyes, letting his body’s momentum carry him completely to the tile, and rested his head on the cold floor. He heard a screeching sound of a chair against tile, and suddenly, Caleb was on the tile beside him, staring up at the ceiling too.

“Pretty ballsy of you to admit, Hew,” he admitted.

“Well, someone ought to know,” he shrugged, his movement exaggerated and sluggish.

Caleb chuckled at his slurred words. “You should tell Annie,” he said quietly.

“I think I’ve offered quite enough of the intimately personal to Anna,” Edmund pointed out, his voice losing some of the luster that alcohol brought it.

“Maybe you have,” Caleb agreed. He sat up and reached up to the counter, his short arms hardly reaching, and brought the almost empty bottle of wine with him. “Here, finish this. You deserve to get smashed tonight.”
Edmund awoke next morning on the kitchen floor, his head pillowed with a cushion from his living room couch, and his body covered in the throw that he used purely for decoration. His bare feet were sticking out from underneath the too short blanket. Quiet snoring told him that Caleb was on his couch.

How long had he been asleep? When had he fallen asleep? He turned over, feeling the cottony feeling on the inside of his mouth, and felt his hand land on something glass. He wrenched his eyes open, ignoring the sting that accompanied a lack of good sleep. There were two empty bottles of cabernet beside him.

When had they even opened the second one?

Wait, why had he even woken up, again?

“Hew, your phone,” Caleb groaned from the other room, and the delighted little tinkling coming from his dinner table finally forced Edmund to get up. It was a number he didn’t recognize, but it was also eight in the morning on a Tuesday, so he answered it. Because why the hell not?

“Morning,” he practically yawned into the phone.

“Sounds like suspension is treating you well,” an amused, deep voice danced over the line.

“Andre?” Edmund asked incredulously. “How did you get my number?”

“I know people,” he replied vaguely. “What are you doing right now?”

Edmund squinted against the sunlight streaming through the window on top of his sink. “Being hungover. Why?”

“Come get coffee with me.” It was not a suggestion. “There’s a tiny coffeeshop off campus, a block from that little café, you know the one.

Edmund furrowed his brow. “Um, don’t get me wrong, I’m flattered, but…why?”

“We have something to discuss. See you in ten.”

The line went dead. Edmund stood, frozen, with his phone to his ear, for another few minutes. What exactly just happened? Finally, as the conversation began to sink in as definitely real and not some weird drunk fever dream, he set the phone back where he’d found it and rushed into the bathroom to wash his face before he could change his mind.

“What is wrong with you and Annie?” Caleb’s voice was clouded with sleep and alcohol. “Both of you insist on getting up way too early.”

The mention of her name only made his headache worse; Edmund splashed water on his face and patted it dry, putting toothpaste on his toothbrush, almost missing completely in his haste. “John Andre wants to meet me for coffee,” he explained before thrusting the brush into his mouth.

“Why?”

Edmund made an ‘I dunno’ sound as best he could with a mouth full of toothpaste foam. He spat it out and surveyed his reflection in the mirror. Truly, he looked like he had slept on his kitchen floor, but that couldn’t be helped. He pulled on a sweatshirt and changed out of his slacks and into a pair of
“Whoa, Hew wearing normal clothes?” Caleb had returned to the couch, and was peering up at him from underneath a blanket, his head the only thing sticking out.

Edmund almost laughed, but the intrigue of Andre was weighing on him. “Stay here,” he told Caleb, who rolled over and closed his eyes in response.

***

Andre was lounging on a sofa in a coffeeshop that was so dimly lit it almost made Edmund want to curl up and go back to sleep. There was a cup of coffee waiting for him on the table beside the open seat. He took it gratefully and sipped it. He hadn’t quite gotten the hang of coffee yet, but it wasn’t as dreadful as it used to be.

Andre surveyed him with a smile that conveyed some amusement and a little understanding that Edmund couldn’t decipher.

“It’s a little uncommon to see you outside of your usual suits,” he pointed out, taking a sip of his own coffee.

“Well, no reason to wear them, is there?” Edmund pointed out. Andre nodded once, raising his eyebrow.

“If you say so.”

“If you’ll pardon my shortness, why am I here?” Edmund asked, thoroughly confused, with a headache that was starting to sink in with a vengeance.

“I heard about your suspension,” Andre said easily. “And I wanted you to know where I stood.”

Edmund narrowed his eyes. “Well, I imagined that you’d stand with Richard, since he’s your boss –”

“Truthfully, I don’t plan to outwardly take sides,” Andre said with a wave of his hand, “but I am, at least for your ears only, on your side.”

Edmund’s face contorted in confusion. “Why?”

“Because I am also in a relationship with a student.”

He said the words so easily, without even looking around at who was listening, that Edmund naturally did the looking for him. But the coffeeshop was mostly empty, except for the man behind the counter, his eyes fixed on the morning news.

“You are?” Edmund asked, leaning forward. “Who?”

“Ah, I fear you might not know her,” Andre said. “Besides, she’s married.”

Edmund’s curiosity was truly piqued. “Married? To whom?”

Andre pursed his lips. “To ah…Benedict Arnold.”

“You’re having an affair with Margaret –”

“Do keep your voice down, man,” Andre scolded, his eyes finally rising to take in their surroundings. Edmund flushed and instead took a drink of his coffee, letting the burn of the beverage
be his punishment. “We’ve made many sacrifices, but for now, we are happy. I just wanted you to know that it is possible.”

Edmund’s own blurted declaration rose in his mind. “I suppose it differs between pairs,” Edmund said wearily, rubbing his temples with his fingers.

“Let me give you a bit of advice,” Andre said softly, leaning forward, mimicking Edmund’s pose. “In a relationship like this one, with a challenging, tempestuous woman, the best thing you can do is keep showing up.”

“And what if the relationship isn’t meant to last?”

Andre chuckled. “Hewlett, people don’t just dance a perfect waltz if they aren’t meant to last.”

The statement felt so silly, but it still brought Edmund back to their first dance, to Anna’s quiet declaration that she couldn’t even dance a waltz. They had been so in sync back then – and then the world had shifted.

“Sometimes the words are hard,” Andre seemed to see that he was struggling. “It isn’t the words that are important; if she keeps showing up, if she continues to smile at you with those same eyes,” he seemed almost lost now, looking faraway at a pair of eyes that Edmund couldn’t see, “then it will last. Have faith.”

***

Robert Townsend didn’t often fidget. He was methodical, he was calm, but more than anything else, he was deliberate. Fidgeting was extraneous, it was unnecessary. But, as he knocked on the wooden siding of an unfamiliar classroom door, he found his left hand fidgeting with the button of his blazer.

John Graves Simcoe was just as intimidating as he expected; his large, wide eyes showing far too much white to be calming, his stature tall and wiry. Robert found himself trying to stand up straighter as the man sized him up.

“Can I help you?” he asked. His voice was too soft, much too delicate for a man capable of such atrocities. Robert clenched his jaw and forced himself to smile.

Think of Mary.

Think of Anna.

“Good morning, sir, my name is Robert Townsend,” he extended his hand to the man, who took it and shook it firmly. “I trust you got my email?”

Simcoe blinked. “I did. Tell me, why are you interested in anthropology?”

Robert stepped further into the classroom, and glanced at the empty desks. Which one did Anna used to occupy? Which one had Mary sat in?

“Well, I was a political science major, but I’m finding that it isn’t nearly as encompassing as I’d like it to be –”

Flattery seemed to be the tactic that worked; Simcoe smirked.

“I’ve often said that of the historical disciplines,” he remarked.

“Of course, sir,” Robert said with a smirk that matched Simcoe’s. “I find that the philosophical,
cultural, and even psychological reasonings behind history are far more interesting than the policies enacted.”
Simcoe turned away from him, and in his moment of freedom, Robert’s eyes scanned the desk that housed Simcoe’s briefcase. It was bare but for the case. He must keep all of his effects in his office.

“I was wondering if I could come by your office later,” Robert said, pretending to check the watch on his wrist. “I have a class to attend right now, but I’d love to pick your brain about anthropology; Richard Woodhull says that you are the best professor in the subject.”

Simcoe’s smile would stay with him for the foreseeable future, but Robert filed it away. He would make it his mission to wipe it away.
Chapter Summary

In which Caleb is hungover, Achilles and Patroclus are mentioned, and Robert continues to take care of business.

Caleb was roused from his peaceful sleep by a tentative knock on the door. Groaning, with one hand supporting the cushion over half of his face to combat the sun, he rose unsteadily and slid open the lock.

“Honestly, did you forget your key?” he muttered, returning to the couch. “I’m too hungover for this. I’m never drinking red wine again.”

When he got no response, he braved the sunlight and pulled the cushion down. Surveying him upside down from the end of the couch, confusion etched all over her worried face, was Anna. Her brows furrowed, her bare arms crossed over her chest, she looked the epitome of the disapproving mother.

“What are you doing here?” they asked at the same time, Anna incredulous, Caleb cautious. She huffed, tossing her braided hair to her other shoulder, and glanced around the room; the cushion and blanket in the kitchen that Caleb had provided for Edmund was just visible from her vantage point, along with the two empty bottles of wine.

“I thought I told you not to get him drunk,” she sighed in exasperation.

Caleb sat up, holding up his hands like she was pointing a gun at him. “He did that all on his own,” he remarked, “I just joined in so he wouldn’t feel alone. Personally, I think red wine is pretty horrible.”

Anna raised her eyebrows and nodded, still glancing around the room. “Is he sleeping still?” she asked, her fidgeting fingers giving away her nervousness.

“He isn’t here.”

The fidgeting stopped. “What do you mean he isn’t here?” she asked. “He told me to meet him here.”

Caleb gave her an awkward smile, his lips pursed. “Uh, well, when did he send that to you?”

Realization dawned over Anna’s face. “Oh my god, he was drunk texting me,” she breathed, seating herself on Edmund’s armchair. His smell momentarily assaulted her and she let it comfort her like a blanket would. “That explains so much!”

Caleb chuckled. “You had no idea that he was drunk texting you?”

“In my defense, his grammar and spelling was still impeccable,” she protested, pulling out her phone and rereading them. “Though I suppose that accounts for the brutal honesty.”

“I’m all ears, Annie.”
She pulled the phone close to her chest. “Oh no, not for prying eyes,” she said sharply. Caleb smirked at her until she rolled her eyes and changed the subject. “Now, where is he anyway? I find it hard to believe that he recovered from a hangover before you did.”

Caleb lounged back into the couch. “All he said before he left was that John Andre wanted to meet with him.”

“Andre?” Anna repeated. “The corporate law professor?”

“The very same.”

Anna opened her mouth to respond, to probe, to try to ferret out what exactly those two could be discussing, but the sound of Edmund’s key in the lock sent her nerves into overdrive. How was she supposed to explain why she was here, other than show him the drunk text messages he sent the night before? Would that solve their problems or make them worse?

She was the first thing he saw when he stepped through the front door.

“Caleb, I brought you a coffee – oh, hello.”

She didn’t respond, but offered a sheepish smile from her place on his armchair. Caleb, sat up and reached for the coffee, settling even deeper into the cushions as Edmund continued to stare at Anna, who wasn’t sure where to begin.

“Good, ah, good morning, Anna,” Edmund said nervously, tossing a glance over to Caleb, who shrugged happily as he sipped his coffee. “What – uh, that is to say, is something wrong?”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head slightly. “Uh, but I can, I mean, I can go –”

“No, stay,” he said even as she finished her sentence “if you need me to.”

They stared at each other again, the silence stretching long and thin, Caleb’s eyes dancing between the two of them with amusement. Anna’s eyes finally landed on him, and she widened them, the nonverbal hint to get lost. He cleared his throat loudly and stood.

“Well, I’m going to take a shower, try to get this red wine out of my system,” he said to no one in particular, and no one answered him as he slipped out of the room, and Anna could hear him opening and closing doors down the hallway, looking for the bathroom.

“Last door on the left,” she called out.

There was a momentary silence.

“Thanks, Annie.”

The closing of the bathroom door lit Anna’s nerves on fire; Edmund was looking at her imploringly again, his brow knit in confusion. Without offering an explanation, she unlocked her phone and passed it over.

“What is this?” he asked, taking it gently in his hands.

“Uh, the reason why I’m here,” she said, moving to sit beside him. “You sent me these last night.”

His eyes dropped to the screen, and as he read, she could see his embarrassment creeping up his neck:

“I shouldn’t have told you that I thought I loved you,” it began without preamble. “It wasn’t a
question of might, or think. I know that I love you, but I shouldn’t have sprung it on you, and I certainly shouldn’t have just expected you to feel the same way.”

“I don’t need to read this,” he said, trying to pass back her phone, but Anna refused to take it.

“Finish it,” she said firmly.

“I’ve never had any woman show any sort of interest in me, much less one as beautiful and perfect as you. And before you scold me on my word choice, know that I use the word ‘perfect’ with complete understanding of the irony of the statement. You will never see yourself as perfect, but you have always been perfect to me. Enigmatic, proud, stubborn, intelligent, beautiful, strong, and all of those other words that are listed beside the dictionary definition of ‘dream girl.’ But I don’t want to love a married woman, and I certainly didn’t plan to. What I suppose I’m trying to say, despite my evidence to the contrary, is that I completely understand if you never want to talk to me again, or see me again. You wouldn’t be the first, and you certainly won’t be the last.”

There had been a long break without a response, long enough that when Anna’s response had come in, the time was listed above the incoming text.

“I always want to talk to you, Edmund,” it said. “But perhaps we should talk about this in person?”

“Meet me at my place tomorrow morning,” was his answer, almost immediately after she sent hers.

Then, later:

“Do you think I could go back to school and get accepted to NASA? Because if we don’t work out, I think I’d like to blast myself into space.”

“Edmund, it’s 3 AM. Go to sleep.”

“Right, okay.”

And there, right after the text, was a kissy face emoji. Edmund buried his face in his hands as Anna spotted it. As she did the first time she saw it, she let out a quiet chuckle that wrinkled the corners of her eyes.

“But wait, there’s more,” Anna announced, and scrolled down one more time. She was not wrong. There, underneath a little banner that said “5:16 a.m.” was one more text.

“Don’t tell anyone that I’m a virgin.”

Edmund let out a strangled groan that brought even more giggles to Anna’s lips. Her hands reclaimed her phone and settled over his. “Knowing that you were drunk when you sent these to me makes so much sense,” she said through her giggles. Edmund felt his cheeks warm and threw his glance up to the ceiling, hoping it would open up and swallow him whole.

Of all embarrassing things to send someone when you’re drunk, the fact that you’re a grown man and still a virgin was probably on the list of things you should never ever let out of the vault, much less send to the woman you hoped would one day take your virginity.

“Edmund, relax,” Anna reassured him. “There’s no reason to be embarrassed.”

“There are so many reasons to be embarrassed,” he protested vehemently. “What is wrong with me?”

“Would it make you feel better if we just pretended that those last few text messages didn’t exist?”
she asked.

“It certainly wouldn’t make me feel worse,” he answered.

Anna nodded and took out her phone again. After a few presses of her finger, the messages were gone. “There, like they were never sent,” she said soothingly.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

There was another long moment of silence, both of them wondering where to go next. Edmund, fully convinced that he had said enough potentially humiliating things, was determined not to speak first. But, as the shower shut off and their time alone started to close, he wondered how long he would keep his silence if she didn’t say anything soon.

As if reading his mind, Anna finally sighed. “I should have…explained to you last night,” she began slowly, rather like a car that couldn’t get going. “Um, well, I just –” she groaned. “What is wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” he answered, almost as a reflex. Her eyes met his for just a moment, long enough to find some sort of strength in them, and she was looking away again, back down at her lap.

“I don’t love you,” she said in a rush. “I mean, not yet. I don’t know what I feel, and I don’t know if I’ve ever felt love for another person, other than my son or my family. Every time I thought I was in love with someone, it was different. It felt different. And it never ended well.”

He didn’t say anything, even as she paused, waiting for a response. If there was more, he didn’t want to head off her explanation.

“I know that you make me happy,” she said truthfully, almost tearfully. “And I know that I wouldn’t be here with you if I didn’t care about you a lot. I tried to talk myself out of being around you so many times, because I knew you would get in trouble, but I just couldn’t stay away. I guess that means I must feel something, something strong, but I just don’t know that I want to give it a name. I don’t want to jinx it, and I think that, with everything coming our way, we’re going be jinxed by just about anything.”

He took her hand and squeezed it tight for a moment as the bathroom door opened.

“We’re going to be fine,” he said with confidence, thinking of Andre’s advice, of Caleb’s reassurances, of her warm smile and deep eyes.

“I took the longest shower of my life, so I hope you guys have worked out your nonsense,” Caleb shouted from the kitchen.

***

Sitting in Simcoe’s office felt rather like sitting at a disciplinary hearing; his desk was much too large for the room, and any unfortunate student that decided to visit him in his office would be forced to sit as far away from the door as possible. Robert took that seat, feeling as he did so that its placement was purposeful. It would be harder to escape if the only way out could be easily blocked.

Thinking of Simcoe as purely a predator made deceiving him easier; there was a sort of profound, absent pleasure in sitting in his office while Simcoe prattled on about anthropology and Robert surveyed his surroundings, his eyes peeled for some sort of clue. He felt useful all of a sudden; he felt like he was making a difference now.
“Tell me, Townsend, what is your particular interest in anthropology?” Simcoe finally asked, after almost half an hour of waxing philosophical about his own love for the subject. Robert blinked slowly, fixing his unapologetic gaze on Simcoe.

“I find myself drawn to ancient civilizations,” he said carefully, trying to make sure his word choices were deliberate. “Political science is, for the most part, the study of current policies, at least, from 1980 and forward. I happen to find the older civilizations more attractive. The Hammurabi Code, for instance, and its influence on written law.”


The cadence of his sentence let Robert know he wasn’t entirely impressed with his choice, but he pressed on anyway. “I think we still employ a lot of the moralistic points of the Hammurabi Code, but what is interesting to me is that now it is seen as cruel to view a perceived slight as something that must be matched in kind.”


“Excuse me, sir, but your classroom door seems to be locked,” the student said sheepishly.

Simcoe frowned. “I could have sworn – oh well. Please excuse me, Mr. Townsend, I’ll be right back,” he stood and led the way to the classroom, an almost sixty second walk. As soon as his footsteps faded, Robert leapt into action. He bolted around the desk and started wrenching open drawers, mindful of the sounds in the hallway. The door was still closed over – he would hear anyone approaching.

The top drawer held nothing but old graded papers; Robert disregarded them and moved to the next one. The second one was old copy paper and ink for his printer. The bottom held notebooks, some old gradebooks, some leatherbound.

He grabbed the leather one, flipping aimlessly through it as his time ticked away.

“Say, must I all my joys forgo and still maintain this outward show? Say, shall this breast that's pained to feel be ever clad in horrid steel? Shall no fair maid with equal fire awake the flames of soft desire? Fond youth, the god of love replies, your aner take from Anna's eyes.”

A…poem? Robert’s eyes landed on Anna’s name. With a quiet sound of approval, he took out his phone and snapped a picture, dropping the notebook back where he found it as approaching footsteps caught his attention.

He rushed back to his seat, managing to just quiet his breathing as Simcoe pushed the door open.

“Ahh, Townsend. We’re going to have to reschedule the rest of our conversation,” Simcoe said, going to his desk and grabbing a notebook and a marker for the board. “I have to teach right now.” He paused, his hand resting on top of the green marker, and Robert saw his eyes lower to the desk drawer that Robert had opened.

Had he closed it all the way? Was it cracked?

Simcoe furrowed his brow for a moment before shaking it off. “Why don’t we finish this tomorrow?”

“Sure thing, sir,” Robert answered easily, probably too quickly. He stood from his chair, his eyes
trying to search out that particular drawer, and let Simcoe hold the office door open for him. “See you tomorrow.”

He tried desperately not to run, but he wasn’t sure if he succeeded or not. As soon as he got outside, out of ear and eyeshot of Simcoe’s entire building, he uploaded the picture he took to iCloud, deleting the evidence from his phone.

Tomorrow he would go back.

***

“I can’t believe you want to go out with me again, after I ruined our first date,” Anna remarked, leaning back in the dimly lit booth of Cherry Tree, the only tea room in the whole city. Edmund smiled at her, a warm smile she thought she’d never see again, and it drew another smile from her.

Knowing that they were okay, that they would be okay for a while, made her feel…giddy. She had been so scared that being on the same emotional page would be too important to Edmund, that they couldn’t be together if she didn’t love him yet, that knowing he was okay with waiting for her to catch up filled her with a softness she hadn’t experienced before.

“Well, since you took me to a place you like to go last time, I figured it was my turn,” he said, sipping his tea. “I know you aren’t a huge tea drinker, but –”

“I love the herbal raspberry one, though,” Anna pointed out. “I always drink it when I get sick.”

He nodded at her cup. “So you like that one then?”

“I do,” she said, taking another sip. “So, I explained football last time, so now it’s your turn.”

“My turn?” he asked.

She nodded. “Teach me something. Something you like.”

His eyes darted around the room, searching for something to jog his memory. As he thought, Anna’s phone vibrated against the table, startling them both. They glanced down at it.

Unknown number.

She ignored it.

“Have you read The Iliad?” he asked finally. Anna, with a small smile blooming over her face, shook her head. “Well, then let me tell you the story of Achilles and Patroclus.”

Her phone went off again, and his eyes landed on it, his expectant smile falling just a bit. “Perhaps you should get that,” he said, pointing at the Unknown Number. Anna pressed ‘decline’ and flipped it over.

“I’m busy hearing the story of Achilles and Patroclus,” she replied, taking his hand across the table.

He painted as vivid a picture as he could, weaving the story from The Iliad and adding his own personal insights, the way scholars thought their relationship was simply a strong friendship while others continued to fight that it was love. He told her of Patroclus’s death, the agonizing way that Achilles mourned him, the heartbeat that accompanied such a loss.

Her eyes were alight with the wonder, the awe that Edmund often felt when he read classic Greek literature. He saw, in her eyes, himself, the first time he discovered The Iliad, the first time he wished
that he could love someone the way Achilles loved Patroclus.

When her phone vibrated again, she turned it off and stowed it in her pocket. Her undivided attention made him feel – light, airy, and important. So few people had deigned to give him their full attention before Anna Strong, and knowing that a woman as interesting as her could find something of interest in him continued to shock him.

“They remind me of Ben and Caleb,” she remarked, her fingers tracing the small scars on Edmund’s hands. “The protectors of each other, the fighters.”

Edmund smiled, his eyes on their hands. “They certainly make a remarkable pair,” he noted.

