

## chapter one

“**W**HAT TIME’S YOUR CLASS, Anne?” my best friend and fellow English professor Larry asked. He was standing at the door to my office in his pressed shirt and tortoiseshell glasses, his balding head shaved close and his hand clutching an interoffice mail envelope.

“In fifteen minutes,” I said, scrolling through my backlog of student e-mails. “Ugh, listen to this one.” I read aloud: “‘Hey, Prof! It’s Mike. I’m going to miss class today because I’m stuck at Burning Man and can’t get a ride back until tomorrow. See you Wednesday!’ I mean, can you believe it? *Burning Man*? Why not just say you’re sick?”

“At least he’s being honest,” Larry said. “I mean, I wish I were at Burning Man.”

“DELETE,” I said. “God, why don’t they make kids take a class on e-mail etiquette during freshman orientation? You know, like address your professors by their full title, not ‘Prof’ or ‘Yo.’”

“I once got an e-mail from a student that began with ‘What up, Lar?’ I have to admit, I was a bit charmed.”

“Hmph,” I said. “I’d kill my students if they tried to call me Anne.”

Larry was a Henry James scholar. He wore cashmere sweaters and tweed jackets and shoes custom-made by John Lobb. You know how people start to look a lot like their dogs? Well, professors start to look a lot like their subjects.

“Your office is looking . . . disheveled,” Larry said, eyeing my piles of library books, the empty Starbucks cups littering my desk, the academic journals I subscribed to but never read, instead using them as a doorstop. He walked over to my desk and picked up my broken wall clock, which was lying facedown on a stack of papers.

“What happened here?” he asked.

“It needs a new battery,” I said without looking away from my computer screen. “I just haven’t gotten around to it.”

“This clock has been lying here for at least six months,” Larry said. “No wonder you’re always running late! How do you know what time it is?”

“I have my phone,” I said. “Clocks are obsolete.”

“Preposterous!” Larry said. He always wore an elegant watch with an alligator-skin band, passed down from his grandfather. He disappeared from my office, carrying the clock. A few minutes later, he reappeared, fiddling with the clock hands.

“I’m setting your clock five minutes ahead,” he announced. “By my calculation, you should be in class right now.”

“Wait, what? Really?” I yelled, jumping up from my chair

and spilling my coffee onto the keyboard. “Where are my lesson plans? Where’s my book?” I rifled through my desk, looking for napkins and cursing.

Larry picked up my dog-eared copy of *Middlemarch*, its cover stapled on, its pages bristling with Post-it notes. “Is this what you’re looking for?” he said drily.

“That’s it!” I said, snatching it from him. I threw it into my book bag, scrambling around the outside pouch to make sure I had dry-erase markers, my lipstick, a pen.

“I don’t know how you make your students read that book,” Larry said. “It’s one thousand pages of pedantic moralizing.”

“I don’t know how you can read Henry James,” I retorted. “What was it that Twain said? ‘Once you’ve put down a James novel, you can’t pick it back up again?’”

“Twain was a philistine,” Larry said, unperturbed. He handed me a lint brush. “You have cat hair all over your skirt.”

“Ugh, I need to take Jellyby to the groomer. She’s shedding like crazy.”

“Another lion cut? Don’t you think that’s a little undignified? She’s a house cat, not a beast in the jungle.”

“Har-har,” I said. I dove under my desk to find my heels, which I’d kicked off as soon as I’d arrived in my office that morning. “Will I see you after class?”

“I have my shrink appointment now, but yes, I’ll see you later—you’ll be at the reception for our new president, yes?”

“We have a new president?” I asked, shoving my feet

into my heels. Our previous president, a Civil War historian, had retired only a few months earlier due to health issues.

“He was hired over the summer! Didn’t you see the e-mail? Or did you delete it, like Mr. Burning Man’s missive?”

“I don’t check my school e-mail over the summer,” I said. “Who is it? Oh, wait—let me guess. I bet it’s an MBA who wants to raise money for a new stadium.”

“No, this guy actually sounds interesting,” Larry said, hanging my clock on the wall. He stood back for a minute, making sure it was straight. “He majored in English as an undergrad, you know. In fact, you might have known him—he went to Princeton, too.”

“Really? I’m sure he must have been years ahead of me.” I slung my book bag around my shoulder and headed to the door.

“Actually, he’s around our age,” Larry said. “Fortyish.”

“I’m thirty-two,” I snapped. “What’s his name?”

“Adam,” Larry said. “Adam Martinez.”

“Wait, are you sure that’s his name?”

“Yes, why? You recognize it?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But it can’t be the same guy. It’s a common name, right?”

“I’m late for my appointment, and you, my dear, are late for your class,” Larry said, pushing me down the hall. “