“So do we, you know,” she replied, pulling his attention back to her face.

“I know,” he answered.

***

They decided, after some debate, to go back to her apartment to watch Serenity. While Edmund had finished Firefly a fair amount of times, he had steered clear of Serenity because of spoilers that Caleb had revealed “Man, I can’t believe they killed Wash!” “Caleb!” But now, he claimed with vigor, he would soldier through, if only so Anna would stop bugging him about watching it.

He finally managed to get a kiss in on her doorstep, his hand resting gently at the back of her neck, his other hand splayed across her back. She answered him with a tender nibble on his bottom lip, a chastisement for taking so long, and soon, they were laughing into each other’s mouths, bodies pressed against her front door.

It was truly something of a dream; that is, until the door opened behind Anna and sent them both stumbling into the entry.

Standing on the other side of the door was a man Edmund didn’t recognize, but judging by the way Anna went still, he could guess the man’s identity.

“Selah?”
Selah has returned and no one is happy about it. Robert continues his mission.

“S-Selah,” Anna’s exhaled name set a cold silence free. The tall, thin man with dark hair and even darker, heavy-lidded eyes was looking at Edmund with something that looked like contempt. “When…when did you get out?”

“Today,” he answered, his voice sharp. “I called you. I called you fifteen times, Anna. What happened to our house?”

Anna stepped completely inside the apartment, closing the door behind her, her eyes fluttering over Edmund without offering any sort of clue as to how to behave. Surely Selah had seen them kissing; surely he knew already, based on the ugly glares he was sending to Edmund. “I sold it,” she answered. “I sold our cars too.”

“You – you had no right,” he snapped, stepping toward her, and Anna immediately retreated, away from him. The instinctive movement put Edmund on his guard. What kind of relationship warranted an immediate recoil from your husband, the one you haven’t seen in years? Why weren’t they embracing? Why were they speaking to each other like this?

“I had every right,” she retorted. “I had no money, no way to support myself. You were gone.”

“Thanks for visiting, by the way.”

Anna scoffed. “How did you even get in here?” she asked, crossing her arms in front of her chest. The familiar defiant stance made Edmund feel a little more at ease; she was in control again.

“Uh, that would be me,” Abraham’s quiet, chagrined voice came from the couch, where he had managed to remain hidden this whole time. “I tried to call you to let you know.”

“How did you get in here?” she asked again, this time directing the question at Abraham.

“Ben let us in,” Abe answered with a sheepish shrug. “I imagine he tried to call you too.” Anna’s hand fell to her pocket, where she had shoved her phone during Edmund’s story of Achilles and Patroclus.

She turned back to Selah, who was still regarding Edmund like a bacteria. “How?” she asked. “I didn’t even know your appeal went through.”

Selah shrugged. “Good behavior and a good lawyer. You would know that if you visited.”

“You didn’t give any indication you wanted me to visit you,” Anna replied, her voice softening. “There are only so many times that I can show up to the prison and get told by a guard that you don’t want to see me before I give up. What did you want me to do, keep coming back?”

“You’re my wife!”
“That certainly didn’t mean shit to you before you got sent to prison,” she slung back.

Selah clenched his jaw, and as the muscles worked, Edmund could see him run his tongue over his teeth beneath the skin of his lip. The movement was almost feral; when his eyes turned to Edmund, he wanted to take a step back. But Anna’s sigh strengthened him, and he held his ground.

“I guess that didn’t stop you from replacing me,” he noted darkly, nodding his head to Edmund.

“Do not look at him, your issue is with me,” Anna immediately stepped in front of Edmund, and he felt keenly like she was shielding him from a blow. He let his hand settle, unseen, on her lower back. She stiffened for a moment, and then relaxed. “You checked out on me when I lost James –”

“When we lost James –”

“When I lost James,” she roared, and even Edmund took a step back, away from her. “You didn’t feel him, you didn’t have to –” she broke off suddenly, and he could see her crumbling and trying to build herself back up at the same time. “You left me when you were all that I had left. You don’t get to be mad at me now.”

“You are still my wife,” he insisted.

“In name only,” she replied, her voice hoarse from her yell.

“Maybe I should go,” Abraham was already moving toward the door. Anna didn’t say anything; Selah’s eyes were on Edmund.

“Perhaps I should go too,” Edmund said, the statement alone leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. Anna’s arm stopped him.

“No, Edmund, stay,” she said firmly. “Selah is the one that should go.”

Selah’s eyes settled on Edmund, this time latching on with the intention of engaging. “So you’re the new guy she’s fucking? I have to say, I thought Abraham would last longer.”

“She – we are – that is, we are not –”

“We aren’t sleeping together, Selah,” Anna replied sharply. “And it isn’t any of your business.”

Selah’s eyes ran up Edmund quickly. “Yeah I supposed you would’ve had better taste than him.”

Edmund flushed, but it was Anna that snapped back. “I thought I just told you to get out.”

“I live here,” Selah shot back.

“No, you lived in our house, which a nice old couple owns now,” Anna argued. “I live here, and I don’t want you here.” She gestured toward the door, and even as Selah looked at it, Edmund knew he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Where do you expect me to go?” he asked. “I just got out of jail, Anna.”

“You have family,” she said coldly.

He glanced toward the door again, and Anna moved out from in front of Edmund to yank it open. “You’re supposed to be my family.”

“I can’t,” she breathed shakily, and her hand tightened around the frame of the door, her knuckles
“I cannot do that anymore. Go.”

Selah moved toward the door and paused on his way out, leaning toward Anna for a kiss. She allowed it, her shoulders stiff, until Selah’s hand tightened around her upper arm. She wrenched her shoulder back, stepping away from him.

“Go,” she said again. When he didn’t move: “Please.”

As the door closed behind him, she leaned her forehead against it, breathing heavily, letting the anger flow out of her, taking her strength with it. Gently, Edmund took a tentative step forward and placed his hand on Anna’s shoulder. She flinched violently, and with a start, he withdrew his hand.

“Sorry,” he said quietly. She sighed, an exhausted, heavy sigh, and shook her head.

“It’s not you,” she muttered. “Don’t apologize.” He wanted to reach out to her again, to feel her skin, her pulse, something, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it again. She sighed again, this one much shallower than the last, and locked the door.

Where did they go from here? Edmund followed her as she swept into the living room, finally pressing the power button on the top of her phone. She let herself fall gracelessly onto the couch as the phone booted up. He followed suit, perching himself awkwardly on the edge of the spot he always occupied.

“Eleven messages, twenty-five missed calls,” she groaned, putting the phone away without checking any of them. As she marinated in the silence and Edmund continued to struggle to find the right words, she let her gaze fall to him. She surveyed his face, digesting whatever his visage held, and reached for his hand. “Do you hate me now?” she asked, her voice suddenly so much younger. “Now that my –” she hesitated over the word, “husband is here, and you’ve seen how I treat him –”

Her voice fractured around the word, and Edmund’s hand tightened around hers.

“I don’t hate you,” he said simply. I love you, he thought, but he wouldn’t, couldn’t say that right now.

“You should,” she said quietly, “I’m an adulteress.”

Edmund grimaced at the word. “You are,” he agreed. “But I still don’t hate you.” He swallowed thickly. “I knew you were married when I…when I pursued you,” he said slowly. “I just – never considered this,” he motioned to the room, the situation, “as a plausible turn of events.”

Anna seemed to sense that he wasn’t done. “And?” she prompted.

He sighed. “And I’m just…not sure how to navigate this. I don’t know.”

Her exhale was a breath against a sob, and she clung tighter to him. “I never wanted you to have to deal with this,” she said softly.

“I know,” he soothed.

And he did know; he could see it in the shake of her shoulders as she struggled to keep her tears in. But he wasn’t sure how she would have handled this situation if he hadn’t been here. Would Selah still be in her apartment? Would Abraham have been the one enduring the venomous looks that Selah had shot at him?

The way she flinched away from her husband still troubled him. It was such an animalistic
movement, a natural reaction, he had to wonder.

“Anna,” he began cautiously. “Has Selah ever…I mean, I saw the way you – you flinched, and –”

“Selah isn’t abusive,” Anna answered easily. “He’s just…he can get a little scary when he’s angry.”

It was a relief to hear, but it gave Edmund less to hold against the scorned husband. He wished, for one horrible moment, that he had done something terrible, if only so Edmund could hate him unabashedly, with vigor. But Selah was just…another lost man who had nothing left. He had no wife, despite the woman who still bore his name, no house, nothing to really come back to. It was sad, to him.

She was watching him again, her eyes large and fathomless. He could see the remnants of the tears she’d tried to hard to hide at the corners of the windows to her soul that he was so disarmed by.

“I do want a divorce, Edmund,” she said without prompting. “I have since he went to prison, but I couldn’t just—” she struggled with the explanation. “He didn’t have anything left, and neither did I, and I didn’t…I didn’t want to take it from him.”

“I know,” he soothed once more.

She sniffed, the sound twitching her tiny nose. “But I have something now,” she said, and he could hear the significance in her voice. She was talking about him. “I have something to live for, and I have someone who showed me that I could live for myself.”

It wasn’t an I love you, but it sure felt like one.

***

“You want me to what?” The janitor, a fragile looking older man, stared wide-eyed at Robert, who took a deep breath and prepared to begin again.

“I just need you to open that door,” he said again. “I left my rough draft in there and the final draft is due tomorrow, and I can’t fix it if I don’t get it, please,” he held out a twenty-dollar bill, and the man’s eyes brightened. “I can’t fail this class,” he prompted, wiggling the money just slightly.

The old man’s eyes rose to Robert’s again, narrowed in suspicion. “I could get fired for this,” he said significantly.

“I could never tell on you,” Robert promised. “I don’t even know your name.”

“And I don’t know yours,” the man answered.

“And we can keep it that way,” Robert pressed the twenty into the man’s chapped hands, dry and cracked from cleaning fluids. “All you have to do is unlock the door and walk away.”

The old man’s eyes glanced up and down the hallway and closed around the money. “Professor Simcoe has never been kind to us,” he confided, his Spanish accent more pronounced when he whispered. Robert nodded understandingly as the key slid into the lock.

He closed the door behind him and sat at the desk, careful not to move anything, even the chair’s alignment, while he searched. He carefully opened the same drawer that he found the poetry in and searched more thoroughly.

Gradebooks were stacked on top of that leather bound journal, one with this semester’s dates on
them. Carefully, he removed them and scanned the grades.

There were the occasional scratches, where he had clearly made a mistake, wrote a 78 instead of a 79, and his penmanship was truly awful, but most of the scribbles were beside the name Anna Strong.

Her first paper had been an 89, the second a 45 that he had scratched out and changed to a 60. That placed her at the edge of a C. Her pop quizzes ranged from 80 to 40 to 0, the 0 the most recent pop quiz, given almost a month ago. Her most recent paper grade had been a 55, which he had scratched out and changed to a 0; but hadn’t she said that Hewlett had helped her correct that paper? That she had gotten a higher grade on it? Robert had seen it, sitting on her desk, with the date across the top. The written grade was an 88.

So he had been lying about the grades he put on her papers, and was putting bad grades to keep her from passing in his gradebook.

She was failing because of that 0.

Carefully, Robert pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of it.

He placed the gradebook back where he’d found it, closing the drawer cautiously, listening for any approaching footsteps. When he heard nothing, he moved to the other set of drawers. The top drawer held a large pocket knife that drew a shiver from Robert. The second held packages of highlighters and markers for the board in his classroom. It was the bottom drawer, again, where he struck gold.

There were arbitrarily folded papers in there, most of them receipts from Starbucks and the occasional Domino’s pizza order. But tucked into the back corner, with distinctly important lettering, was the evidence Robert needed.

He unfolded the papers, scanning the top.

CHRISTUS SPOHN HOSPITAL SUMMARY:

His eyes dropped lower on the document: “examined for a dislocated shoulder, sustained during a car accident. Once reset, the doctor prescribed oxycotin for the pain and sent patient home. No overnight visit necessary.”

And, at the very bottom: “Blood alcohol level just above the legal limit.”

Forgoing all caution, Robert creased the document once more and shoved it into his pocket. He was seething; the man couldn’t even claim that he was blackout drunk. He was just barely over the legal limit when he attacked Anna. He had been aware of his intentions, of his actions. He shoved the drawer closed, relishing in the loud bang that came from it, and left, taking great care to make sure the door was locked behind him.

***

When Caleb had suggested a night in with Ben, he had not anticipated a visitor, bunking in their dorm, watching them with heavy eyes that always reminded him of a bloodhound. But Abraham had called Ben, who had told Caleb, and Selah was now, against Caleb’s will, sitting across the room from them.

“So tell me about this Hewlett guy,” he said, and Caleb narrowed his eyes.

Ben’s eyes slid to Caleb’s for just a moment. “I don’t…I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said
carefully. “You just got out of prison – let’s not cause too much drama too quick.”

Selah laughed a mirthless laugh that didn’t bring smiles to anyone else’s face. “Benjamin, I didn’t go to prison for murder.”

“Well, you kind of did,” Caleb pointed out. Selah’s eyes landed on him.

“Not the kind of murder I’m likely to repeat,” he answered.

The silence that followed was long and awkward; Caleb turned to Ben and widened his eyes, trying to communicate with his boyfriend nonverbally. Unfortunately, nonverbal communication was not his strong suit, and soon, his careful get him out of here had dissolved into a series of angry faces that made Ben look confused and slightly amused.

“Come on, Tallmadge, I just want to know what the guy’s like,” Selah prompted, drawing Ben’s attention back to him. “I know that Anna and I have no chance.”

“Do you?” Caleb blurted.

Selah turned his eyes back to him. “How can I be sure if I don’t know anything about this guy?” he asked. “So, come on. Is he better than Abraham? I always figured I’d lose her to Abe.”

His voice feigned nonchalance, but his hands were clenched tightly into fists. Caleb’s eyes landed on them, noting the nervous, angry tell. Selah looked expectantly at Ben. In their childhood, Caleb had always been the friend that called Selah on his antics while Ben had always been afraid of him; Selah had been best friends with Samuel, Ben’s older brother, who had died in Iraq. Now, Ben constantly looked at Selah like he was simultaneously the brother he’d lost and the man that took him away.

“Abe started dating Mary Smith,” Ben finally said. “Anna told him to choose between the two of them, and Richard pushed him toward Mary. That was pretty much the end of Anna and Abe. And then she met Edmund.”


“Yes,” Ben sighed, letting his hand fall to Caleb’s forearm to keep him in place. “Edmund Hewlett, a British law professor.”

“A professor?” Selah exclaimed. “Well, I suppose he had that pasty nerdy look.”

“Edmund Hewlett is an honorable man,” Caleb snapped.

Selah held up his hands in mock surrender, but his brows had furrowed. “Alright, Brewster, calm down.”

“If you want an indication of intensity, he was the only one that could calm her on March 23,” Caleb replied coldly, his voice flat and devoid of emotion. Selah’s face turned from amused to stricken. “As far as I can tell, he’s the only thing that’s held her together, with everything that’s happened.”

“Everything that’s happened?” Selah repeated. “What does that mean? What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” Ben interrupted. “Just…the usual.”

“He already told her that he loves her,” Caleb butted in again, his voice growing in belligerence. “And if I had to hazard a guess, I’d say she loves him too.”

Selah’s eyes rose to meet his, but he didn’t move from his spot. “Are you sure it isn’t you that loves
him, Brewster?"

With a rush of heated movement, Caleb wrenched Selah up from his spot and shoved him against the wall by the front of his shirt.

“Look you flippant little shite,” he spat, “Edmund Hewlett is one of the nicest men I’ve ever met, and he hasn’t committed enough sins to be cursed with you. You left Annie when she needed you, and he helped pick her up. You don’t get to claim her like a piece of discarded clothing. Not anymore. And if you hurt Hew, I’ll make sure I hurt you so bad I get put in the same cell they just released you from.”

“Caleb, stop!” Ben shouted, grabbing him by the shoulders. He wrenched him away from Selah, whose face was flushed dark red. With a grunt that sounded like a growl, Caleb extricated himself from Ben and stalked out the door, slamming it behind him.
Anna expected to be awoken the next morning by Selah banging on her door, by Ben knocking politely on the door, or even by Edmund trying to slip out the door without her noticing (and she couldn’t have blamed him if he did, not anymore), but instead, she was greeted with a surprise, and not altogether a pleasant one. The screeching of her phone jerked her awake, and it took a few moments for her to realize that she was, in fact, in her own bed, with Edmund beside her.

The loud, obscene jingling continued and Edmund groaned, stirring at the sound slower than she. She shushed him gently, placing her hand gently on his shoulder as she reached for the phone.

Mary.

“Hello?” her voice was ragged from screaming at Selah, and the scratchiness of her throat was a painful reminder of the most recent developments in her life. Edmund quietly turned to look at her, his eyes squinted against the sunlight pouring through the blinds.

“Anna, you and Edmund need to go to the hockey game today,” Mary said in lieu of a good morning. Anna ran her hand over her eyes, flinching past the pink glow of the sunlight through her fingers. “There isn’t a lot of time left in the semester, and you two need traction before we protest.”

With a groan of exertion, Anna heaved herself into a sitting position, letting Edmund’s arms wrap loosely around her waist and pull her closer to his warm torso. “Why the hockey game?” she asked. “Edmund doesn’t even like hockey.”

Edmund groaned his agreement, but his hands were rising to wipe the sleep from his eyes. She watched him with a soft smile, letting Mary chatter on about the importance of being seen together and happy in public. She knew what the reasoning was, but she couldn’t bring herself to consider this a truthful portrayal of their relationship. They were probably going to be more strained than ever now, with Selah back.

With a pang, Anna remembered that Selah loved hockey.

She sighed heavily, her shoulders stooping, and Edmund immediately wrapped his arm around her waist again, his forearm resting across her thighs. He was still hovering between the stages of awake and asleep, his eyes closed against the light but his limbs alive with energy. He pressed a soft kiss to the skin of her back without sitting up.

“Alright, alright, we’ll go,” Anna conceded, careful to make her voice almost jocular at the edge so she wouldn’t snap at someone who didn’t deserve it. Mary seemed to sense her reticence, or the tone that she covered up.

“I heard about Selah,” she said, her voice delicate, like it would dance carefully and gracefully over the issue. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Anna sighed quietly, hoping it didn’t travel over the phone. “There isn’t much to say, Mary, but I
appreciate it.” Mary didn’t respond for a moment, and, in a rush to make sure she didn’t alienate her completely, Anna added, “why don’t you and Robert join us at the game? It can be a double date.”

“Oh,” Mary’s exclamation was almost a gasp, and it was so doll-like that it brought a smile to Anna’s lips. “Uh, I’m not sure what he’s doing today. I’ll ask him.”

“Oh, Mary?” Anna replied, leaning back into Edmund’s still horizontal form.

“Yeah?”

Mary’s voice was sheepish, with a hint of guilt that Anna couldn’t place. “Thank you.”

Before Anna could ask her what she was thanking her for, Mary muttered a quick “bye,” and hung up, leaving Anna staring at the refreshed background of her phone quizzically. Edmund cleared his throat, dispelling the sleep in his chest, and finally opened his eyes. The sunlight struck them hazel, and Anna allowed herself a few moments of unabashed admiration.

“A hockey game?” he finally asked, squinting up at her.

Anna leaned down into his embrace, putting her upper body almost on top of him. “According to Mary, we need to be seen happy in public more often.”

“Ahh,” he replied. His eyes darted away from her. “And…and Selah –?”

She was momentarily assaulted by the memory of Selah beside her at a hockey game, the radiating cold of the ice keeping the color high in her cheeks and her jacket tight around her shoulders. His arm was around her shoulders, his breath on her cheek, while he explained to her the rules. It was one of their first dates, and the first time they had kissed, right in front of the ice, while the players were slamming each other into the barrier in front of them.

They had been in love then, they’d thought. They were invincible.

And now –

She remembered when she first realized that she lost James; when she had been in the hospital, waiting for Selah, hoping for someone to come, to hold her hand while she cried. She was in so much pain, felt keenly every single breath she took, knowing her son couldn’t have them. She would never be a mother, the doctors told her. She could never give that to Selah now.

He didn’t come. She was flawed, weak. They were no longer invincible.

And now he was sickening reminder of her failures, of every sin she had ever committed. He was the billboard that projected them to her. She blinked, lost for the moment in Edmund’s gaze. How long until he took up Selah’s position? How long until he realized that her marriage was doomed not because of Selah, but because it had her in it?

She wasn’t sure she could bear it.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, letting her eyes drop away from his gaze. “I don’t exactly want to seek him out today.”

His hand fiddled with her fingers before lacing them together. “I understand,” he said. “You don’t have to.”
“I want to focus on making sure we can get your job back,” she defended, even though he wasn’t fighting her. “Selah will only complicate that.”

He nodded, finally sitting up. Anna sat back on her knees, watching him carefully. She was so ready, ready for him to decide to leave, to decide that she was too much baggage, too much work.

“I agree with you there,” he said quietly.

Anna felt helplessness begin to weigh her down. “We don’t have to go,” she said quickly, almost blushing at how obvious her insecurity seemed to be. “If you don’t want to.”

“No, no, that’s not what I said,” he amended. “I just…I want to make sure you aren’t going all of this for me and nothing for yourself.” His eyes were locked on hers again, unwilling to release hers, and she felt stressed tears wetting the corners of her lashes. “What do you need?” he asked. “What do you need me to do?”

“You,” she answered, almost ashamed, and she felt her chin start to quiver, the dead giveaway of tears coming. He held her hands tighter, pulling her into his embrace.

“You have me,” he reassured her, and with her face hidden against his shoulder, it was so much easier for her to cry.

In the wake of her first sob, she let her fear free. “Not for long.”

He pulled away, his hands on her shoulders, and surveyed her face worriedly. “I challenge you to tell me what you could possibly do to make me leave,” he said firmly. She sobbed once more in response. “Anna, please,” he let one hand caress her cheek. “I know things are complicated.”

“Complicated? Things are a mess!”

“And I still love you,” he insisted, refusing to stutter over the word, refusing to bow beneath her disbelieving stare.

“You won’t,” she said softly, the knowledge, the insistence clear in her voice.

“I will,” he argued. She pulled her hands from his and slid off the bed, turning her back to him.

“Anna!” She swept into the living room, away from him, away from the words she couldn’t believe. “Anna, don’t.”

“Don’t what?” she asked, her voice cracking, her hair sticking to the tears on her neck.

“You’re trying to leave,” Edmund’s voice betrayed the hurt that Anna didn’t want to hear. She turned away from him again. It was too much – this was all too much. Selah, Edmund, Abraham, Simcoe. Even Edmund, in his kindness, his love; she felt keenly its impermanence, just like Selah’s, just like Abraham’s. And now he would truly see, if he hadn’t already, what kind of trouble she was.

“I need to,” her voice was almost a whisper, carried on the edge of a sigh, of defeat.

“You said, just yesterday, that you had something to live for now. That I gave you something to live for,” he was rapidly losing his patience, giving way to desperation as she continued to look at him with those sad eyes, those eyes that said they were over before they really started. “What changed?”

“Just because you gave me something to live for doesn’t mean I should thank you by sticking around,” she replied. “Edmund, you deserve so much better –”
“No,” he burst out, his voice almost a shout, and he was forcibly reminded of Anna’s argument with Selah just a few hours ago in this same spot. “No, you don’t get to say that, you don’t get to decide what I deserve.”

“And what about tomorrow, when I remember the first time Selah said he loved me?” she shouted back, her voice twisted and cruel. “And what about when Selah decides to come back, because he will. What about when I struggle to file those divorce papers, because change is terrifying? When will you decide that you’ve had enough?”

He couldn’t find the words to respond, so he stood there while she waged an entire war against him.

“When, Edmund? When I finally say that I love you? When we sleep together the first time? The second time? When the semester ends and you get fired? One day, you’re going to wake up, just like the rest of them, and realize that you don’t love me anymore. Maybe you’ll realize that you never did.”

“Anna, I couldn’t –”

“And you’ll leave without saying goodbye, and I’ll just be convenience after that. I made you feel free, I made you feel young. But I’m not a wife. I’m not – God, I’m not a mother. I’m a mess. I’m a fucking mess, and I can’t even get through college without making an entire disaster of things. You don’t love me, Edmund, you’re much too smart for that. You couldn’t.”

He was on the edge of tears now; he could see his vision blurring at the sides, the woman he so desperately loved obscured by his emotions, and he supposed that was some kind of sick metaphor. His mouth twisted with a mirthless sneer.

“If you’re so convinced that I don’t love you, then why are you trying to convince me to leave you?”

“Because I’d rather you leave now before –”

“Before what?” he asked, finally chancing stepping closer to her. She closed her eyes and allowed herself a deep breath, trying to steady her voice. “Before you tell me that you love me? Before you allow yourself to love me?”

He gave her a few moments to answer, and when she didn’t, he spoke again.

“Or because you already do?”

Her eyes jumped back to his, and he knew he had his answer. The thought didn’t comfort him – she was fighting it so hard that it hurt him more to know she loved him and was still trying to push him out the door.

“I love you for everything that you are, and everything you’ve done,” he said clearly. “And I don’t plan on leaving you unless you can look me in the eye and tell me that you truly want me to go.”

He could see her jaw clench and knew he had staked his claim on the wrong thing; he had allowed her the opening he should have closed. A tear snaked down his cheek.

“I want you to go,” she said quietly, firmly. “I need you to go.”

“All you have to do is call me,” he said through his tears, trying to keep his voice steady, “and I’ll be right back here.” He turned away from her, toward the door.

“Edmund?”
He turned back to look at her, but she had her back to him already, like she couldn’t bear to watch him leave.

“Anna.”

“I love you.”

***

Their phones rang at the same time. Caleb’s eyes dropped to Ben’s before he found his own. Anna’s name was displayed across Ben’s; Edmund’s across Caleb’s. They made uneasy eye contact for a few moments before they answered. This was surely a bad sign.

“Hew,” Caleb answered, and was immediately assaulted with a barrage of words, mostly angry words, that he couldn’t follow. He quickly jumped up from his spot. “Whoa, whoa, relax. What’s happened?”

Ben, a pit of dread opening in his stomach, answered his call. “Anna?”

He heard nothing but silence. He gripped the phone tighter, suddenly worried as Caleb grabbed his jacket and his keys, his face contorted in disbelief, sadness, and anger.

“Anna?”

“I did it,” she answered. Her voice was flat, devoid of emotion. “I made him leave.”

Shit.

Caleb was standing by the door, staring at Ben. Something must have changed on his face, because his boyfriend quickly muttered a “can you hold on a second,” to Edmund and moved toward his boyfriend’s side. “What?”

“Anna,” Ben replied as if that was enough of an explanation.

“Yeah,” Caleb nodded sadly. “Hew is freaking out. I’m going to make sure he’s okay. You go to Anna.”

“Anna,” Ben directed into the phone. “Where are you?”

“I’m going to the bar,” she answered, and he could hear the sound of her front door closing as she said it. “I need to be – not me right now.”

“Anna, please. Just…wait for me,” he said quickly, locking the door behind Caleb as they took off in different directions. “Don’t go there by yourself.”

She chuckled into the phone, the sound lacking all amusement, and Ben grimaced. “What does it matter, Benny Boy? Nothing matters.”

He doubled his speed, jogging to his car. “Anna, I know how this goes. You do something that you think is smart, you decide that you need to forget about it, and you go on a bender. At least let me make sure that you’re safe before you do it this time.”

“I told him I loved him,” she muttered, like she was disgusted with herself. “Right after I told him to leave. I shouldn’t have said it.”

Ben sighed, starting his car and backing out quickly, trying to turn the wheel with one hand. “I think
“he deserved to know,” he replied. “Or else he would have always thought you didn’t.”

“I love him so much, Ben,” her worrisome voice fracturing to one with too much emotion. “I – I mean, I must, right?”

“If you love him,” Ben said slowly, “why did you make him leave?”

She scoffed. “He deserves better than a married woman who flunked out of college.”

“You haven’t flunked out of college.”

“I will,” she promised. “What was I going to do? Just wait until we’d been married for years and let him leave, like Selah did? Let him take my heart with him?”

He could see her, walking on the sidewalk across the street from her apartment. “Anna, if there was anyone who would protect your heart, it would be Edmund.”

She spotted his car and he could see the tear tracks on her face, worn with repeated hand swipes and tissues. “Don’t you think I know that?”

He pulled over, and when she finally stepped into the front seat, he wrapped an arm around her, letting her sob against his shoulder. He sighed heavily, unsure where to go from here. She caused herself so much pain in the name of preventing more; he couldn’t keep her safe, like they had promised each other when they were kids.

“He deserves a wife,” her voice was almost unintelligible. “He deserves children; he deserves peace.”

“Why can’t you bring that to him?” Ben asked, his voice gentle. “Why can’t you bring him peace?”

“I can’t give him children,” she answered.

“Anna, he isn’t asking for children,” Ben insisted, wiping her tears away with his thumb. “He’s just asking for a chance to love you.”

“I can’t –” she pulled away from him, wiping her eyes again, furtively. “I can’t do this right now. I want to get drunk.”

Ben fell silent and nodded, putting the car back in gear to head toward the bar. His phone vibrated in the cup holder. His eyes fell to it; it was a message from Hewlett.

“Don’t let her do anything stupid.”

Even now, Ben thought ruefully, he was putting her first. If just looking at Anna’s distressed face, looking at the text message could break his heart, he could only imagine how Hewlett felt.

***

“Who does that?” Edmund had moved swiftly past sadness and right into anger. Caleb watched with raised eyebrows from the couch as his friend tried to pace a hole in the carpet of his living room. “She tells me she doesn’t want to be with me, that she wants me to leave, and then just tosses out an ‘I love you’. Who does that?”

Caleb shrugged. “Annie does,” he answered plainly.

“I don’t even know where it came from,” he continued as though Caleb hadn’t spoken. “We were
fine, Mary wanted us to go to some hockey game, and then she was just, pulling away, and I
couldn’t stop her. I just –” he let out a long breath, “I just let her.”

“Hew, you know that when Annie decides something, there’s no changing it,” Caleb replied.
“Annie’s been abandoned many times, and I’m sure that the more she feels for you, the more
frightened she is.”

“She’s being a bloody coward, that’s what she’s doing,” Edmund snapped back harshly.

Caleb recoiled from his friend’s spat declaration. “Well, when you lose as many people as Annie has,
cowardice feels like self-preservation, mate.”

“Caleb, you of all people know that I wouldn’t do anything to hurt her,” Edmund was practically
pleading now. “I don’t understand –”

“It isn’t about what you would do to her,” Caleb pointed out. “It’s about what she would do to you.
She’s self-destructive, she’s impulsive. She feels like she failed as a wife. She’s terrified of change.
She can’t have children.”

“She what?”

“You have to try to see this from her point of view, Hew,” Caleb explained. “Annie feels like she’s
failed at everything she’s ever done. If she truly loves you, and I think she does, she probably thinks
that she’ll eventually screw something up and break your heart. She’s trying to save you.”

“I don’t need to be saved,” Edmund answered firmly. “Why does no one think I can take care of
myself?”

Caleb sighed. “I don’t know if I can give you a solution, Hew. That’s just how Annie is.”

Finally, the energy seemed to leak out of him and he dropped into his armchair, his head in his
hands. “How do I fix this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Dammit, Caleb, you know her the best, how do I fix it?” Edmund snapped. “I can’t – I can’t just
not fix this.”

Caleb pursed his lips at his friend. “I think you need to come to terms with the fact that you don’t
have to fix it. You aren’t the one that broke it.”

Edmund frowned deeply at the implication. “And what if she never decides to come back?”

Caleb’s eyes left his and he was reminded forcibly of Anna, in the throes of her goodbye. This
couldn’t be it, he thought bitterly. This couldn’t be the end.
2:39 a.m., April 28

There was something about that lingering silence between the falling of nighttime and the surreptitious creeping of the sunrise that Edmund found to be comforting. Time was stalled, the world quiet, at least in his little corner of the world, and there was very little to worry about. And yet, as the minute hand of the clock made yet another revolution and ticked ominously toward three in the morning, Edmund found none of the solace.

In fact, all he found was a silence permeated by dread, a fuzziness, a ringing in his ears that brought him no usual comfort. He stared at his wine glass, left untouched long enough to leave a red ring in the middle of the crystal, and hoped for that lost liminal space.

It had been almost two days since his fight with Anna – The Fight, as he had begun to christen it, and the sting still reverberated over his bones, lingered in the tension of his muscles, and threatened to overtake him at the most inopportune moments. He itched with irritation at the stillness of it all, of the lack of action he was allowed to take. It twitched at the tips of his fingers.

But seeing her, lying unconscious on the bed, her eyes flickering beneath the lids, had reminded him of Simcoe, of her assault. He hadn’t been there to protect her the first time, and he felt almost directly responsible now. He wondered if she had woken up yet; Ben had said that if she wasn’t awake by the end of the day, he would take her to the hospital. Just thinking about her hooked up to machines, lost in yet another space that seemed to linger between asleep and awake, real and fiction, pulled him to his feet.

He had to see her. He had to know if she was okay.
He slipped his shoes onto his socked feet, not bothering with a jacket despite the chill in the air. It didn’t matter anyway. He poured his wine down the drain and filled the glass with warm water from the tap, leaving it standing in his otherwise empty sink.

His keys were hanging on the hook by the door, and he looped his finger through the ring, moving purposefully toward the door. He swung it open – and froze.

Anna was on his doorstep, Anna, like he had summoned her with his thoughts, her hair a ravaged mess, bags under her eyes, no jacket, just a pair of the smallest shorts he’d ever seen and a tank top, her hand raised to knock.

She looked almost ashamed of herself, like she had shown some weakness in coming here. The pair stared at each other for a long moment, and Edmund’s liminal space was suddenly full of buzzing, full of energy, full of her. He wanted to move aside to let her in – he wanted to pull her to his chest. The relief he felt at knowing she was okay, that she was even awake, threatened to spread a smile across his face, but that felt perverse. Now wasn’t the time for smiles.

And he remembered that she practically shoved him out the door – that she had driven herself to unhappiness, to hysterics, to destructive behavior simply because she couldn’t rationalize happiness in the equation that was her life, and felt his gaze harden.

“What are you doing here?” he asked shortly, finally, after a long silence that spoke volumes more than his five words.

“I tried to stay away.”

1:45 p.m., April 26

“Where are they?” Mary stood from her seat for the tenth time, at least, her eyes rising to the doors. “She said they would be here.”

Robert’s eyes stayed on the ice, watching the players warm up, wondering if he would understand any part of this…macho process that he truly didn’t care about. No, he was here for Mary, for Edmund and for Anna, and he had only agreed to come because of the few papers pressed against his side, creased from his rapid escape from Simcoe’s office. He would tell them here, so no one would yell, so they could decide together what to do with it.

He didn’t trust Ben and Caleb, if he were being honest, to keep the information without revealing it with their fists across Simcoe’s face. He certainly didn’t trust Abraham. He would keep it a secret until they decided, together, what to do with it.

“They’re probably just late,” Robert soothed, letting his hand reach up to take Mary’s. “Sit with me.”

She glanced down at him, her little jacket with the fur at the collar pushing her blonde curls up just a bit higher, giving her the innocent stare of a puppy. She relented, reclaiming her seat and leaning her head on his shoulder. He smiled, the rare smile that he reserved just for her, and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Her hair smelled like peaches.

When the clock started to tick down on the ice, and the game began, Mary had to admit, both to herself and to Robert, that Anna and Edmund weren’t coming. She sighed in disappointment.

“They invited us to come,” she said ruefully, sounding hurt. “Why would she do that if they weren’t going to come?”

Robert shrugged. Though he didn’t want to show it, their absence had blown a hole through his plan.
as well. But, as Mary continued to fret, he decided that sharing it with her would be better than
carrying the burden alone.

“I was going to show this to everyone,” he began, cutting off Mary’s relentless worrying, “but since
Anna and Edmund aren’t here, I guess I can show it to you.” He pulled the papers from under his
jacket and slid them onto her lap. “Keep them low,” he advised. “Just in case.”

The rink was almost empty – the hockey team at Setauket University was almost notoriously bad,
and their fanbase was made of the families of the players and the sad sods like Mary and Robert,
brought there under false pretenses.

“What is this?” she asked, unfolding one of them. Her gaze landed on the name at the top. “Robert
–”

“He was hospitalized for a dislocated shoulder,” Robert said hurriedly into her ear, “and Anna said
she kicked him in the shoulder, this was the same night.” He was rapidly becoming angry again, and
his words picked up speed. “He said it was a car accident, but there’s no indication that anyone else
was involved. And look –” he flipped the page over for her. “I took pictures of his gradebook. Look
at Anna’s grades.”

“They’re scratched out.”

“Exactly. He’s been changing them. And I remember seeing this paper on Anna’s desk,” he
indicated the recent grade. “She got an 89 on it, so why did he record a zero?”

“Robert, how did you get these?”

“And look at this,” he pushed on as if he didn’t hear, “he wrote this poem about Anna in one of his
notebooks.”

Her eyes scanned it, but she folded the papers back in half and passed them back to him. “Where did
you get them?” she asked again.

He averted his eyes. “It’s probably better that you don’t know.”

“Robert!”

“Newspaper articles are only going to get us so far,” he exclaimed, lowering his voice when Mary
shushed him. “A protest might not even work. We needed evidence.”

“This is inadmissible in a court room,” she argued. “You stole it.”

“Shhh!”

“What do you plan to do with it?” she asked, looking more disappointed than Robert had hoped she
would.

“I can send it to the police, anonymously,” he said confidently. I’ll just make copies of it at a public
use printer, wear gloves, and drop it in their mailbox.”

Mary considered his plan and smirked. “Now that’s the Robert I know and love.”

10:19 p.m., April 26

“Anna, maybe you should slow down,” Ben’s long fingers reached for the glass in her hand, but she
leaned back on the chair, dangerously low, out of his reach.
“Benny boy, I’m ‘lowed to do whatever I want,” she slurred, tilting the glass back and spilling some of the alcohol on her lap. “Whoops!”

He groaned, ignoring her incessant use of the one nickname he loathed being called. “You’ve been at this for hours,” Ben reminded her, grabbing her wrist and pulling her upright so she wouldn’t fall to the floor. “Maybe it’s time we got you something to eat?”

“Food’s f’r pussies,” she spat derisively, motioning to the bartender. “Right?” she directed at a girl beside her, who held up her drink in a wordless show of solidarity while her male friend continued to chat her up. “See? She gets it.”

“She’s humoring you,” he retorted, trying to motion to the bartender to cut her off. But Anna was too charming, too beautiful. Whatever she wanted, the bartender would provide. But Ben would be here this time, watching carefully to make sure she stayed safe.

Don’t let her do anything stupid.

He would protect her, if not for his own sake, then for Edmund’s as well.

He ordered another soda from the bartender and watched with thinly-veiled worry as Anna tossed back another shot, her hand around another glass of whiskey to chase the tequila away. “Anna, honey, you’re going to throw up,” he warned her, jutting his chin at the drinks. “Remember you said you weren’t going to mix those two anymore?”

Anna shrugged, her mouth full of booze. The woman beside her rose to leave, or to go to the bathroom, and the movement pulled her attention from Ben once more, who took that opportunity to snatch her drink from her hand.

“Ben!” she exclaimed. “Give ‘t back!” Her clumsy fingers reached for the glass, and he tossed it back quickly, flinching past the taste. Anna truly could hold her liquor better than he, and her choices in beverages left much to be desired. He sucked down a large portion of his soda through the straw to chase out the lingering burning in his nose.

“Sorry,” he shrugged insincerely as she gaped at him, her eyes unfocused. He knew how Anna would get with more alcohol. It was only a matter of time before she called Abraham or Edmund, either for carnal comfort or sympathetic crying. He would have to prevent both of them.

Anna looked, for a moment, like a petulant child, her eyes narrowed at her friend as if he had just grievously offended her. He raised his eyebrows at her, challenging her to respond. With her lips pursed in thought, she cast her eyes about for revenge. Her eyes landed on the girl’s drink beside her.

Before Ben could stop her, she snatched the drink, fizzing a bit at the top, and knocked it back.

“Anna, don’t!”

She grinned at him, triumphant, and he saw her throat work as she swallowed. “Thought you’d got me, didja, Benny boy?”

“Stop calling me that,” Ben finally snapped, and Anna’s eyes were suddenly large and round. Immediately, he felt guilty. “I’m sorry,” he apologized. “Come on, why don’t we take you home and order a pizza. You’ll feel better.”

“With extra cheese,” she negotiated, wagging her finger at him.

“Sure,” he acquiesced. He motioned to the bartender to pay their bill.
By the time the bartender slid his credit card receipt to him, Anna’s head was resting against her arm on the bar, her mouth slightly agape. Ben nudged her gently. “Come on, sleepyhead, let’s go, no passing out yet.”

Her eyes blinked open discordantly, her face pale. “Ben?” she asked. “Wh-what – where are we?”

Ben gripped her under the arms and pulled her up against his side. “At the bar, come on, we’re going to get pizza.”

“Something’s wrong,” she murmured. “Ben – Ben –”

She was sliding in his grip again, and he renewed his hold on her, pulling her up into his arms. She was muttering again, something about the fizz in her drink, the different taste of the rum that girl had been drinking.

Shit.

Ben had a sneaking suspicion he knew what had happened to her; he gently lowered her into the car and rushed to the driver’s side, turning on the car while he booted up Google.

“How do you know when you’ve been roofied?” he typed quickly as Anna’s slurred murmurings dissolved into tears.

“Ben? Ben, where did you go?” she begged, her hands reaching for him. “Ben – Selah’s here. And James.”

Her begging quickly lost coherence, and soon, all Ben could understand were names.

Edmund.

Abraham.

Selah.

James.

Simcoe.

Quickly, Ben backed out of the bar and sped back toward her apartment. “We’re going home, Anna,” he soothed. “We’re going home.”

She howled in response, her hands clutching at her throat. “I can’t breathe,” she wheezed. “Ben – Ben – I can’t – I can’t breathe –” her voice trailed into nothing, and Ben had a terrifying moment where he thought she’d stopped breathing altogether. But her breaths were there, just short and labored.

He carried her up to her bed, his legs shaking in fear. How had he not seen that girl’s date put a drug in her drink? How had he allowed her drink someone else’s drink? How had he let this happen?

Guilt weighed heavily on him, and as he kneeled beside Anna, slipping rapidly into unconsciousness, he struggled with what to do. She wouldn’t want to go to the hospital, not the same one where she had been put when she lost James. She wouldn’t forgive him for that. But there was nothing he could do. Nothing they could do but wait for her to ride the drug out.

He exhaled shakily, his hand resting over his mouth as her eyes fluttered closed and her breathing evened out.
He quickly dialed Caleb’s number.

12:04 a.m., April 27

“How did this happen?” Edmund’s voice was full of rage, but Ben knew, with a distant objectivity, that it wasn’t directed at him. “How do these things happen to her?”

Ben shook his head, taking what small comfort he could from Caleb’s arm around his shoulder. “She drank some other girl’s drink, and her date must have roofied her,” he explained. “I watched the bartender make all of her drinks, it wasn’t him.”

But Edmund was hardly listening to him anymore. His hands were gently pushing back the tendrils of her hair that had fallen into her face, his fingers tracing the curve of her jaw, the indentions of her temples, her cheekbones, the Cupid’s bow of her lips.

“Why did you do this?” he asked her softly, and Ben suddenly felt like he was intruding. Caleb’s eyes lowered to the floor, almost guiltily, and Ben followed suit.

They felt like they were watching someone grieve for a lost loved one, but she was here, she was alive, but for Edmund, it was as close as he would be able to get – her unconscious, unaware of his love, of his presence. Ben could see that notion coiling up in the tension of Edmund’s shoulders.

“I can’t do this,” Edmund straightened up, wiping his eyes. “I can’t be here. She doesn’t want me here.”

No one spoke. They wanted to contradict him; it was obvious that Edmund wanted to weather this storm by her side, and of all people, he had a right to be here. But the pain in his eyes would not abate, and Ben couldn’t see how watching the woman he loved struggle would ease his heart.

“Call me when she wakes up,” he muttered, turning his back to the pair. Caleb patted Ben on the shoulder and stood, following his friend to the door. Ben could see that both of them were under the same influence that had burdened Anna.

“Did you drive here?” Ben asked, and Caleb shrugged.

“I’ve had very little,” he defended. “Hew has had quite a bit more. I drove his car.”

Edmund was at the end of the hallway, his head and back leaning against the wall, his eyes closed. Ben could see the older man trying to desperately hold himself together. Caleb moved toward him, resting a hand on his shoulder. Edmund’s eyes fluttered open, the creases in his forehead deepening.

“If she doesn’t wake up by tomorrow, I’ll take her to the hospital,” Ben promised.

Edmund nodded but didn’t speak. Caleb took him by the arm and led him to the door, and for the first time, Ben could see Edmund stumble. His gaze returned to Anna, barely visible through the hallway, restlessly asleep on the bed. His eyes turned even sadder, his jaw clenching, and Ben and Caleb locked eyes.

They had to make this right.

4:56 a.m., April 27

Anna’s rise to consciousness was quick and disorienting. She had dreamt, oh she had dreamt of worlds that she knew weren’t possible but held her close and comforted her while her body felt like it had been thrown onto the deck of a ship and ravaged by a storm she couldn’t comprehend. Edmund
had been there, his hands tracing loving words into the skin of her neck, into her cheeks, and his lips pressuring reassurance into her skin.

But when she awoke, she remembered – she remembered what she had done, that Edmund was gone, and the pain in her throat was unbearable, the ache in her body unfamiliar, and for a moment, she felt panic grip her tightly between its fingers. She was back in the bathroom of the bar, with Simcoe’s arm pushing against her throat, and she didn’t realize she was about to throw up until her knees hit the tile in the bathroom.

“Oh thank god you’re awake,” Ben’s voice was ragged, torn apart, and his hands were suddenly pulling her hair away from her face while she threw up, his hands rubbing soothing circles into her back.

“What – what happened?” she asked, her voice wretched. Ben kneeled beside her, pressing a cup of water into her hands, and she sipped it absently, her eyes searching his blue ones, swimming in tears she didn’t understand.

“What do you remember?” he prompted.

She squinted against the light of the bathroom, trying to recall the night’s events. “I remember…I remember Edmund and I fought, and we went to the bar…”

“And?”

“And…I guess I got drunk?” she asked, and Ben’s eyes were so sad she knew her answer was wrong. “What?”

“Anna, you were drugged,” he said gently, and Anna closed her eyes against the memories that assaulted her. That girl’s drink, fizzy at the top, the weird taste, the way her throat started to close. “Anna, Anna, hey, look at me.” Ben’s hands were on her face. “It’s okay. It’s okay. I brought you back here, and you’ve been sleeping.”

“Why do I do this?” she murmured, resting her head on the edge of the toilet bowl, her eyes closed.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Ben reassured her. “Come on, let’s take you back to bed.” He helped her up, guiding her back to her bed, where she had apparently thrashed around so much that her sheets were all expelled to the floor. He tucked her back in and pulled out his phone.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice already heavy again.

“I told Edmund I’d tell him when you woke up,” he replied without thinking.

“Wait, you told him?” she sat up quickly, and the rapid movement sent her reeling.

Ben turned his eyes to her. “Of course I did, Anna, I thought you were going to die.”

“You – you had no right –”

Ben held up his hand. “Don’t. Don’t start that. I know that you would have wanted him here, and I know that he would have been devastated if I didn’t tell him.”

“But –” her voice was weak, her eyes heavy.

“I will not apologize for calling him,” Ben said firmly, slipping his phone back into his pocket. “Go back to sleep.”
Anna wanted to argue, but sleep was pressing demandingly down on her and she could hardly settle herself into the pillows before she slipped away again.

10:22 a.m., April 27

Ben was asleep beside Anna when a knock shook her awake. His arm was curled over her stomach, his eyes closed tight against the world. She slid out from beside him, unwilling to wake him, and walked on unsteady legs to the door, trying to blink past the light of the sun. Her head was still swimming, and her stomach roiled. She felt like she was living through the hangover of a nightmare, and the lingering soreness in her throat and her muscles told her that she had endured much worse.

A man was standing there, holding a manila envelope. “Mrs. Anna Strong?” he asked, his gaze falling to her clothes. Anna glanced down at herself – jeans, a t-shirt, what was there to look at?

“Yeah,” she answered tentatively.

“You’ve just been served,” he passed her the envelope calmly, and even though there was no malice in his voice, nothing but professionalism, Anna still felt attacked, humiliated. She knew what this was; there was only one explanation.

Divorce papers.

So Selah had left and immediately drawn up divorce papers. She pulled them out of the envelope and dropped them onto the table in the living room. He was citing “abandonment.” The word made her laugh out loud, a cynical, broken laugh with her worn throat. She shoved the papers into the envelope and tossed it onto the couch.

She had only gotten a few moments to gather her thoughts when someone else knocked. She rose again, trying to ignore the queasiness in her stomach as she did so, and opened the door.

“Hey, wow, you look –” Abraham’s eyes quickly drank her in, lingering on her tangled hair and red eyes. “Are – are you alright?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m fine, Abe. What’s going on?”

She didn’t move aside or offer for him to come in, but he stepped past her anyway, walking straight into the living room. “I thought I would check on you, especially after Selah,” he didn’t seem to know where to go from there, and Anna let him flounder for a moment.

“You’re doing that thing again,” she pointed out. “When you have something you want to say, but you don’t wanna say it.”

He hesitated. Anna felt her stomach rebel and had to clutch her own wrist to steady herself. She would not throw up while Abraham was here. She would not.

“I just – you seem to be – I mean, is everything okay with you and Hewlett?” he asked, sitting on the couch, dangerously close to her divorce papers. “I mean, with Selah coming back and all.”

She pursed her lips. “We’re fine,” she lied, ignoring the pain his name brought forth.

He nodded, casting his eyes around her apartment like he hadn’t had a spare key until very recently. She watched his nervous fidgeting, sensing a familiar vein he was getting to, but unable to settle on what it was. Finally, as his eyes stayed on her for a few moments, with that longing look that she had hoped she would never see again, she understood.
“What did you hear?” she asked.

“That you two broke up,” he answered readily. “I thought I’d check on you.”

She sighed and turned away from him. “You wanted to comfort me,” she corrected him. “Because you hoped that I’d let you pick up the pieces, right?”

He didn’t answer. She forced herself to take a seat when another spell of dizziness overtook her. Abe’s eyes were worried, but she could still see that undercurrent of familiarity, of expectation. He knew this would happen, he had banked on it. The notion lit her fragile nerves on fire.

“I hoped I wouldn’t have to pick up pieces,” he finally said. “I hoped you wouldn’t have been too attached.”

She let out an incredulous snort.

“I mean, Anna, you two were dating for less than two months,” Abe defended. “And your husband is back now. Did you really think this was going to go on forever?”

“The same could be said for you and me,” she pointed out.

He was momentarily struck by her statement, as if the notion had not occurred to him before, and Anna forced herself not to press the opening. He struggled for where to go from here, and Anna felt sorry for him. He hadn’t expected her to fight him this much, and she could see the thinly-veiled hurt on his face, but didn’t have the patience to pull back.

“Why did you really come here?” she asked bluntly. “You don’t just come over to chat anymore, you haven’t for years. What did you truly want?”

He sighed. “I’ve been trying to understand, Anna, but I just – I don’t. I don’t understand it. You and Edmund, I mean. I tried to see it from your side, because I don’t want to lose you as a friend, but I just can’t wrap my mind around why you’d want to be with him. He’s a teacher, Anna, and he’s not even your age! And let’s face it, you love sports, and beer, and rock music, and Edmund –”

“Edmund what, exactly?” Anna asked, her voice short and waspish. Abe screeched to a halt, his eyes rising to hers once more, and she leaned back in her chair, her crossed arms pressing on the pain in her stomach. The room was lurching, her stomach tight, but she was determined to get through this conversation without giving away weakness.

Finally, he plowed on. “Edmund drinks only red wine, he doesn’t understand any sports, and I’m pretty sure he only listens to classical music. I mean, you have nothing in common!”

“But you and I have things in common, do we?” she asked. “Like what?”

“Why are you being like this?” he asked.

“Because I can’t do this right now, Abraham,” she spat, standing up from her spot to waver on her feet before she slowly moved toward the kitchen. “I have enough shit going on in my life right now to deal with you and your repeated declarations of ‘we belong together.’ I can’t take it right now.”

She heard him get up from his seat and knew that he was following her. His hands landed on her shoulders and kneaded gently. It was reminiscent of one of their last conversations, when he was drunk and Mary was still his girlfriend, and while the gesture used to bring her comfort, it just impressed upon her that he didn’t know when to give her space – even when she was begging for it.
“Anna, please,” he said softly, and she turned to face him, his eyes soft and pleading on hers. “We deserve another chance.”

“I’m going to throw up.”

“Oh, real mature, Anna—” Abraham grumbled as she pushed past him to the bathroom. For the second time in a few hours, her knees hit the tile and yet another man was holding her long hair away from her face while she hurled. It was a humiliating position to be in, but it was preferable to the conversation they had been having before.

“Anna?” Ben had finally awoken from his slumber, and his bedheaded self was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, surveying her critically. “Are you okay?”

“Ben?” Abraham looked between the two of them as if he was about to accuse them of something.

“Abraham?” he seemed to finally notice the other man’s existence. “When did you get here?”

“Approximately twenty minutes ago,” Anna supplied helpfully. “Do you think you could—?”

“Sure.” Ben passed her the cup of water sitting on the edge of the bathroom counter and offered her his hand. She let him help her up, ignoring Abraham as best she could. She let Ben lead her into the living room, her head still swimming from getting up off the floor too fast. He let her collapse onto the couch, sliding her divorce papers deeper into the couch cushions.

“What is Ben doing here?” Abraham’s voice preceded his entrance to the living room.

“He was sleeping,” Anna pointed out. “I imagine my puking woke him up.” She turned her head to Ben. “Sorry.”

“But—but he was in your bed—”

“Great observation, Abe,” her voice was acid, and Ben glanced between the two, keeping silent. Abraham’s face hardened.

“It was just a question,” he pointed out. “You don’t have to be mean.”

“I do,” she retorted. “I do have to be mean, because apparently you still think that you can come into my apartment and police who is asleep in my bed. If it’s Edmund, or Ben, or hell, even Mary, you think you can pitch a fit because it isn’t you.” She took a deep breath. “Look, I’ve told you again and again that I can’t handle this right now. So whatever else you have to say about why Edmund isn’t suitable for me—”

“Seriously?” Ben exclaimed from the kitchen. Abe ignored him.

“Or whatever you think we should be, I can’t hear it right now. If I want to hear it, I’ll let you know.”

Abe turned away from her, toward Ben, and sighed. Ben refrained from saying anything, but whether that was out of fear of Anna’s reaction or out of self-preservation, they couldn’t know for sure.

“All you have to do is call—”

“Don’t.” Anna’s voice was strangled, harsh. Those were Edmund’s words. She would not, could not, let Abraham taint them. He looked stricken, like she had thrown something at him, but did not
speak again. He quietly shut the door behind him, and Anna could finally take the divorce papers out from under the cushion and pass them wordlessly to Ben.

“Shit,” he murmured, dropping onto the couch beside her, holding her close as she sniffed.

“They’re all gone now,” she whispered. “I’m alone.”
Existentialism, Part Two

Chapter Summary

A direct continuation of the last chapter, this time featuring Andre, Peggy, Richard, Mary, and Robert.

9:42 p.m., April 26

Caleb nudged open the door with his foot, his arms burdened with paper bags. “Okay, as per your request, I got you some different booze because you are all of a sudden done with red wine, which I totally understand, because let me tell you, Hew, it’s disgusting.”

Edmund knew he was rambling because he wasn’t sure what else to say, but he couldn’t bring himself to answer. It was an admirable attempt at conversation, truly it was, but his voice was… robbed of him. Once Caleb had told him there was nothing he could do but wait for Anna to come around, he had resigned himself to nonaction. That had almost crippled him.

“Here, try this,” Caleb put a glass in his hand, filled with two fingers of an amber liquid that smelled almost spicy. He sniffed it tentatively and took a sip.

“That’s the alcohol that you think is good?” Edmund choked out past his coughs. “That was… horrible. Overwhelming.” He tried to find another good adjective.

“That’s called Kraken,” Caleb confided, passing him another glass and taking the Kraken from him. “Spiced rum. Strong stuff, too. Try this.”

This other one smelled soft, almost sweet. Edmund took a larger sip, trying to place where he had tasted it before. It reminded him of something, of freedom. He drained the little bit that was lingering at the bottom of the glass and remembered the soft feeling of Anna’s fingers on his, her bright, proud smile.

“That’s whipped vodka, that is,” Caleb said proudly. “You like it?”

Edmund sighed. “Anna gave this to me the first night I saw her at the bar.”

Caleb’s smile slipped off his face. “Oh. Well, we don’t have to –”

Edmund held up the glass. “Refill it,” he said firmly, his eyes daring Caleb to contradict him. The younger man frowned but did as he was told, sipping at the Kraken while his eyes stayed on Edmund.

“I’m still kind of convinced that it was all a dream,” he confided when Caleb relaxed enough to sit on the couch. “Anna. Simcoe. All of it. It just – doesn’t feel real.”

Caleb smiled sympathetically, his eyes full of sadness for his friend. Edmund’s eyes landed on the clear liquid in his glass, and he swirled it around, letting the smell waft up at him, and it assaulted his senses.

“A girl that beautiful never should have been interested in a guy like me,” he continued, his voice so
quiet that he was sure Caleb couldn’t hear him. “So neurotic, socially awkward, weird looking – the list is endless,” he sighed, sipping the vodka again.

“I’m always going to be that guy that gets left behind,” he was just letting words pour out of his mouth now. “Always the temporary solution to a larger, more permanent problem. Maybe that’s what I’m here for. To help people realize that they deserve better.”

Caleb snorted into his glass. Edmund raised his eyes to him, his eyebrows quirked. “I don’t believe that,” Caleb explained.

Edmund pursed his lips and waited for him to explain.

“I don’t think you’re any sort of the settling kind, Hew,” he said easily. “I think you’re a prize, if a pretty weird one. And do I think that you and Annie were a weird pair when I first saw you two together? Sure. But you two complement each other, I think, and that’s truly what you want in a person.”

Edmund’s eyes landed back on his glass. He shrugged, unsure of what to say, or where to go from here. Caleb watched him carefully.

“Don’t give up on her yet,” he reassured him. “If there’s anything I would ever ask of you, it’s that.”

Edmund shrugged.

A quiet beep shook him out of his blank stare, and Caleb turned his eyes to Edmund’s phone, lit up with the remnants of a text message. Dare he hope? Could it be Anna already, realizing that she didn’t, in fact, want him to leave her alone? His hands were overreaching, unsteady, and he typed in his password for his phone with shaking hands.

“What are you doing?” Edmund sighed at the name on the display. John Andre.

“John Andre,” Edmund said aloud, and Caleb frowned.

“He sure wants to be your best friend now,” he pointed out, refilling his and Edmund’s glasses.

“Jealous?” Edmund almost joked, and Caleb smirked.

“Course not, Hew, we all know I’m your favorite.” He slid the glass back to him as Edmund typed out a response.

“Drinking. Bad day. Why?”

The response was almost immediate. “Text me your address. I have some red wine that might help.”

Edmund typed out his address and clicked send before he could second guess himself. He dropped his phone onto his lap. “Andre is coming over.”

Caleb sipped his drink. “This is turning into a serious sausage fest.”

Edmund shrugged. “I don’t exactly want women here.”

“It was a joke, Hew,” Caleb answered lightly.

Edmund let out a small “oh,” and retreated back to his drink. Caleb allowed him a few moments of silence before he spoke again.
“Hew?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you ever had a girlfriend?” he asked cautiously. “I mean, before Anna.”

Edmund smiled softly. “Not really. I mean, when I was in high school, there were girls that had
crushes on me, but I was so wrapped up in other things, I didn’t even really notice. And by the time I
realized that I was interested in those girls, they had already left me behind. There were a couple of
girls in college, the ones that thought I was cool and aloof and they thought that was attractive, but I
am neither of those things. When they realized that I was just…me, they got bored.”

“I resigned myself to being alone a long time ago,” he finished, polishing off his drink as a knock
punctuated his story. Caleb looked, once again, sympathetic, and poured him another drink as
Edmund rose to get the door.

Andre was still in a suit, a petite blonde girl on his arm. Edmund felt a pang as he looked at her –
Peggy Shippen, Benedict Arnold’s wife, on the arm of John Andre. It was a reminder of what he
couldn’t have.

“Edmund Hewlett, Peggy Shippen,” Andre introduced them, and Edmund shook her hand, carefully
clasping her much smaller hand in his.

“Oh, uh, this is Caleb Brewster,” Edmund introduced his friend, smirking from the couch. “Caleb,
this is –”

“I know who they are,” he replied, waving his hand. “Though it is nice to see that rumor finally
confirmed.”

Peggy blushed.

“Don’t worry,” he reassured her, “I’m good at keeping secrets.”

“I hope so, Mr. Brewster,” she confided, dropping daintily to the couch beside him, “because I’m
sure if you poured me some of that, you could get some more secrets from me by the end of the
night.”

Caleb raised his eyebrows at her, impressed. “I’ve never been one to deny a lady a drink.”

Andre addressed Edmund. “And where’s Anna?” he asked. “I was hoping Peggy could meet her.”

The silence that fell in the wake of his statement was thick and enveloping. Caleb paused in his act of
pouring a drink for Peggy, and even Peggy looked around.

“Darling, have you put your foot in your mouth?” she asked demurely, taking the drink from Caleb’s
hand, her fingers curling slyly around it.

“We broke up,” Edmund explained.

Peggy took a sip of her drink as Andre cast his eyes about for an adequate response. “Ahh,” he said
finally. “I’m sorry.”

Edmund shrugged and sipped more of his drink. He was starting to feel the tingling at the base of his
jaw, the same numbness that told him he was getting drunk. He was sure that getting drunk in front
of Andre and his girlfriend that reminded him of a mixture of Mary and Anna was not a good idea,
but as Andre smirked at Peggy, he realized that he was past caring.

He finished his drink and let Caleb refill it.

11:56 p.m., April 26

Edmund was in the middle of a full belly laugh when the loud ringing of Caleb’s phone stopped him. Andre was lying on the couch, his head in Peggy’s lap, Caleb sitting cross-legged on the floor happily, and Edmund had slipped lower on his chair, his fingers loose around his glass.

He’d had too much to drink, he knew, but he was hardly in any position to stop himself. Every sip made him feel less pathetic, less himself, and he gladly accepted being anyone but himself. He was so sick of being neurotic, so sick of being Edmund Hewlett, the practically forty year old virgin, the one that always got left.

He was just so sick of it.

He swallowed another mouthful of that drink that tasted like sweeter memories as Caleb answered the phone.

“Tallboy, what’s going on?”

Remotely, absently, Edmund knew that Ben was with Anna, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask how she was.

“Whoa, whoa, slow down, what’s going on?” Peggy’s eyes, closed as she leaned her head back on the couch, opened.

“Ben, slow down, I need you to tell me what happened,” Caleb’s voice had lost all humor, and the whole room was watching him closely now. He rose to his feet. The drunken pressure on Edmund’s ears was suddenly incredibly inconvenient.

“She’s what?”

Edmund was on his feet immediately. There was only one ‘she’ he could be referring to.

“No, don’t take her to the hospital,” he said, his eyes rising to meet Edmund’s. Suddenly, Caleb was stone cold sober. Something was terribly wrong. “Let her sleep it off. Just stay with her.”

“Where are they?” Edmund demanded. Caleb’s eyes softened as Edmund stumbled, trying to maintain his balance on what felt like a carnival ride. “What’s happened to her?”

“Hew’s going to want to see her,” he said into the phone. He paused, listening to Ben’s response, and Edmund could hear that the other man was in tears. “It doesn’t matter if she’s unconscious, Ben, we’re coming over.” He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. “Just – just try to calm down, baby, we’re coming.”

Caleb’s eyes were on Edmund’s as he hung up the phone. “Grab your keys, I’m driving,” he said clearly.

“Do you need us to go with you?” Andre asked as Peggy slipped her heels back on.

Caleb shook his head. “Probably not a good idea, but thanks.”

“What happened to Anna?” Edmund asked again, and Caleb’s eyes slid to his for just a moment before he snatched the keys from his hand.
“I’ll tell you on the way,” he said softly, moving toward the door as Peggy and Andre opened the door, holding onto each other. They shouldn’t be driving, Edmund thought, but then again, neither should Caleb. But it didn’t matter. All that mattered was getting to Anna.

As Caleb started up the car, Edmund turned expectantly to him. “Hospital? Unconscious?” his voice was hardly working. Caleb’s hand landed on his arm.

“Anna was…Anna was drugged…” Caleb said slowly, “at the bar.”

The anger he had been repressing all evening was suddenly taking over in the place of panic. “I told Ben not to let her do anything stupid,” Edmund exploded, his fists slamming on the dashboard. Caleb flinched but kept driving, squinting at the road, trying to stay between the lines. “I knew, I knew something like this would happen.”

“She took some other girl’s drink,” he explained. “It wasn’t meant for her.”

“I never should have let her kick me out,” Edmund continued, ignoring Caleb. “I should have refused. I should have stayed.”

“Hey, get it together,” Caleb snapped. “Now is not the time for shit like this.”

It was a short drive, one that increased the pressure on Edmund’s chest. He was tapping his feet, his hands fidgeting. He was cursing himself. He should be sober. He should have never left her. He could have stayed.

He had left her and Simcoe had assaulted her. He had let her push him away and now this. His eyes burned, and he pressed the heels of his hands into the recesses of his eyes. It brought him no relief, but Caleb was turning, the motion so familiar that Edmund knew they were in her parking lot.

He vaulted out of the car, taking the stairs two at a time and knocking rapidly on the door. Ben answered it immediately, his eyes ringed with red. He looked like a mess, his hair mussed and bearing the tracks of his fingers.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, and suddenly, all of the energy that had possessed Edmund leaked out of him. He felt exhausted, looking up at Ben, trying to find the words that could express that he didn’t blame him, he blamed himself.

“How is she?” he said instead, and Ben let him go to her.

He could see the tear tracks on her face, and red marks where she had clutched at her own throat, proclaiming that she couldn’t breathe. Her hair was tangled around her neck, and he gently set to untangling it, letting it frame her, fanned out over the pillow. He let his fingers linger on her cheeks, her neck, her collarbone.

She was so familiar, but so far away.

He felt a sob creeping up his throat, but he pushed it away. This wasn’t the time. He couldn’t cry over her body like she was dead. She was alive, she was here.

But she didn’t want him to be.

“Why did you do this?” he whispered to her, wiping away his tear as it landed on her cheek. Ben and Caleb were watching him, he could feel their eyes. He couldn’t be here. The ache in his chest was making it hard to breathe, and the more he watched her, a slight sheen of sweat coating her forehead, the more wretched he felt.
8:04 a.m., April 27

Edmund hadn’t slept. After Caleb brought him home and demanded to stay at his place to make sure Edmund would be okay, he had settled into his chair and felt the alcohol slowly work its way out of his system. Caleb slipped into a restless sleep on the couch, and his snores punctuated the ticking of the clock.

Ben didn’t call. His phone was sitting on his thigh, face up, but it didn’t ring, it didn’t vibrate. Nothing. It was like Anna lying on that bed was nothing more than a vivid nightmare. He sighed, running his fingers through his hair again. He wished he could forget it, but he could still feel her skin on the tips of his fingers, the steady rhythm of her breathing.

The doorbell pulled Caleb forcibly out of sleep.

“Holy shit wassat?”

Edmund almost smiled at him. He rose from his chair and glanced out the peephole.

“Caleb, go to my room,” he said clearly. “Don’t come out. You aren’t here.”

Caleb furrowed his brow. “Okay…” he trailed off, grabbing his favorite throw blanket off the cushions and trudging into the bedroom. Edmund waited until he heard the door close before he opened the door.

“Richard,” he said shortly as a greeting. “To what do I owe this…” he certainly couldn’t say pleasure, so he let the word hang there, unfinished.

“May I come in?” The older man’s eyes were narrowed suspiciously past him, as if he already knew someone else was there.

“Do I have a choice?”

Richard stepped past him anyway, and Edmund sighed, closing the door behind him, leaving it unlocked. Richard’s eyes landed on the empty glasses on the coffee table, the ones that Edmund hadn’t cleaned yet.

“Have company?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

“John Andre and a couple of friends, not that it’s any of your business,” Edmund pointed out. “Why are you here?”

Richard’s forehead creased at the mention of Andre’s name, but he turned back to him, finally ceasing his inspection of Edmund’s home. “I wanted to talk to you about your…options. In regards to your job.”

Edmund frowned. “I wasn’t aware I had any.”

“Well,” Richard began, spreading his hands in front of him, “There are a few things you could do.”

“Like?”

He sighed. “Like forget about Anna Strong.”

“Oh, is that all?” Edmund asked facetiously. “And tell me, how is that investigation against Simcoe
Richard’s face hardened. “That is up to the police, not to me.”

“So it isn’t happening,” Edmund corrected. “You mean to tell me, and correct me if I get this wrong, that you’re more worried about my relationship with a student than a teacher that has assaulted one. To be frank, Richard, I always knew you were a little…short-sighted, but this is truly foolish.”

Richard sighed. “I didn’t come here for a debate.”

Edmund reclaimed his chair. “Then by all means, Richard, talk at me.”

“Look, Edmund, if you decide that you will cut ties with Anna Strong, we could give you your job back at the end of the semester,” Richard said calmly, but his face was still flushed from Edmund’s insult. “The board is prepared to give you a full time position instead of a part time one.”

“So your impartial board is the opposite?” Edmund asked. “And the investigation you’re supposed to have no part of is being headed by you?”

“Edmund –”

“No, let me make one thing clear, Richard. I have no intention of ‘cutting ties’ with Anna, as you say, and if we get to the end of this semester and no action has been taken against Simcoe, whether legal or otherwise, I will be prepared to have Mrs. Strong take it to court, and ruin your school in the process.”

Richard spluttered. “You have no idea what her family has –”

Edmund chuckled, actually chuckled. “What her family has done? I do, Richard. Her father incited a riot, so you say, and that riot ended with your son’s death. Truly lamentable, I agree, but not Anna’s fault. The sins of the father shall not be visited upon the son, or daughter, in this case.”

“Anna Strong is an insubordinate –”

“She’s not your employee, she’s a damn student, and a person! And she deserves to be treated like one, instead of a criminal. Maybe you should be treating the actual criminal the way you treat her,” Edmund stomped to his door and held it open. “It was nice to see you, Richard, if only to further understand just how corrupt you truly are.”

“Corrupt? I –”

“Goodbye, Richard,” Edmund motioned to the door. “You can expect my letter of resignation on your desk by the end of the week.”

2:41 p.m., April 27

Caleb was still complaining about Richard Woodhull when the doorbell rang again. They exchanged a dubious look before Edmund went to the door, ignoring the banging sound that told him Caleb had used his momentary lapse in attention to rummage through his cabinets for food. Edmund glanced into the peephole, feeling his hackles rise in preparation of another round of battle, but relaxed.

“Robert?” he swung the door open. “Mary?”

The couple stood before him, looking for all accounts the perfect royal couple, except for Robert’s downcast eyes and Mary’s fidgeting hands.
“Come in,” he closed the door behind them, and Caleb’s head popped out from the kitchen.

“I’m making eggs,” he told them both without even a greeting. “Want some?”

Robert furrowed his brow. “Uh, no, thank you. We just came here to give you this, since Mary and I missed you and Anna at the hockey game yesterday.”

Edmund had no energy to explain why they hadn’t gone, but took the envelope Robert was holding anyway. “Did we win?” he asked as he opened it.

“Oh of course not.”

Caleb snorted as he cracked an egg into the pan and Edmund was about to join him until –

“Robert, what is this?”

Mary spoke for her boyfriend. “Medical records proving that Simcoe went to the hospital for treatment the night he assaulted Anna. And behind it you’ll find a page from his grade book, where he’s been changing Anna’s grades, and a poem he wrote about her.”

“Damning evidence,” Edmund agreed, choosing for the sake of his sanity not to read the poem. “But how did you get these?”

Robert shrugged. “A friendly janitor that is now twenty dollars richer.”

Edmund immediately passed it back. “These can’t be used in court,” he said. “I can’t have seen these.”

“We just want you to know what we know,” Robert reassured him. “I’m going to make copies and send it anonymously to the police.”

“On a public copy machine with no cameras nearby, I hope,” Edmund said firmly. “And wear gloves.”

Robert waved him off. “I have it taken care of. But – Mary has something she needs to tell you.”

“Actually, I hoped to tell Anna, too,” Mary’s eyes glanced around the room, as if Anna would be leaning in the corner, waiting. Edmund clenched his jaw and did not answer. “When I took Simcoe’s class, he uh…well –”

Caleb seemed to catch on first. “Mary,” he warned.

“He didn’t do anything to me that was nearly as bad as what happened to Anna,” she reassured him in a rush. “He just…he was inappropriate. He pulled me onto his lap.”

“And you didn’t report him,” Edmund finished for her. “And now?”

“I want to tell Anna first,” Mary said tearfully. “I don’t want her to feel like she’s completely alone.”

Edmund’s eyes met Caleb’s, and his bearded friend looked away under the guise of cooking. He inhaled deeply and held it for a moment before he exhaled.

“I’m sure she’d appreciate that,” he said kindly. “And if you want to report him, we can do that too.”

And for the first time, Mary hugged Edmund.
2:43 a.m., April 28

“I tried to stay away.”

He moved aside but she still didn’t come in; she was staring at him, like he was a ghost, something ephemeral that she couldn’t reach out and touch. He swallowed thickly, trying to hold up his façade of anger, but his relief was breaking through.

“What does that mean?” he asked instead, still leaving the hall open for her to enter whenever she deemed herself ready. The cold air was blowing in from outside, and she shivered, goosebumps rising on her skin.

“Anna, come inside,” he prompted, holding out his hand. “It’s freezing out there, you aren’t even wearing a jacket.”

Finally, slowly, she stepped inside, shivering but doing nothing to warm herself. Edmund closed the door behind her and grabbed the blanket that Caleb always slept with and wrapped it around her shoulders, the smell of her hair wafting up and paralyzing him for a moment. He stayed there, his arm halfway around her, relishing in her closeness, in her safety, before he forced himself to pull away.

He sat at his armchair, refusing to put himself in close proximity with her. She stood in the entry, the blanket wrapped around her, her eyes watching him closely.

“Do you like rock music?” she asked suddenly, her voice still scratchy.

He was dumbfounded. “W-what?”

“Rock music,” she prompted, moving toward the couch but still refusing to sit.

He furrowed his brow, considering the question. “I mean, I don’t actively listen to it, but – Anna, what is this about, I was so worried about you –”

“I know,” she breathed, “I know, and I’m so sorry, I –” she exhaled a shaky breath and shouldered on. “I have done some infinitely stupid things, and many of those things ended up hurting me and you. I’m sorry.”

He nodded, accepting her apology without verbalizing it, afraid of what it would prompt her to say.

“Abraham came to see me today.”

He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes. This was surely not something he wanted to hear. Their history, her feelings for Abraham surely ran deeper than the feelings she had for him. “Anna, I don’t want –”

“No, let me finish. He told me that you and I couldn’t possibly be compatible, because,” she laughed, a chuckle that drew his gaze back to her, “because of things like music, and wine. And sports. God, sports! As if that fucking matters.”

She pulled the blanket tighter around herself, and Edmund was mesmerized by the fire that was rapidly returning to her face.

She dropped her gaze to her lap. “And uh – Selah – Selah served me with divorce papers this morning.”
“Oh,” Edmund blurted quietly. She gave him a sad smile.

“Don’t get me wrong, that’s not why I’m here,” she said quickly. “He cited abandonment as his grounds. Abandonment, can you imagine?” She let out another laugh that held no mirth. “As if he didn’t fucking abandon me.”

He sighed. “I’m not sure where this is going, I confess.”

Her smile was soft, ethereal. “I wish I could explain it to you,” she said truthfully, “the realization. The epiphany.”

“I’m listening,” he said plainly. “Because frankly, the last time we spoke –”

“I know,” she interrupted. “I was – scared, and overwhelmed –”

“Don’t you think I am too?” he burst out, trying to resist the urge to stand up. He didn’t want to tower over her; he didn’t want to yell at her. “Don’t you think I’m overwhelmed every single time you look at me? God, Anna, I am terrified. Of everything, all the time. But I thought that you and I were supposed to get through that together.”

“We are.”

“Then why did you run from me?” he asked, his voice desperate, and this time he did stand up, so he could kneel in front of her. “Why did you do this to me?”

Tears were floating in her eyes, but she steeled herself and didn’t free them. “I thought I was doing what was best –”

“For me or for you?”

“God, Edmund, just let me explain it to you –”

He shook his head, “No, no, I won’t, because every time you explain something to me, something up there,” he pressed his finger to the top of her head, “tells you to leave me. So instead of explaining to me why you left, tell me why you’re here.”

“Because I don’t need you.”

He faltered. “What?”

Her hands came to rest at the sides of his face. “With Abraham, with Selah, I needed them. I didn’t feel like a whole person unless I was with them. I was part of a whole, but never a whole by myself. And without you – God it hurts, but I could survive. I didn’t think I could survive without either of them.”

He furrowed his brows. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you?” she exclaimed, her thumb brushing his bottom lip softly. “I don’t need you in my life, Edmund, but I want you there. And that choice is so much more important.”

She pressed a kiss to his forehead, her hands quivering, but with fear or anticipation he didn’t know. He closed his eyes against the feel of her lips, relishing in a feeling he never thought he’d get again.

“You can’t run out on me like that again,” he chided, but his voice was almost a whisper.

“I won’t,” she promised.
It wasn’t the same as the I love you she had gifted him with in the wake of her goodbye, but it felt more real. He let her tilt his chin up to press a kiss to his mouth, his hands gripping the soft skin of her waist underneath the blanket. She was pulling him up to meet her, her mouth possessively latched onto his, and he rose to meet her, trying to be gentle, trying to make sure she was okay, but she was insistent, demanding, just like she was in every other element of her life.

He pulled away to give her soft, lingering kisses on the column of her throat, on her collarbone, but her hand gripped his chin roughly and pulled his mouth back to hers. He was restrained, determined not to take advantage of her, especially right now. Her teeth sunk into his bottom lip, berating him, challenging him, and his body responded immediately, achingly.

Before he could stop himself, he was pressing her body into the couch, and she was humming appreciatively, gripping his shirt tightly and pulling him completely on top of her, the blanket tangled underneath her.

He was lost in her, in the current of her soft murmurs and breaths on his skin, but when her hands went to his belt, he immediately retreated.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked, holding her hands tightly in his own. “I mean, just yesterday –”

“Just yesterday I was in love with you, just like I am today,” she finished. “I do want to do this,” his eyes dropped away from hers, and she tilted her chin to catch his gaze again. “But we don’t have to.”

He had hoped their first time would be romantic, with candles and music and all of those cinematic accessories that made it special, but what was more romantic than this? The woman he loved, that loved him.

“I always imagined this to be different,” he confessed. “Candles, music.”

He could see the smile break across her face. “I can light candles,” she reassured him. “If you want me to.”

He pushed her hair out of her face, tucking it gently behind her ear and let his hand cup her face. Her eyes, even in the dark, were drawing him in. He swiftly kissed her mouth, almost missing it entirely, and stood up, trying to ignore the shakes, the nerves, in the backs of his knees. He offered her his hand.

“Then we should probably take this to the bedroom,” he told her, and she gently laid her hand in his, letting him pull her to her feet.

She gave him another breathtaking kiss, her fingers on his neck. “I’ll get the matches,” she whispered against his mouth.

He wanted to tell her that he was half kidding, that she didn’t have to light any candles, but knowing that she was so eager to make him comfortable, to make this special, made him feel more at ease. He followed her into the bedroom, and watched with a smirk as she lit two candles, putting them on the dresser, far away from the bed.

“We don’t want my hair catching fire,” she confided. “Or a pillow.”

He wanted to blush, but the shadows over her body chased embarrassment from his mind. She was beautiful, otherworldly, and she was offering him her hand, kneeling on the bed.

He met her in the middle, laying her gently on the mattress with his arm around her waist and the
other in her hair. She let him kiss her, her body writhing underneath him tantalizingly, and after a moment, finally pushed back. Her hands pressed him into the bed, and she climbed on top of him, her knees pinning his hips in place.

Delicately, she unbuttoned his shirt, her fingernails scraping against his skin as she did so. He was holding his breath, his eyes on her mouth, the way she caught it between her teeth in concentration, the way her eyelashes fluttered when she finally peeled the shirt away.

She kissed the skin above his heart, her hands roaming free on his chest. Her body was pressed hotly against his, and as her lips roamed lower, he felt his hips buck up to meet any part of her he could reach. Her hand took his own and gripped it tightly, and he could feel her pulse from her wrist, pounding wildly.

She was with him.

With a sigh that sounded almost like a giddy laugh, she sat up, her hips grinding against him, and allowed him to pull her shirt over her head. Her shorts were pulled up on her waist, exposing even more of her muscular legs to his hungry eyes. He released her hand to grip her thighs, relishing in her soft skin.

“You’re still wearing pants,” she noted, her voice ragged, breathless, aroused. He closed his eyes against the sound, willing his body to relax, to take its time. He knew what she was going to do before he felt her fingers on his belt.

He allowed it this time, trying to focus on his breathing; her fingers were confident but not harsh, every new inch of skin bared to her eyes immediately covered in kisses from her warm mouth. He expected her to be wild, untamed, but she was cautious, slow, tempting. She was careful to make sure that he was comfortable, that she wasn’t moving too fast.

When they finally managed to get completely undressed, she worshipped his body, his bare skin, and taught him how to do the same thing to her. He relished in the noises she made, the soft declarations, his name on her lips, her fingernails digging into his skin.

The first time he entered her, she insisted on being on top, insisted on guiding him, showing him how much she loved him. He tried to keep his eyes open, to watch her, but found that pleasure forced his eyes closed. But his hands gripped her hips tightly, her fingers tangled in his.

She pressed kisses on any part of his skin that she could reach, whispering words of encouragement, of awe that spurred him on.

He didn’t know if he lasted a long time, or what a long time even consisted of, but she was breathless when they were finished, her body slick with sweat, her lips dry from pulling greedy breaths through her mouth. She kissed him firmly, her mouth cold from the air, and settled into his embrace, her nose just barely brushing the skin of his neck.

She loved him.
Intermediate Repercussions

Chapter Summary


The sun was barely peeking over the buildings when Robert parked his car down the street from the police station, locking the doors and slipping the keys into his pocket. His eyes searched the empty sidewalk for anyone that could identify him later; his blood was pounding in his ears. He had thought this through as clearly as he could – the only thing that could be traced back to him would be his car, spotted parked half a block away.

The station was almost empty; the parking lot had only two cars in it, dew still running down the hoods like abandoned flowers in a cement jungle. Though that decreased his chance of getting caught, it didn’t stop his pulse from racing under his skin. He was putting a target on his back. He could be ruining the entire case if he was caught.

He considered the empty parking lot for a moment as he glanced at the mailbox. With a deep sigh, he slipped the envelope in carefully, sliding off the gloves and tucking them into his other pocket as the flap closed. He swallowed thickly, feeling some of the anxiety start to recede.

His walk back to his car was swift and not as inconspicuous as he would have liked it to be, but once he unlocked the car and slid into the leather seat, he breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

A knock on the window startled him so bad he started shaking. His eyes rose to the figure by the window.

Simcoe.

His heart rate spiked. He barely managed a smile as he rolled the window down.

“Professor Simcoe,” he said weakly. “Long time.”

Simcoe gave him a chilling smile, his wide eyes taking in the interior of the car. “Mr. Townsend. I thought you were interested in defecting to anthropology, and yet I haven’t seen you since our last meeting.”

Robert chuckled, the sound loud and uncomfortable to his ears. “Oh, yes, my apologies. I’ve been so busy lately.”

“Yes, I suppose being Mary Smith’s boyfriend must be time consuming,” Simcoe said, his voice light.

The mention of his girlfriend did not serve to calm him; in fact, he felt his hands around the steering wheel clench tightly. Simcoe’s eyes dropped to them for a moment, and Robert forcibly relaxed them.

“How about I meet you in your office for lunch tomorrow?” he quickly asked, trying to appease the predator at his window. Simcoe’s eyes rose to his again, and a smile took over his face.
“Of course, Mr. Townsend,” he said easily.

Robert clenched his jaw and gave Simcoe a smile as he retreated, watching the man’s progress. To his surprise, Simcoe’s path took him into the police station. Was he being called in for questioning? If he was, would he seem so confident? So at ease? Robert stalled in his car, trying to decipher this new turn of events.

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Ben paused in his morning jog to take a detour to Anna’s apartment early in the morning; after his talk with her about Edmund, that had come across as more of a scolding, she had asked him for a ride to Edmund’s place, and promised that after they talked, she would have Edmund bring her home.

Though he would never admit it, he was kind of invested in how that conversation had turned out. He felt like it was his responsibility as a good friend to let Anna know when she was being ridiculous, but if the conversation had gone poorly, it was also his duty to help her cope.

He jogged up the stairs, wiping the sweat off his brow as he did, and knocked at the door.

After a few moments, he knocked again.

Was she still sleeping? It was possible; Anna was a heavy sleeper, and most of the time, she was an early riser, but if the conversation had gone poorly, maybe she just wanted to be alone. He listened closely for sounds in the apartment.

Forget it, he thought gruffly, reaching into his pocket. He was going in.

He fished her spare key out and slid it into the lock, turning it easily.

“How Anna?” he called. “Please be dressed.”

No one answered him.

“How Anna?”

He peeked into her bedroom, then into the bathroom. No one.

It wasn’t until he was sitting on her couch, probably leaving his sweat behind, that he realized that if she wasn’t there, then she was still at Edmund’s.

He grinned and locked the door behind him, finding the rest of his jog much easier than usual.

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Edmund woke before Anna the next morning, his arm falling asleep from holding her head. He wanted to be irritated at the pins and needles that tickled his entire arm, but finally understanding the feeling of having your lover lay beside you, wrapped in your embrace, kept his irritation at bay. He never thought they’d get this intimacy; he never thought they’d get past sharing a bed for nothing but comfort. She shifted slightly in her slumber, pulling his arm even closer to her chest, and he let his thumb brush soft circles into her bare skin.

The sun was rising in the sky, casting tendrils of light over Anna’s body, the curve of her hip revealed by the slipping sheet. Edmund pressed a kiss to the bare skin of her shoulder, smiling against her skin as she let out a quiet sigh in her sleep.
There was so much peace here, he thought happily. After all they had been through, they had managed a moment like this. He turned toward her, trying not to move his arm and wake her, and allowed himself the indulgence of her skin. He peppered soft kisses on her shoulder, her neck, and down her arm.

Finally, as he reached a tender spot near her collarbone, she stirred, rolling over to face him and burying her face in his neck. Her eyes were still closed, her limbs heavy with sleep, but for Edmund, it was a gift he never thought he’d receive.

“Good morning,” he murmured into her hair, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

She groaned, a delicious sound, and graced him with a lingering, lazy kiss to a spot on his neck. He relished it, closing his eyes against the pressure of her lips, and used his now freed hands to pull her closer to him by her hips.

She pulled away from his embrace long enough to kiss him full on the lips, her languid lip lock pulling a tortured groan from his throat. Soon, they were spiraling out of control again; her leg was hiked over his leg, her hands reaching for every part of his body that she could reach, and he was biting back a stream of expletives as her mouth moved down his body, trailing a series of fiery kisses on his sensitive skin.

For a moment, he was sure that he was at the gates of heaven; that is, until he heard his front door creak open.

“Hew?”

Suddenly, Anna was very awake. “Shit,” she muttered, grabbing the discarded sheet and pulling it up to her chin.

Edmund groaned heavily. “Of all days,” he grumbled. “He had to pick today.”

“Hew? Have you seen Annie?” Caleb’s voice was getting closer.

Edmund catapulted out of bed, grabbing his discarded clothes off the floor quickly, almost tripping himself in an attempt to put his boxers on. Anna watched with thinly-veiled amusement as he shoved his arms through his shirt, appearing through the top of the shirt with the messiest hair she had ever seen him sport.

She settled into the bed, the sheets pulled up to her neck, and tightened her hold on them as Edmund reached for the door. Unfortunately, Caleb was also reaching for the door, and before Edmund could stop him, he swung the door open, his eyes falling on Edmund with an amused smirk before it rose to Anna.

“Holy shite,” he said slowly, a grin taking over his entire face. Edmund’s entire face and neck flushed bright red, but Anna refused to blush. “Annie, Ben was looking for you,” he tossed over Edmund’s shoulder.

“Caleb, it’s – uh, it’s not what it –”

“As much as I’m sure you’ve waited your entire life to use the ‘it’s not what it looks like,’ line, I hate to break it to you, Hew, but it is exactly what it looks like,” Caleb chuckled, stepping past him and settling on the edge of the bed. “So, Annie…” he waggled his eyebrows.

“Don’t –” she warned him, a smile lightening her threat.
“How was he?”

Behind Caleb, Anna could see Edmund burying his face in his hands. She raised an eyebrow at Caleb, refusing to speak.

“That good, huh?”

“What are you doing here?” she asked as Edmund raised his head from his hands to look to her for her confirmation. “Why was Ben looking for me?”

Caleb shrugged and leaned back on the pillows, the same spot Edmund had just been occupying. “I was just sent here to make sure you were okay,” he said lightly, chuckling as Edmund blanched at Caleb’s close proximity to Anna’s naked body.

“Caleb,” Anna said sweetly, “I love you, and I appreciate you, but could you, I dunno, get out?”

He smirked at her. “Why? Working on round two?”

Edmund let out an audible embarrassed groan. Anna inhaled a steadying breath and fixed Caleb with a sisterly glare.

“No matter which round we’re on, we’re not yet to the round that would require a third person,” she said with a smirk. “Now get out before I make you.”

“What, with your bedsheets toga?”

“Caleb!”

“Alright, alright I’m going,” he held up his hands in mock surrender. “Good job, Hew,” he said, fist bumping his friend on his way out. “I’ll tell Ben you’re okay, Annie.”

“Great, you do that.”

Edmund closed the door behind him, leaning heavily against the wood with his forehead resting on it. He seemed to be unwilling to move away from it.

“Well,” Anna began, a laugh lurking at the back of her throat. “That was –”

Edmund exhaled a laugh that turned into full on giggles, and soon, Anna was laughing with him. He returned to the bed, dropping light kisses on Anna’s hip, torso, and neck on his way up to her. She wound her arms around his neck, pulling him down for a searing kiss that left him breathless.

“If it makes you feel better, he has walked in on much worse from others,” she murmured, curling into his side again, content to waste the day here with him instead of facing the world.

“Do tell,” Edmund pressed a kiss to the side of her head. Anna chuckled and shook her head.

“I’m sure that the people involved would be very offended if I told the story,” she said, zipping her lips with her fingers. “Their shameful, group sex secret is safe with me.”

“Anna!”

She kissed him again, her lips just barely pressing against his and stamping her taste there before she moved on to another part of his body that she had yet claimed. He allowed her to change the subject, and let her explore him like a new country, her fingers curling around the curve of his thigh, the tense muscle of his forearm.
He let her chase all thought from his mind.

***

They didn’t have to get out of bed until the doorbell rang close to noon. Anna had managed to get dressed, despite Edmund’s repeated protestations to the contrary. They were lounging on the bed, the sheets all banished to the floor, Edmund’s eyes drifting closed when the sound jolted them into action.

“Who the hell –?”

Anna shrugged. “Ben, maybe? To confirm whatever Caleb told him?”

Edmund stepped into his pants, trying to flatten his hair. “Think he’ll go away?”

Anna laughed. “Not if he knows I’m here.”

Edmund groaned and padded into the living room, Anna close behind him. He swung the door open as the visitor rang the doorbell again.

“Benjamin Tallmadge, haven’t you ever learned to give a girl her privacy?” her voice trailed off as she registered who was standing at the door.

“Richard,” Edmund replied stonily. “What are you doing here?”

“Can I come in?” he asked.

Anna, who had been standing beside Edmund, retreated into the living room. Edmund’s head turned halfway toward her, searching for her opinion. “What do you think?” he asked.

She shrugged.

He opened the door a little wider, and Richard stepped in, his eyes raking disapprovingly over Anna’s attire. She realized, with a flush, that she wasn’t wearing a bra and her hair was surely all kinds of disheveled. It was obvious what they had been doing.

“You must be surprised to see me,” he noted, “especially after resigning your post.”

“You resigned your post?” Anna’s voice was sharp, and Edmund closed his eyes against it. He turned to her.

“Ah, I, well, yes, I did, just yesterday, but I forgot to tell you, what with – well –”

“He didn’t tell you?” Richard asked, turning to Anna.

“Oh, don’t look at me like I’m your ally,” she snapped. Richard scowled and turned away from her again, back to Edmund.

“Anna, I’m – I’m sorry,” Edmund sounded like he was pleading with her, but Anna was already rising from her place on the couch.

“You can explain it to me when he’s gone,” she said, jutting her chin toward Richard. “I see no need in having this discussion with him here.”

“It was nice to see you, Mrs. Strong.”
She didn’t answer, but continued down the hallway; Edmund watched her go, wondering how he was going to explain his sudden choice when this conversation was over. As the door to the bedroom closed, he turned his attention back to Richard.

“Why are you here?” he asked curtly.

“I came here to tell you that the case against Professor Simcoe has been dismissed,” Richard said simply, “because of a lack of evidence.”

Edmund immediately thought back to the papers that Robert had shown him. “What do you mean – dismissed?” he asked, his voice deadly quiet. “There was plenty of evidence. I saw the bruises. I saw her!”

“Well, your little girlfriend wasn’t exactly forthcoming with the police, and they questioned Simcoe and found no evidence to support her claim,” Richard shrugged. “I am just as concerned as you are, Edmund –”

“I doubt that.”

“- but you have to consider the possibility that she lied to you.”

Edmund felt his eyes widen. “You think – you think she lied?”

“It has certainly happened before,” Richard pointed out. “She wants him out of the way so she can pass his class, he won’t bend to her will like so many others do,” his eyes speared into Edmund’s, and he felt his hands clench.

“You can’t just pretend like it didn’t happen,” Edmund insisted, trying to focus on breathing in and out, on keeping his anger in check.

“I can if I have no evidence that it did,” Richard replied. “We went through the proper channels –”

“Your proper channels are bullshit!” Edmund shouted, and immediately took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “I want you to understand what you’re bringing down on you.”

“Bringing down on me?” Richard asked. “Whatever do you mean?”

Edmund shook his head. “You know what? I’m not even going to warn you. You haven’t earned it. Get out of my house.”

Richard shrugged and moved toward the door. “If that’s what you want.”

“Don’t come back here again,” Edmund ordered, slamming the door behind him.

He could hear the bedroom door open as Anna realized that Richard had left. He heaved a breath, trying to prepare himself for the news he was going to have to tell her.

“Edmund?”

He could tell by the sound of her voice that she had heard the whole thing. He turned toward her, moving swiftly to her, already knowing that she would be horrified, traumatized. But her eyes were blazing, full of fire, and she allowed him to hug her, but she didn’t really need it.

“We’re going to get him,” she promised, pulling him out of her embrace to look into his eyes.

He didn’t answer, but kissed her, forcefully and deeply, pushing her against the wall, trying to lose
himself in the feeling of her mouth, of the sounds she made, hoping that would keep his anger at bay. She tried, but he wasn’t sure it worked.
Dusk was falling much like the graceful sunrise had; slowly, and with tendrils of beauty that lingered on the planes of Anna’s face. Edmund watched as her face flickered between anger, determination, and something that looked like fear. Caleb occupied the couch on the other side of the living room, with Edmund in his armchair and Anna perched on the arm of it, her legs across his lap.

“You want to do the protest,” Caleb said simply, furrowing his brows as he considered Anna’s demand. “Now.”

“In a few days, yes.”

“But not for Hew?” His eyes rose to Edmund. She turned toward him, prompting to speak.

“I already resigned my post,” he explained, raising his voice to speak over Caleb as he tried to interrupt him. “Look at what has happened at this university! I don’t want to work here if that’s what goes on here.”

Caleb sighed, exasperated. “Hew, we were ready to defend you!”

He held up his hands in agreement. “I know you were, and I appreciate it, but I think the fight we need to be fighting is the one against Simcoe and Richard.”

Caleb turned his gaze to Anna, who was still holding Edmund’s hand close to her, as if she feared he’d leave. “We know you didn’t lie, Annie.”

She scoffed. “I know you know, that isn’t the issue. The issue is that the police think I’m a liar.” Her eyes rose to the door. “Where’s Robert?”

“He said he was going to pick up Mary and he’d be here,” Caleb said dismissively. “Tallboy should be here soon too.”

“I still don’t see why we have to wait for them,” Anna said, rising from her perch and moving into the kitchen. “We could plan without them and just catch them up when they get here.”

Caleb and Edmund’s eyes met, and Anna immediately knew they were communicating nonverbally. “More secrets?” she asked, indignant, staring at Edmund and Caleb in turn. “Haven’t we established
that secrets are a stupid idea?”

Caleb’s eyes jumped to hers, but they were tender, and that frightened her more than the idea of a secret. “Annie, we aren’t keeping a secret –”

“Then tell me,” she insisted, her voice soft despite the command. Caleb turned to Edmund, his eyes asking for help, and he jumped in, squeezing Anna’s hand.

“Mary has something she wants to tell you,” Edmund directed at Anna, who looked confused. “So does Robert. It isn’t our secret to tell.”

She couldn’t find anything to say to that; she had her own secrets that she hoped these same men wouldn’t tell if asked. So she shrugged into the silence, eliciting a grateful sigh from both Caleb and Edmund.

“Where is Ben?” she heard Edmund ask Caleb as she poured them all a drink. Whatever the secrets were, they would need fortifications; namely, scotch.

“He said he was going to talk to an ally,” Caleb said vaguely. “I don’t know who it is. He wouldn’t tell me.”

Edmund sounded incredulous, his voice matching the surprise Anna felt. “You mean Ben didn’t tell you something? I find that hard to believe,” he pointed out, a forced laugh tickling his voice. Anna balanced all three glasses and reentered the living room, her eyes immediately landing on Caleb. He looked…a little lost.

“I’m sure Ben didn’t mean to keep it a secret,” Anna reassured him as she passed him a glass.

He shrugged, but the troubled look on his face couldn’t be shaken. Anna’s eyes met Edmund’s, and he dropped his gaze to Caleb for only a moment. Ben didn’t keep secrets, not in their entire life, especially from Caleb.

A knock at the door sprung all three of them into action. Immediately, Edmund placed his glass of scotch on the table, untouched; Anna knocked the rest of hers back, trying to prepare herself for whichever secret was knocking on the door; and Caleb leaped up to open the door.

“Tallboy!” he exclaimed, but the term of endearment was a little forced. “And…”

Anna’s stomach clenched tightly as the door swung open more completely. She had seen the imperious looking man before, but she had only spoken to him when her father was a professor at the university. And yet, here he was, smiling down at her, standing next to Ben, whose face was bright pink.

“President Washington?”

The man stepped around her into the living room as Edmund vaulted to his feet. Caleb’s eyes stayed on Ben, narrowed just slightly, enough to tell Anna that something wasn’t right.

“Mrs. Strong,” he acknowledged, his eyes turning to Edmund. “And Dr. Hewlett.”

“Ben –”

“Mr. Tallmadge didn’t bring me here of his own accord,” Washington interrupted Caleb’s warning tone. “I heard rumors that our old protestors were going to be organizing another protest, so I called Ben into my office to assess the situation.”
Eyes met eyes across the room, but Ben’s gaze remained steadfast on the carpeted floor. The residual sound in the room slowly dissipated into an uncomfortable silence. Washington’s eyes surveyed the rest of the room before settling on Anna.

“Please don’t be frightened, or worried. I wanted you to know that you have my support. I know that my role in this entire mess, from your suspension –” he nodded at Edmund, “to your assault –” he let his eyes flicker to Anna, whose hands immediately jumped to her throat, “has been…uncertain. Mostly, I allow Richard to take care of smaller issues at his discretion. I am not usually consulted on things like this. And, most of the hiring and firing of professors does not come by me. However, I will not stand in your way when your protest takes place. In fact,” he lowered his voice, and everyone leaned closer to him except for Caleb, who took several steps away, “I think I know some people who would like to know about this protest. So they can help.”

Anna furrowed her brows, as Edmund spluttered behind her, spurring her to speak. “You…you want to help us?”

Washington smirked, a devastatingly old Hollywood quirk of his lips that would have charmed a woman not in love. As it was, Ben’s jaw tightened at the sight of it. “You know, Anna Strong, once upon a time, I too was considered a rebel. I would never stand in the way of rebellion.”

The doorbell jolted the entire room, and Caleb, who had retreated from the rest of the group, swiftly opened the door. “Oh, good, the gang’s all here,” he said flatly at the sight of Mary and Robert. “Let’s get this going, shall we?”

Robert frowned at him, his arm around Mary’s shoulders tightening in comfort. “What is wrong with you?” he asked. “You look –” his eyes caught sight of the looming presence of Washington. “President Washington?”

Seeing the latent confusion on Washington’s face, Ben jumped in. “George, this is Robert Townsend and Mary Smith.”

“George?” Caleb exclaimed, but it was lost amongst the hand shaking and the rapid paling of Mary’s face.

“I can see that there is some sort of meeting going on here that I have interrupted,” Washington pointed out, dropping his hand lightly on Mary’s shoulder for just a moment, communicating to her and to everyone else that he saw and was responding to her discomfort. “I should probably take my leave. Benjamin, keep me apprised of the situation, so I know which day to be unreachable.”

The door closing behind him sent a flurry of noise throughout the occupants of the living room.

“Benjamin? George?” Caleb’s hand reached for Ben’s. “You and I need to talk. Immediately.”

“What the hell was he doing here?” Robert asked.

“Are you alright?” Anna asked worriedly as Mary gently lowered herself to the couch, shaking like a leaf.

“Did I miss when Ben became friends with the president of the university?” Edmund asked to no one in particular.

After a moment, the room settled into a quiet murmur and then into silence. Caleb and Ben were gone, and the sound of Edmund’s bedroom door closing punctuated their exit. Anna took the seat on the couch beside Mary and turned her knees toward her, waiting patiently for her to speak.
“I don’t believe you,” Caleb’s voice was hushed, but Ben could hear the hidden power beneath it. “I can’t believe you brought him here.”

Ben’s eyes were pleading, large and blue and soft. “I didn’t bring him here, Caleb. He contacted me.”

“And I thought you closed all of those channels of communication, Benjamin.”

Ben clenched his jaw tightly, hard enough to feel his teeth grinding together. Caleb’s voice had lost all markers of affection. They stared at each other from opposite sides of the room, Caleb with his arms crossed over his chest, Ben with his hands shoved deep into his pockets.

“I did. His secretary came to see me –”

“Oh, so it wasn’t Alexander?” Caleb exclaimed sarcastically. “Or Gilbert?”

“No!”

“How am I supposed to believe that?” Caleb shouted, loud enough to startle Ben into taking a step back. “You didn’t tell me anything before you just…brought him here. You haven’t returned my texts all day, you’ve been acting weird. What am I supposed to think?”

“You’re supposed to trust me,” Ben retorted, finally finding his voice.

“Would you have ever told me about him and your…arrangement if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes?” Caleb finally unfurled his arms, but the red marks that showed where his hands had been clenched didn’t comfort Ben in the slightest.

“We’ve talked about this –” Ben could feel a lump growing at the base of his throat.

“We have,” Caleb agreed, “but that was before I knew you were talking to him again.”

“I didn’t talk to him!” Ben shouted in frustration. “I didn’t…I didn’t want to talk to him. He offered to help Anna, and I thought that was more important. I thought you would think that was more important.”

Caleb sighed and lowered himself onto Edmund’s bed, letting the silence grow around them. “He’s always going to be the one guy that I just can’t –”

“I know,” Ben agreed, reaching for Caleb’s hand.

“So…let me get this straight,” Anna said slowly, trying to ignore the sounds of shouting coming from Edmund’s room. “Simcoe has harassed you too?”

Mary sniffed and nodded once. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but –”

“And you found hard evidence that Simcoe was changing my grades?” Anna turned to Robert, standing awkwardly beside Edmund’s chair.

“And writing some obsessive poetry,” he replied. “I put it in an envelope, after I made copies, of course, and turned it in to the police anonymously.”
“And you saw Simcoe going into the police station after that?”

Robert nodded.

“And yet the charges against him have been dropped and he’s facing no consequences,” Edmund finished. “Despite the fact that we have hard evidence and two witnesses.” He dropped his head into his hands and groaned. “Law. Order. Authority.”

Anna, who was absently rubbing her hand down Mary’s back, paused. “What?”

He shook his head and didn’t bother to look up. “That’s what we’re taught in law school. At least, at Oxford, we are. Law, order, and authority are what we’re supposed to respect. Who knew that I’d come here and realize that none of those words apply.”

Robert’s eyes fell to Mary, whose tears had finally ceased, and sighed.

“I forgive you,” Anna said softly, nudging Mary in the shoulder. The blonde girl jumped and turned her wet eyes to Anna. “I know how hard it is to talk about things like this. Especially when everyone assumes that you’re lying or that you were…asking for it. I don’t – hey,” Mary released a quiet sob and Anna grabbed her hand to get her attention. “I don’t blame you for this.”

“If I had just – said something –”

“If the way Richard has handled this is any indication, then Simcoe still would have had the opportunity to do this,” Anna insisted.

Edmund finally raised his head from his hands, his hair sticking straight up in the front. “So what do we do now?”

Robert and Mary both looked at Anna, who shrugged. “We should probably be asking Ben. He’s the one who talked to Washington.”

“Yeah, did anyone else notice the tension there?” Edmund asked. “I mean, Caleb was –”

“Let’s not – let’s talk about that later –” Anna’s eyes jumped to the doorway that led into the kitchen. Out of the corner of his eye, Edmund could see a familiar figure.

“Washington says that he knows people he can get into contact with that will protest with us,” Ben said to Anna, ignoring Edmund’s flushed cheeks. “We don’t have to run anything by them. All we have to do is give them a date, time, and place and they’ll show up. Fill up the crowd, you know?”

Behind him, Caleb padded into the room, holding a refilled glass of scotch. Ben’s eyes followed him until he settled onto the couch before he continued.

“Alright, let’s get planning.”

***

The day of the protest dawned cold and misty; Anna watched the sun paint the sky a dim, murky orange and brown. Surely that was a bad sign, wasn’t it? That they wouldn’t have a clear day on the day they needed it most? She turned away from the window, back to Edmund’s sleeping form. His arm was thrown wide, hanging off the bed, and his other arm was tucked between their bodies, his fingers just out of her reach.

The faint smell of paint still lingered in the living room, where the signs that decried Richard as a
corrupt university politician and Simcoe as a filthy predator waited patiently by the door, stapled securely to wooden posts.

“Did you sleep at all?” Edmund’s voice was thick with the remnants of his deep sleep. “You look like you’ve been staring at the ceiling all night.”

Anna released a chuckle that quirked her lips upward but betrayed no mirth. “I think I slept. Somewhere between three and five.”

“Or you just zoned out,” Edmund replied. Anna’s face remained impassive. After a few moments, Edmund shifted, propping himself up on his elbow. “Anna, dear, you look – is something wrong?”

The silence stretched thin and fractured as Anna sighed and let her eyes fall to Edmund. “I love you, you know that, right?” she asked, her right hand settling on his cheek. He pressed a kiss to it and furrowed his brow.

“Of course I know that,” he replied. “Anna, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know…” she said softly, her eyes going back to the ceiling. “I just have a bad feeling about this.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Edmund reassured her, his fingers gently pushing the tendrils of her hair away from her face. “We’ve planned for everything.”

“I know that,” she agreed. “But…do you ever have the feeling that something is going to go terribly wrong, no matter how much planning you do?”
Your First Amendment Rights, Part Two

Chapter Summary

The protest.

TW: Blood, gore, implied death.

4:19 p.m.

Red and blue flashed brightly in Anna’s vision, too bright for her to make out anything else. The abstract figures of her friends, of the blood on her hands, and the bleak outline of the ambulance, were all too blurry and too rushed to make out clearly.

“Ma’am, you have to let go,” the EMT’s voice was soothing, but it only served to incense her further. She realized, as his hand closed around hers, that she was clutching the edge of the gurney so tightly her fingers were cramping around it. “Ma’am.”

His hand wrestled hers from the gurney and she watched, still but malleable, as they wheeled the prostrate body away from her and into the back of the ambulance. Around her, the protest had descended into chaos, groups of people screaming, fighting, others trying to maintain order and peace. Out of the corner of her eyes, Anna could see the university police, in riot gear, suiting up. Everything was muffled; the sounds were faraway, in some distant place that was neither close enough to matter nor near enough to hurt her.

“She’s going into shock,” the same EMT said to another one. “Someone get her a blanket and sit her down.”

The sound of the ambulance door slamming shut sent sound rocketing back through her, and Anna immediately covered her ears, a scream tearing itself from her throat. It hurt, God, it hurt so bad, but the pain was nothing to the agony of knowing what was happening around her.

Edmund.

Familiar arms closed around her shoulders and guided her to the curb. She let them push her gently to the ground, the shaking in her hands and knees suddenly more pronounced. She shuddered with it, the panic, the fear, the rage, and felt George’s grip on her tighten.

“Let it in,” his voice was deeper than the high pitched sounds of the sirens, of her sobbing. When had she started crying? “The sooner you let yourself feel it, the sooner it’ll become bearable.”

She hardly knew him beyond his portrait and the rumors she’d heard, but now, with Edmund…she couldn’t even let her mind think about that yet, and Selah and Abraham, the sound of someone’s voice, masculine, soothing, and wise, reminded her of her father.

If there was ever a moment when she needed her father, it was now.

She clutched at George’s arms, tight around her much smaller frame and sobbed again, letting him rock her back and forth. His voice was quiet in her ear. “Breathe, Anna. In…out…in…out…” He mimicked the deep breaths, watching her profile carefully to make sure she was following along.
She followed his voice like a lifeline though a dark tunnel, but the breaths weren’t helping. She still felt the heavy, immovable weight on her chest, tight enough to hurt, and the wavering pain behind her eyes and her nose that told her she wasn’t getting enough oxygen. It wasn’t until George gently wiped away what Anna quickly realized was blood on her forehead, wiped there by her saturated hands that the breathing exercises well and truly went out the window.

How could this happen?

How could he survive?

12:38 p.m.

The crowd was large; much larger than Anna had originally anticipated. Faces that she didn’t recognize were clapping their hands on her shoulders gently, telling her how brave they thought she was. The campus pride group, wearing their trademark shirts with PRIDE written across it in rainbow paint, was especially vigorous, holding up their own signs and passing out brochures on how to prevent on campus assault.

There was apparently a Take Back The Night group that professed to support feminism in every wave, and they came in droves; women with horror splayed across their faces, women holding hands of other women, women with masculine haircuts, women with shirts that were next to nothing, with the words “still not asking for it” blazoned across their bare stomachs.

“There are alumni here,” Caleb announced, shifting his sign from one hand to the other. “People who make donations to the university are here. Do you understand what this means?”

Edmund exhaled a relieved sigh and pressed a kiss to the side of Anna’s head. “You did it,” he whispered into her ear. She let a smile take over her mouth, but her eyes kept searching the crowd.

“He isn’t here,” Ben noted, seeing her gaze wander. Edmund furrowed his brows and stepped away from her, the better to see her facial expressions.

“Who?” he asked.

“Abraham,” Ben replied.

Edmund’s gaze momentarily hardened as Anna’s melted into one of guilt. “I thought it didn’t matter if he came?” he asked, a warning in his tone that he rarely used with Anna. Her own eyes dropped to the ground at the sound of it.

“It’s not what you think –”

“I hope not –”

Anna huffed in exasperation and Edmund fell immediately silent. “I’m just…worried that if he doesn’t show up now, he’ll show up later, drunk and upset, and cause trouble.” She dropped her and to Edmund’s arm. “I told you I had a bad feeling,” she said quietly. “I want to make sure he isn’t the reason.”

His eyes weren’t as warm as they usually were, but he acquiesced with a nod and let her kiss him swiftly on the mouth. He let her walk past him and took his place beside Caleb, who put his hand on his arm like he understood. And perhaps he did; what was Abraham but a constant threat, just like George?

Ben nudged her gently with his shoulder. “He’ll be okay. He just loves you.”
“And Caleb?”

Ben blanched, his usually rosy face going momentarily pale. “I understand why he was so angry,” he noted, “but I couldn’t just ignore George because of something that happened years ago.”

“A year ago,” Anna pointed out. “It was only a year ago that you were so swept up in this man that Caleb thought he’d lost you forever.”

Ben’s hand around his sign tightened. “Have you ever felt like that?” he asked. “Like someone was pulling the strings of every single emotion and sense at your disposal? Like they were slowly setting you on fire with every look?”

His eyes strayed to Anna, but she didn’t respond. Ben never told her about George, or how they even became close. She feared speaking would break the spell.

“That’s how George made me feel. But –” he chuckled dryly. “that’s how he makes us all feel.”

“Ben –”

“Caleb…he’s safe. He warms me instead of burning me alive. That’s what I need,” he clenched his jaw firmly and turned his gaze more purposefully to Anna. “Does Edmund make you feel like that?”

“Safe?” Anna asked. Ben nodded. “I suppose he makes me feel safe…” she trailed off, trying to find the words that made sense.

“But he lights you on fire too,” Ben confided. Anna flushed, but Ben laughed. “He must, for you to give up Abraham so completely for him.”

Did Edmund, as Ben said, light her on fire? Anna considered the notion; she disliked the notion that her affection for someone could be so completely outside of her control, but of all the reckless decisions she had made, Edmund seemed to be the one with the most consequences, and yet, she had no problem making that decision over and over again. But it wasn’t destruction – it was…

“Magnetism,” she said confidently. “We are pulled together, I think. I never saw my…feelings for him as all-consuming, but rather just…rational and natural. I can’t imagine being with anyone else.”

Ben nodded, his eyes on Caleb, ruffling Edmund’s hair. “Me neither.”

5:01 p.m.

It seemed like time was moving in slow motion; Anna had been sitting on this curb for what felt like years, hoping that the tears streaming down her face would stop, that something fundamental would change. But nothing shifted; the world kept moving around her, and she was powerless to stop it.

George had risen from her side, passing her a handkerchief that she now had clutched in her shaking, dirty fist. She could see him talking to someone just beyond her sight, his large frame completely covering his figure.

“We just need –”

“Surely you have other people you could be taking statements from,” George’s tone was harsh, steely, and suddenly his charm was gone. Anna listened closely.

“She was right there when it happened, we –”

“You will talk to someone else,” George insisted, raising his voice just enough to make the other
man take a step back. “Mrs. Strong is in shock; she won’t be able to answer any of your questions right now.”

The man seemed to take George at his word, but as he was turning around to talk to someone else, he called back, “We will have to speak to her soon, President Washington. No matter how difficult.”

“I understand.” George answered.

“If he dies, this becomes a murder investigation,” the man pointed out.

2:10 p.m.

“Look alive,” Caleb muttered to Anna, “Richard is here.”

Edmund’s eyes landed on her immediately, and they instinctively moved together, their hands intertwining. She relished in the momentary contact, knowing that he was still upset with her for looking for Abraham. But it didn’t matter now; they were united.

“I should have known you’d do something like this,” Richard’s voice was hoarse, as though he’d spent a lot of time yelling, but his face was calm; the rage was hidden behind his eyes, behind the hardened wrinkles of his forehead. “Typical.”

“If that’s all you came here to say, you can go now,” Edmund snapped.

Richard’s eyes never strayed from Anna’s, though his jaw tightened visibly. “I should have thought that after the tragedy that a protest brought this university, that you’d have enough class to refrain from reminding the administrators and the students of it.”

“Enough class –?”

“Caleb, don’t –”

“I’m not the one that started this,” Anna replied, her ears listening hard to the scuffle of Ben holding Caleb back. “You did, when you refused to hold Simcoe accountable for assault.”

Richard’s eyes rose to the crowd, taking in the participants and the size. Caleb, behind Anna, had calmed, and Edmund’s hand around her own was tight. She waited, with bated breath, for his next insult. For his dismissal.

But his eyes, when they returned to hers, were full of pain and rage. He was remembering, she knew, about their last protest. Remembering Thomas. Momentarily, she regretted planning this protest. Looking into the eyes of a father who knew the pain of loss, she suddenly felt sorry for him. But he clenched his teeth and the rage took over.

“You dare…you caused a tragedy last time –”

“So you expect me to endure my own tragedy because it makes you uncomfortable?” she asked, and the force of her reply was enough for Edmund to grab her upper arm, making sure she wasn’t about to make their argument physical. “I tried to do this your way. But it seems that this is the only way to get your attention.”

“To throw my son’s death in my face?” he asked, incredulous.

“To remind you that you don’t pick and choose trauma, Richard. You aren’t the only one that’s ever endured hardship. You certainly aren’t the only one who has ever thought life was unfair. But you –
you are allowed anything in your position. But me? I’m supposed to just accept that assault is a part of my daily life? I won’t. I refuse to accept it.”

Ben had a tight hold of her other arm now, and it wasn’t until he squeezed that Anna realized she was shouting at Richard, tears welling up in her eyes. The crowd was quiet, watching the exchange, wondering if their protest would turn suddenly into a riot.

But Anna wrenched her arms back, heaved an unsteady breath, and let it out.

“This is my first amendment right, Dr. Woodhull,” she said firmly. “So unless you’re going to infringe upon my fundamental human rights, it’s time for you to leave.”

5:54 p.m.

“What did you see?” the policeman asked again. Anna shook her head, unable to respond. Her hands, still shaking, were tight around a Styrofoam cup of water that tasted like the blood in her mouth. All she tasted was the blood she could see on her hands, that hadn’t come off from her nail beds. She watched it now.

“Did you see who was driving the car?” he asked, his patience waning. Anna didn’t blame him for being frustrated with her – they had been at this for thirty minutes, and fifteen of those thirty had been George telling the officer that she had nothing to say.

“Did you recognize the car?”

Anna shook her head.

“Alright, at least that’s something,” the man sighed, writing that negative response in his notebook. “Did someone push him?”

“Is he alive?” she asked suddenly, ignoring his question. The man immediately paused in his writing, his hand poised over the notebook. He took in her appearance carefully, weighing his possibilities. Deciding whether to lie to her or to tell the truth.

“As far as I know…yes,” he answered cautiously. “Now, can you tell me –”

“They said he might not wake up,” she continued. “Is that true?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted honestly.

“That he might not be able to walk –” she was trailing off again, she could see it on the officer’s face, but the idea was too much to bear, enough to distract her from his line of questioning. “I have to go there.”

“No, you have to answer my questions,” the officer insisted as she stood up. “Mrs. Strong! Where was your husband during this…accident?”

She paused, turning back toward the officer. “I don’t…I don’t know.”

“And Mr. Woodhull?”

She shrugged once more and turned away from him, her eyes searching the crowd for Ben or Caleb.

4:04 p.m.

“Um…Anna?” Edmund’s voice was quiet in her ear. “Did you tell Selah about this?”
“What?” she immediately pulled away from him and cast her eyes around at the surrounding crowd. “Of course not, why?”

“Because he’s here,” Edmund pointed out Selah’s head of dark hair, talking animatedly to Caleb and Ben. Caleb’s face was dark, tight, with obvious restraint, but Selah looked nonchalant, almost casual. How could he be here, after what happened last time, and be so calm?

Ben’s eyes rose to hers and Selah followed them immediately, smirking when he found her. She knew that smirk; he was coming to cause damage, unnecessary, selfish damage. She reached for Edmund’s hand, squeezing it gently.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, a bit more harshly than she originally intended. Selah blinked at her but accepted her tone.

“I went to your apartment but you weren’t there,” he shrugged. “I wanted to know why you haven’t signed the divorce papers yet. My lawyer needs them so I can get my assets in order. Maybe try to get back my house that you sold.”

“You haven’t signed the papers yet?” The confusion, the underlying hurt in Edmund’s voice was exactly what Selah wanted; Anna could see the triumph tighten the muscles in his face. She kept her eyes on her husband even as Edmund took his hand out of hers.

“I’ve been a little busy, Selah,” she pointed out. “Getting drugged, planning a protest. Surely you can understand a delay in what you want and what you need. I’ll sign the papers for you when we’re done here.”

Selah, seeing that her weakness lied with Edmund, turned his gaze to the man in question. “You expected this, didn’t you?” he asked slyly, lowering his chin to catch Edmund’s eyes. “Your face… you don’t look surprised. You must have so much trust for your… what is she? Your girlfriend? Fuck buddy? That’s what she was to Abraham, at least.”

Caleb and Ben almost missed Edmund as he lunged toward Selah, his hands balled tight into fists. Shock colored their faces, matching Anna’s. Edmund’s jaw was tight, his eyes full of righteous anger. He was fed up; Anna could see that now. Fed up of having their relationship invalidated; sick and tired of having other men telling him who Anna was.

“Hey, you came here to make a point, and since I’m the one saddled with your last name, I suggest you talk to me,” she spat, catching Selah’s attention once more.

“It’s my duty to warn your next victim what to expect, isn’t it?” Selah pointed out, his calm demeanor falling away to anger. She could hear it in the way he spoke, through his teeth, the skin around his jaw reddening.

“This really isn’t the time for this,” Ben grunted as Edmund tried to reclaim his arms from his and Caleb’s restraint.

“It sounds like the perfect time to me,” Selah replied. “What better place to make sure people know who you are than the adoring public?”

He turned away from Anna toward the crowd, trying to pretend they weren’t listening to the next installment of men angry at Anna. “Do you know who you’re defending? You’re defending an adulteress, who uses sex to get what she wants.”

“Selah –” Caleb warned, Edmund’s struggling almost knocking him clean off his feet. “Not here. Not now. Remember what happened last time?”
“How do you know she isn’t lying?” Selah’s voice rose in volume as the crowd quieted around him. “Couldn’t convince her teacher to give her a better grade so she tried to get him fired. Wouldn’t be the first time she’s tried to manipulate someone that way.”

“Edmund, don’t –!”

Anna whirled around with enough time to see Edmund stalking off into the crowd, the skin of his cheeks dark red with anger. But he was moving away from Selah, away from the crowd. Away from her.

With a glance back at Ben and Caleb, who were watching Selah continue to address the crowd, she shoved her way through the throng toward Edmund. The crowd was less forgiving now, some of the more casual newcomers staring down at her with new eyes, tainted with the sludge Selah kept shouting.

“Edmund, wait!” she called after him, and his shoulders rose a fraction of an inch, enough for her to know that he heard her, before he continued walking away from her, shoving his way through the crowd, ignoring the glares that followed them.

A shout rose behind her and Anna turned toward it, just slow enough to get caught around the cheekbone by someone’s elbow as the whole crowd moved as one, a ripple of a shove.

“Don’t!” she heard in the distance, and the sound of breaking glass.

Suddenly, the crowd wasn’t a crowd anymore, but an animal all its own, and as the animal pushed back, Anna struggled to stay on her feet, her hair falling in front of her face, making it impossible to see Edmund as he continued to struggle to get free of the crowd. The sound of skin on skin, heavy breathing, and screaming sounded almost eerily like the protest that came before, the nightmare they had all hoped to forget, to prevent.

“Edmund!” she shouted, knowing the her voice was going to be all but swallowed up by the restless crowd. A woman to her left swung her fist toward the man in front of him, catching him in the nose. His body stumbled, crashing into the campus pride members that were trying to get out of the crowd, holding onto one of their own, her nose bloody.

“Shit,” Anna muttered.

She could hear the sound of traffic and knew she was getting closer to the street. Bodies crashed into her, and she felt her feet sliding in the grass, farther away from the direction Edmund had gone in. She struggled against the tide, using her elbows to get people out of her way, but they were incensed; a different crowd than the peaceful one that had been protesting all afternoon. They pushed back, and someone’s fist, aiming for someone else, caught Anna in the cheekbone. She grunted past the stinging pain of the deflected punch and tried to keep moving.

Panic was starting to set in at the edges of her vision as the crowd grew in volume. People weren’t just screaming now; there were sirens, the sounds of police, and feet pounding against the ground. People were fleeing.

They had failed.

Screams erupted in front of her, a sudden explosion that took her off-guard, and a sickening, loud, thud. The sound was fragmented, multiple sounds that all came together in a symphony of what Anna knew was a body hitting the ground.

No.
She shoved past more people, but they didn’t fight her anymore. They were still. The stillness, of an eye of a hurricane, a calm before a storm, set a roiling in her stomach. She didn’t trust it.

The crowd finally parted for her and her world stopped.

She was sure, as she dropped to her knees, feeling the broken glass cut into her skin, that she was dreaming. This was a nightmare. But no – Edmund’s eyes were open, terrified, locked onto hers the second she stepped off the curb. His leg – God, his leg, bent at an unnatural angle, shuddered as he tried to move toward her.

“Don’t, don’t,” she said in a rush, her eyes searching his torso for the wound that was spreading dark blood through his shirt and onto the pavement. “Don’t move.”

“Someone call an ambulance!” Someone screamed into the crowd.

“Someone hit him!”

“The car – the car kept going –”

Anna’s eyes searched the pavement for a clue, for something she could use to identify who had done this, but Edmund’s hand caught her arm, but as he opened his mouth, all that left it was a gurgle, and a bubble of blood rose to his lips and spilled over. There was blood in his lungs.

Immediately, Anna pressed her hands into the deep wound across his stomach, feeling the blood pulse around her hand. Edmund let out some sort of scream that wasn’t quite human and suddenly, she was crying, apologizing over and over.

“It hurts, I know, I know,” she said breathlessly, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

His other hand reached for her cheek, settling there only for a moment before it fell onto his chest, limp.

“No, no!” she sobbed, dropping her ear toward his mouth, hoping to hear his breath, anything.

“Anna –”

Her tears were landing on his face like rain, and her whole body was shaking so hard she could hardly keep pressure on his wound. “Don’t, don’t try to talk. Just stay still. They’re coming. The ambulance is coming for you.”

“Abraham –”

“He’s not here, it doesn’t matter now, just keep breathing, please,” she wanted to touch his face, to comfort him, but the blood pouring around her hands was too much, far too much.

“Abe – it was Abe –”

The sirens were getting closer, but they weren’t ambulance sirens.

“Ma’am, you have to step back,” a cop was grabbing her by the upper arms, trying to pull her away from Edmund. But no, he couldn’t, couldn’t he see that she was helping him, that he was alone without her? She wrenched her arms back, jostling Edmund’s body as his eyes fluttered closed, rolling back into his skull.

“Get off of me!” she screamed, her voice breaking.
“The ambulance is coming, you have to let him go,” the cop was trying to be reassuring, but it wasn’t working. All Anna could see were the whites of his eyes, his hand around her wrist loosening as he slipped away from her.

Ben’s hands were on her shoulders. “Anna, they’re going to help him as much as they can,” he was trying to be soothing, but she could feel him shaking, hear the sobs he was trying to keep in. “Let them do their jobs.”

The cop that had tried to remove her had abandoned her and was kneeling in front of Edmund, doing chest compressions. The sight was enough to sicken her; she struggled to keep the bile that rose in her throat down, but she allowed Ben to lead her away from Edmund’s body.

“It was Abe,” she muttered to him. “Edmund, before he –” she took a great shuddering breath. “Find him.”
Ben sat in the driver’s seat of his car, his knuckles white around the steering wheel, the keys in his lap, for a long time. He wasn’t sure what he was waiting for, staring out into the fog that was starting to roll in as the night wore on. But wait he did, while Caleb occupied the space beside him, a companion in silence. After a few moments, he reached over and took his hand.

“Abraham,” his touch had prompted him to speak, his voice quiet. “I can’t believe it.”

Ben shook his head. “Edmund saw him,” he replied. “And if Anna wants us to find him, then we will.”

Caleb released his hand, using it to run both sets of fingers through his hair. “And what do we do when we find him, huh? Take him to the police? Help him hide?”

The silence reigned again, and for a long time, Ben didn’t have an answer. The answer he wanted to give was lodged deep in his throat, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever say it out loud. He let his eyes drift over to his boyfriend, and he knew, just from the lines in his brow, that they were thinking the same thing.

He finally gathered the courage to turn the key in the ignition and pulled out of his parking spot, directing the car to Abraham’s apartment.

They drove in silence, the unasked questions hanging in the air.

Was Edmund alright?

Would he survive?

What were they going to do now?

The drive was short, and their journey fruitless. Abraham’s car was absent from the parking lot, and their knocks went unheard, unanswered, or ignored. But the lights were all off, the inside of the apartment still, waiting its master to come alive again. Ben and Caleb returned to the car, Ben checking his phone for an update on Edmund.

There wasn’t any.

“We can try the bar,” Caleb suggested, settling his hand on top of Ben’s thigh. The contact gave him comfort. “He might have gone there.”

Ben nodded, his jaw still tense with worry, and they followed their familiar path to the parking lot they occupied all too often. Once more, Abraham’s car was missing from the parking lot; Caleb went inside to ask the bartender, leaving Ben alone with his thoughts.

There would be some sort of punishment for this, he thought ruefully. There was no way there
wouldn’t be some sort of blowback, some retribution, though whether that would come squarely on
Anna or on all of them had yet to be determined. If Richard had his way, this would boot Anna from
the university for good.

Not that it would matter to her, if anything happened to Edmund.

And Abraham; the thought wearied him even more. Abraham would face the same predicament that
Selah had just escaped, especially…he paused in his thought to swallow back tears.

Especially Edmund didn’t pull through.

Caleb yanked open the door, the furrow in his brows the only answer Ben needed. They lingered in
the parking lot, trying to figure out where Abraham would go. No answer came to them.

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Richard had been at home when the lock on his front door squeaked and gave way. Alarmed, he
stood from his chair, trying to remember where he had hidden his pistol years before that. The
silhouette of his son, bruised and bloody, chased the thought from his mind.

“Abraham!” he exclaimed, rushing to his son’s side. “What – what happened to you?”

But Abraham could not, or would not speak; he clung to his father like a child, weeping into his
shoulder, trying to hide his injuries.

“Son,” he pleaded, trying to pry Abraham’s fingers off of him. “Where are you hurt?”

A drunken babble was all he got in return. With a worried tut, Richard led his son to the bathroom,
where he turned on the shower and inspected Abraham’s face. Glass was shining in his hair,
reflected off the harsh fluorescent light, and he took his time picking the pieces out carefully. A good
sized piece had sliced Abraham across the forehead, enough that blood had trickled into his eye and
down his nose.

His breath smelled horribly of tequila, an almost almond-like smell that made Richard gag. A bruise
was blooming on his cheekbone, rounded, in a shape that looked familiar. He stared at it for a while,
trying to place where he had seen that shape before. Once the steam of the shower started to obscure
his vision, however, he left his son to get undressed and wash, leaving a towel hanging on the
shower curtain.

He gently closed the bathroom door behind him, finally allowed to inspect the debris his son had
brought with him unimpeded. It didn’t take him long to find his car, smashed in the front, the
windshield caved in, blood on the hood.

It looked just like the car that hit Thomas.

The sight of it sent him running to the bushes to empty his stomach, but he returned, wiping his eyes,
to assess the damage. The dent to the front of Abraham’s car said that whatever he had hit (or
whoever, he thought with a shudder) had hit the hood first, and the speed had sent them into the
windshield.

Whatever it was, it would be lucky to survive an impact like that.

With a heavy sigh that released an errant tear he didn’t know had been welling up in his eye, Richard
went back inside and grabbed his phone. He wasn’t sure who he was going to call, or what he was
going to ask, but he needed to know what Abraham had done, and he needed to know now.
He listened to the water, running still, in the bathroom, and dialed Mary Smith’s number.

She picked up on the fourth ring, her voice thick with hysteria. “Richard?” she asked, sniffing deeply. “Wh-why are you calling me?”

He knew, somehow, that she had the answer he sought. “Where are you?” he asked without explanation. Mary hesitated, and in the background, Richard could hear the deep voice of George Washington. “Mary.”

“The hospital,” she answered quickly at his prompting. “Edmund was hit by a car.”

Richard froze, his hand loosening its grip around his phone. He struggled to find the correct words; he wasn’t sure how to proceed from here. Finally, Mary’s voice came over the phone again.

“Anna wants to talk to you,” she said before he could hear her passing the phone to Anna Strong. “I know he’s with you,” she said immediately, her voice so hoarse it was almost a whisper. “You can’t hide him from this.”

Richard didn’t bother trying to deny it. “I know.”

“Tell him to come find me. Culper General, fifth floor,” she didn’t demand, didn’t yell, but Richard knew it wasn’t a suggestion. “He has an hour, or I’m going to call the police.”

“Anna –”

“An hour starting now, Richard,” she replied, and before he could answer, the call was over.

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Anna wasn’t sure how much time she had spent counting the tiles on the floor of the hospital. She had stopped at close to three hundred, allowing herself a moment to breathe before she started counting again. The monotony soothed her, kept her from focusing on why she was here. But it lingered, underneath her like a predatory shadow, waiting for the right moment to rise up.

George pressed a cup of coffee into her hands, his own large palms covering her own to make sure she wasn’t about to drop it. She was in shock, she knew, and the longer she went without speaking, the more time she spent obsessed with the tiles on the floor, the more worried everyone became.

Abraham. His name was a curse in her mind now, a word that accompanied a sneer. He had run to his father, of course he had. He knew nothing beyond what Richard could do for him, nothing beyond his father’s shadow. And yet, the confident notion that what Abraham had done was an accident still stuck to her. The venom she felt would come in waves, threatening to overtake her, but it was chased by worry, by sorrow. All she could do was struggle to keep her head above it. She couldn’t let it overcome her, not when Edmund needed her.

George, beside her, stood, and hearing the click of Mary’s heels on the floor prompted Anna to finally lift her eyes from the tile. A doctor, pulling his mask away from his mouth, was standing before them, and the blood on his scrubs was enough to send Anna to her chair again, her knees weak.

“We’re doing all that we can, but for now, he’s been put in an induced coma,” the doctor explained, focusing on George the most. “We’ve repaired his punctured lung and set the broken bones, but he sustained a severe head injury, and we’re working on reducing the swelling of his brain. Unfortunately, we have to give him a little bit of time to stabilize before we can do anything else.”
“And is he –”

The doctor seemed to know the question before it was asked. “If the swelling goes down, recovery looks like a long road, but it is possible. Some of it will be in his hands.”

“Thank you,” George said graciously, even as Anna wanted to scream that it wasn’t enough, it would never be enough. She watched the doctor leave them behind, feeling keenly like she was being abandoned. Every moment that she spent sitting here, unable to move, was another moment that she failed Edmund.

The negative thought bolstered her a little bit, and she finally leaned back in the chair, closing her eyes as her muscles finally stretched. The movement caught George’s eye, and she could feel his gaze on her, waiting for a clue, trying to decide how to act.

“Mary,” she finally said, her voice sounding foreign to her ears. “How long has it been?” She didn’t have to explain what she meant. Mary was too smart for that. The blonde girl pulled her phone out of her pocket and checked the time.

“Thirty one minutes,” she supplied, slipping her phone back into her pocket. “What exactly are we waiting for?”

So she didn’t know; no one had told her. Anna scrutinized her face, allowing herself a moment of appreciation while she hesitated. Did she have the strength to ruin Abraham in her eyes? Did he truly deserve that?

What he deserved, while Edmund was in an induced coma, was disgust, endured hatred, and unimaginable pain. But she knew, without any proof, that it had been an accident. And she knew he would come. He had to; he wouldn’t allow her to go to the police without trying to talk her out of it first. But, even as Anna struggled to keep her thoughts in order, she knew this was bigger than a simple fight, much larger than simply infidelity. Abraham had committed a crime, an indiscretion that could quickly grow into a murder charge.

When it happened to Selah, it ruined her life and his. Anna didn’t want the power to do the same thing to Abraham; but if it came down to it, the choice was between Edmund and Abraham. She knew the choice she had to make.

Time moved unapologetically forward, and Anna found her eyes straying to the clock at the arch of the doorway. As the hour slowly ticked to a close, her eyes followed the second hand in its multiple revolutions, making her own resolutions in her head that she would call the cops in the next ten seconds, then twenty, then thirty.

That is, until a familiar silhouette caught her eye at the end of the hall.

It was just a flash of his jacket as he passed the hallway, but it was all she needed. Anna rose from her seat, her eyes fixed on her destination.

“I’m going to find something to eat,” she said to George, who rose to follow her. “I’ll be right back.”

She waited until she heard him reclaim his seat before she left, her own anxious breathing shortening her strides and quickening her steps. She turned the corner, her eyes taking in the sterile paint on the sterile walls, and frowned in distaste. She hated hospitals, hated them ever since she lost James, since she lost her father.

Abraham was waiting for her inside a closet, full of boxes of gloves and bedpans. It smelled like rotting plastic, but somehow, Anna found the scent a complement to the situation. Abraham looked
horrendous; his father (it had to have been his father) had cleaned what looked like a deep wound across his face with butterfly stitches; the bruise of the steering wheel was prominent on the lower half of his face.

“I’m sorry, I might have missed your hour deadline,” his voice held no malice, but it still set her off just the same.

“Is that all you’re going to apologize for?” she asked, crossing her arms. She could feel her arms shaking, and after a moment’s reflection, realized it was her whole body that was trembling.

“It was an accident, Anna,” Abraham pleaded, his hands reaching for hers. Immediately, without her having to recoil, he pulled his hands back to himself. “I – I was so drunk, I couldn’t handle the thought of another protest happening –”

“So you got drunk and decided to drive?” Anna sneered, stepping closer to him. “You didn’t just drive, Abraham, you were speeding. That’s the only way you could have hit Edmund that hard.” The memory of him lying in his own blood rushed back to her, overwhelming her senses, and she had to pause to breathe, trying to remember George’s breathing exercises.

“Anna?” Abraham’s voice was far away. “Anna, are you alright?”

“Do I look like I’m alright?” her voice, muffled from her exaggerated breathing, was so loud it startled even her. “This is some bullshit nightmare you put us in; history repeating itself forever in every direction. What do you want me to say? That I understand? That I forgive you for almost killing Edmund? He might not wake up, Abe, and you did that. There’s no one to blame, not me, not the protest, not the drink. You!”

Seeing her so hysterical only made him worse. “I’m sorry, Anna, I’m so sorry. I didn’t – I didn’t mean to.” He was crying now, and the sound, the sight, made Anna nauseous. She didn’t want to see this, she didn’t want to feel bad for him. Selah had reacted the same way.

“You’re going to jail, Abe,” she said firmly, and his sobs were quieted as he struggled to find a way to combat this. “Not even Richard can make this go away.”

“He knows what I deserve,” Abraham replied, his voice straining and cracking on the final word.

Anna knew this tactic; he used it on her often. He wanted her to contradict him, to placate him. “You want me to tell you that you don’t deserve this?” his eyes rose to hers, still wet with his tears. “I won’t.”

“Anna,” her name was a prayer in his mouth, and Anna’s mouth twisted at the sound. “You have to believe me –”

His hands reached for her again, his fingertips brushing her arm, and she yanked her arm out of his reach. “No. No, you don’t get to do this. I had to watch him try to breathe, Abraham. I had to watch the –” the memory made bile rise in her throat again, “watch the blood spread around him, pour from his mouth.”

“I didn’t –”

“You did!” she shouted, the strength of her shout cracking her voice again. “His lung is collapsed, his bones are broken. He might not ever wake up, and you did that to him. Why? Because you couldn’t handle dealing with something that had nothing to do with you!”

He was crying too, tears running down his face, over the cut and the bruise, watching her come so
completely undone. “What do I have to say to convince you that I’m sorry?” he asked, his voice small. It made her chest ache more to see them come to this.

“You can go to the police,” she said firmly, the quivering in her chin stilled by her clenched jaw. “You can turn yourself in. Do the decent thing.”

“And I will,” he promised. “I will.”

“Will?” she repeated.

“I just need a day,” he wheedled. “A day to explain to my father what I did, why I did it. Just a day to get everything in order.”

She let out a laugh that held no mirth, using the moment to wipe the steady stream of tears from her face. “You are unbelievable,” she sneered. “Un-fucking-believable.”

He stepped closer to her, his shoulders drooping when she backed away from him so fast that her shoulders hit the shelf behind her. “This is the last thing I’ll ever ask of you,” he said quietly.

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When Ben’s phone rang, he expected it to be Anna; he expected her to ask him if they had found Abraham, to give him an update on Edmund. He didn’t expect to see George’s name on the caller ID. His eyes slid over the Caleb for a moment, long enough for him to widen his eyes and nod at the phone, a silent prod to answer the damn phone, Tallboy, before he pressed ‘talk.’

“George.”

“Benjamin,” George’s voice was all business. “The doctors just came to give us an update. Edmund is in an induced coma. They have to wait for him to stabilize before they can work on reducing the swelling in his brain.”

Ben exhaled sharply, feeling Caleb sigh with him. “So he’s still alive.”

George paused. “Still fighting,” he agreed.

The word gave Ben a modicum of comfort. “Is Anna there?” he asked. “How is she?”

He could hear George rise from his seat and move away, his footfalls echoing back over the phone. “She’s been in shock for a while, but about half an hour ago she just got up and left. She said she was going to get food, but she came back with nothing. She’s been a little better since then, but I’m still worried.”

“We will grab her something to eat,” Ben reassured him. “We’ll be there in half an hour or so.”

But George didn’t respond. Ben waited, listening for the affirmative that George always gave him. “George?” he asked tentatively.

“Um, Ben?” his voice was slow, questioning. “I think Anna wants to talk to you.”

Ben swallowed past the nervousness in his throat. “Oh. Okay.”

He heard the phone change hands with a quiet shuffling, and started speaking as soon as he knew that Anna was listening. “We went to his apartment and the bar, and we can’t find Abraham,” he said in a rush. “I’m sorry, Annie.”
“Don’t worry about it,” she replied dully, trying to cough past the hoarseness in her throat. “I found him.”

Ben paused, his eyes meeting Caleb’s, their astonishment mirrored in each other’s expressions. “You did? How?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll tell you later. I need you to do something for me.”

“We’re already bringing you food,” Ben reassured her.

“No,” Anna answered. “I need you go to my apartment and bring me the divorce papers. Do you still have my spare key?”

Ben’s eyes searched for it on his overworked key ring. “Yes,” he answered. “But… Anna, are you sure now’s the time?”

“It’s now or never,” she said softly.

Ben nodded, even though he knew Anna couldn’t see. “Annie, everything’s going to be okay.”

She laughed, a toneless laugh that sent a shiver through him. It was a laugh of disbelief. “We’ll see, Tallboy,” she said, her voice so far away that he knew she was lying for his sake, to make him feel better.

“We’ll see you soon.”

“Oh, and Ben?” she caught him right before he hung up. “Bring me a pen.”
The World Shifts

When she finally saw Ben at the end of the hallway, carrying a bag of what she knew was food and a familiar looking envelope, Anna felt a sudden exodus of energy. It felt like everything was suddenly sucked out of her, like the night, longer than any night she’d ever endured, had finally succeeded in beating her. She didn’t get up to greet him; she was sure she wouldn’t be able to stand.

Her eyes rose again to the clock. Just give me a day, Abraham had pleaded. A day. Twenty-four hours is all he would get, she swore.

“We got you some clothes, Annie,” Caleb passed her a little gray backpack, one that Anna recognized from the cluttered floor of her closet. “I figured you’d want to get out of those…” he trailed off, his eyes trailing down her body, to the blood stains in her knees, on her arms, the splatter on her shirt. “Do you want help?”

He seemed to know without asking, and she didn’t have to give an answer. He was beside her in a second, lifting her up under the arm and helping her down the hall to the women’s restroom. The nurse at the station glanced up at him in alarm for a moment before she recognized the way he supported Anna, the careful way he was guiding her. Without saying anything, she went back to her charts.

He didn’t talk, didn’t prompt her, but she found herself talking all the same, as he pulled her stained shirt over her head. “He wants a day to get his affairs in order,” she snarled. Caleb’s eyes met hers as he replaced her shirt with her favorite one, stolen from Ben.

“Of course he does,” he muttered. “You’re going to give it to him?”

She shrugged. “I can’t lose Edmund and shove Abe into a jail cell on the same day,” she said, feeling her knees start shaking again. “I – I don’t why I can’t, but I can’t.”

He nodded understandingly. “Then we give him twenty-four hours,” he said matter-of-factly, reaching for the button of Anna’s jeans. She shooed his hands away and undid them herself. “And when those twenty-four hours are up, he either goes to the cops himself or we take him there ourselves.”

“Could we forgive ourselves?” she asked as she kicked her jeans off and took the offered dark blue tights. She didn’t have to specify. She looked up into Caleb’s eyes and caught him wiping a tear away.

“We’ll have to,” he said simply, dropping a hand to her shoulder and squeezing gently. “And if you need me to, I’ll forgive you if you forgive me.”

***

Abraham had hoped his father would be asleep by the time he made it back to his house. He had asked Anna for a day to explain himself, to get everything in order. He had intended to need the entire day so he could put off this conversation as long as possible. But the light in the window was a burning beacon, one he could not put off, and he found that the front door was unlocked.

Richard was facing the empty fireplace, staring into the dark expanse of ashes and old kindling. He didn’t look up when Abe walked in, but hardly shifted in his seat. Without saying anything, Abe took the seat to his right.
“I’m sorry,” he whispered into the silence. His father said nothing back. “I – I don’t know what to say –”

“There’s nothing to say,” Richard’s voice was hollow, an empty hallway, devoid of any feeling.

“Dad –”

With a lurching movement, his father was on his feet, turning away from his son. “I’ve spent as long as I can remember hating Selah Strong, Anna and her father for what happened to Thomas. They took my son from me, a joint effort. I heard all of the pleading without remorse. Selah had been drunk, he was troubled. It didn’t matter.”

He looked at his son over his shoulder, his eyes full of tears. “It didn’t matter because my son was still dead.”

Abraham struggled to find any words that could put a stop to whatever his father was trying to say. He felt some, in his mouth, and swallowed them back. They weren’t good enough. At this point, his father was right – there was nothing to say.

“You did the same thing that I spent years hating Selah Strong for,” his father said finally, into the tense silence. “You almost took someone’s life, very well could still take his life, because you were selfish. Because you had no self-control.”

The tears were sliding, fast and hot, down Abraham’s cheeks. “Father –”

“You are no son of mine,” his father interrupted. “You are my comeuppance. For what I’ve done, for my own selfish behavior; I see that now.”

A sob shook Abraham’s body, and pain flared in the cut over his forehead, in his jaw. “Please –”

“I don’t want this either, Abraham,” Richard said, and Abe could see, clearly, tears sparkling in his father’s eyes. “I have done my best to make sure I didn’t lose both my sons when I lost one. But you wrenched yourself away from me, against my will, and no amount of begging, or tears, will bring you back from this.”

They both fell silent for a long moment, the only sound the incessant ticking of a clock in another room. Abraham studied his father’s face, the blood he had smeared on Richard’s shirt, the way his hands still shook. They were all barely held together.

“I’ve called the police,” his father said softly. “They’ll be here soon.”

***

When Anna pictured signing her divorce papers, she never figured it would be in a sterile hospital, surrounded by her grim-faced friends, signing with a pen she was pretty sure used to be Abraham’s (it was the same blue Bic that he loved to write with so much). She never imagined that she’d still hesitate over that signature, somehow finding it inexplicably difficult to end something that seemed like so much a part of her, even now.

She never thought that she’d sign it anyway, despite the nauseated feeling in her stomach, and shove the papers away from her, toward Ben, who slid them back into the envelope. She had expected a terse signature that she didn’t give a shit about, and a comment to Selah she had to bite back behind her teeth.

She didn’t expect it to hurt this much, but she couldn’t distinguish hurt from hurt anymore. It all
ached, it all poured over her like the unrelenting rain outside. It never stopped.

Almost as if she was watching a movie, she could see Ben talking to Washington, his head bent low, too close to his face; Washinton’s lips could have brushed his jaw if he really wanted, but Caleb was still there, his face concerned, listening intently to what they were saying. Mary had been whisked off somewhere by Robert, his face white as a sheet, his hand on her elbow.

The tile blended in with the ceiling and the walls and the numbers were all arbitrary. Somehow, the floor continued to tilt until she was sitting in a kaleidoscope, letting the colors slide by her unmolested.

She drifted.

She dreamed of some day, somehow simultaneously in the past and the future, with a dark haired little boy that looked like she always imagined James would look. He clung to her leg, only about waist-high. His hair was dark, but it wasn’t dark like hers. She ran her fingers through it, finding some kind of tacit comfort in it. But no, she didn’t feel sad, or scared, or anything. She felt…peace.

They were standing somewhere nondescript, but familiar all the same. The little boy was holding a bouquet of flowers, and as she noticed them, he bent to drop them gently at the base of a grave.

“James Strong, beloved son,” the grave read, and the little boy gently brushed away some dirt at the top of the headstone.

The little boy glanced up at her, an adoring gaze that Anna could only attribute to a son looking at his mother, she was looking into Edmund’s eyes. But that was impossible.

It was all impossible.

Suddenly, as if doused by cold water, she was awake again, jolting upward so quickly that someone’s hands came to rest on her shoulders. “Anna, it’s okay, deep breaths.”

She was looking right into Ben’s eyes, the blue startling and comforting at the same time. They were still in the hospital; she had fallen asleep, her head against Ben’s shoulder. He smiled weakly at her.

“The doctors said they aren’t going to do anything else tonight,” he said softly. “Why don’t you let me take you home?”

She shook her head. Somehow, the idea of going to her apartment was repugnant, awful. She couldn’t stand to be there any more than she could stand to be here. Ben looked troubled, and glanced over his shoulder at Caleb, who smiled in that tentative way people did before they cried.

“Do you want me to take you to Edmund’s, Annie?” he asked gently.

Just the sound of his name sent tears over the edges of her eyes and onto her cheeks, down her jaw, dropping easily onto her lap. He seemed to take that as a yes, and helped her up, holding tightly onto her hand. She realized, with a force that almost knocked her over, why Caleb was so in-tune with her feelings; because he was the one, other than herself, that had been close to Edmund.

And no one had ever checked on him.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to him with no context, and no warning, and her tears were suddenly sobs, and she was a complete mess, driven madly by her guilt. She hadn’t even thought about him, not one single thought, and all he had done was take care of her. “I – I didn’t think –”
He smiled halfway at her, tightening his grip on her hand. “It’s okay,” he soothed, but there was no way he could know what he was absolving her of. “It’s okay, I promise, Annie.”

But it wasn’t okay, she thought vehemently. Would it ever be okay?

***

Morning found Anna asleep, her head on Caleb’s chest, on the floor in Edmund’s living room. The bedroom had proved to be far too painful, the couch too small for them both. She had fallen asleep almost the second Caleb had offered his arms up to her, her eyes swollen and sore and aching to close. Ben had watched them sleep for a long while, at a loss. What could he do for them now?

He had settled for making some food for them to eat when they woke up, making coffee, and nervously cleaning Edmund’s house. He didn’t want to think about how long this house would go uninhabited, especially if…

He pushed the thought from his head and checked his phone again. No new calls. George had sent him a text a matter of three hours ago, saying that Edmund was stable, and that the doctors were going to make sure the swelling in Edmund’s brain hadn’t gotten worse. They were optimistic; it was the best possible outcome so far.

That gave him traitorous hope; Ben didn’t like to dwell on hope. When he was a religious child, hope was his bread and butter. It helped him through every single hardship in his life, and then his mother had gotten sick. He had watched her wither and slowly die, and every prayer to God had gone unanswered. He couldn’t understand, couldn’t fathom how his poor mother, so perfect, so beautiful, and so pious, could be so completely forsaken by the one she worshipped.

When she died, he was by her side, and he left his cross necklace in her casket. He hadn’t prayed since; he hadn’t prayed when Anna’s father died, when Thomas died, when Selah went to prison, when Anna lost James. He didn’t see the point – bad things happened to good people, he knew that now.

But he thought about praying now, even if only to make sure he had exhausted every possible avenue; the prayer was on the tip of his tongue, and he almost uttered it. If he didn’t pray, and something else happened to Caleb, to Anna, he wasn’t sure if he could forgive himself. Every time they lost someone, and he hadn’t prayed, he felt their blood added to his hands. There was only so much blood he could take.

True, bad things happened to good people, but there had to be a limit, he thought vehemently. There had to be something; he couldn’t live if there wasn’t some sort of moral hourglass that had to be balanced. This was the tipping point – he knew, even if he didn’t want to believe he knew it, that God couldn’t let Edmund die. Not this good man, he thought, trying his best to be heard by a deity that never answered and probably never listened. Not this good man, and not these good people.

So, as his boyfriend and his best friend slumbered, he finally prayed.

***

Anna woke to a chatter that sent her into an immediate panic. Was Edmund okay? Did something happen? But Caleb’s arm around her waist, his leg over hers, brought her back down. She wasn’t in the hospital, she told herself. She was at Edmund’s. She was safe. He was safe.

Ben was watching the news, a blanket around his legs and a cup of coffee in his hand. He didn’t look at her; he was enthralled by the television, his mouth slightly open. Anna squinted at the
television, and felt breath halt in her lungs.

Simcoe was on the screen, his hands behind his back, being walked to a police car. The banner headline across the bottom of the screen said “University Professor Accused of Sexual Assault.”

“Oh my god,” she whispered, feeling suddenly nauseated.

“Oh my god indeed,” Ben agreed without looking at her.

They both sat in silence for a while, watching their world changing before their eyes.

***

Two Weeks Later

They all existed in a series of painful silences between forced laughter; they didn’t know how to handle this purgatory they were a part of now. For an hour, maybe two, if they were lucky, Anna, Caleb, Ben, Mary, and Robert could forget what had happened and exist with momentary, fleeting joy. They could tell jokes, they could eat a real meal. They could live.

And then it would come back to them, suddenly, in half a second, and they would all fall silent, their eyes dropping to their laps, the air around them dead. It would always be Caleb or Ben that would clear their throats and determinedly change the subject.

It always took Anna the longest to come back. Sometimes she would force herself to smile; other times, she could just stare for hours at a time, completely lost in her own world.

They spent most of their time in Edmund’s house, pooling their money to pay his rent when the beginning of the month came around, content to keep his house clean and everything ready for him, whenever he would return. It was an inevitable return, and Anna would hear of nothing different. There was no “if” he was coming home. He was, he was, he was.

Ben watched Anna stare at the television, taking in the black and white movie with starry eyes. She had never cared about movies like this until she realized that was what Edmund mostly owned. She had seen every movie on his shelf by now, familiarizing herself with Audrey Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, and James Stewart to feel like she was close to him.

Their silence was broken by his jingling cell phone. At the sight of George’s name, he quickly answered it.

“Hey,” he said quietly, getting up from his chair and walking into the kitchen, just in case it was bad news. “Anything?”

“He’s awake,” he said in a rush. “He’s asking for her.”

***

In retrospect, Anna would always remember the drive to the hospital, dangerously fast, breaking all of the traffic laws they could in their haste. She would remember her run to Edmund’s room as a slow-motion ordeal, never fast enough for her taste. She would remember seeing his eyes open and feeling her knees hit the floor.

She remembered crying so hard she couldn’t breathe, but she was happy, so painfully happy to see his eyes open, to see his faint smile (though it was more like a grimace of pain). He was crying too, holding out one hand for her to take, the other one full of needles and tubes. Ben had to help her up,
had to push a chair up to his bedside for her.

Caleb, too, was sobbing, trying to wipe his tears away so he could tell Edmund, “I’ve never been so glad to see you, Eddie.”

But it was Anna, Anna that looked like she had been brought back to life; Anna that couldn’t take her eyes off of him, her eyes red and her hands shaking so much Edmund was trying to keep them steady.

“I missed you,” he said softly, his voice such a welcome sound that even Ben had to wipe a tear away.

End Notes

Forgive me adding author’s notes at the end too, but I did want to clarify a few things; Anna is very much the strong, independent woman we see in the canon; I don’t believe that she would immediately bandy about her business, especially to someone like Abe, who she would probably consider a reckless friend when it comes to protecting her. I hope you found everyone to be in character! Thanks for reading. (Oh, and the reason everyone calls her Miss Strong instead of Mrs. Strong is because she is trying to hide the fact that she’s married. Also, Selah is a little bit of a bad guy in this fic, but not because I don’t like him or his character – he just serves that plot device here.)

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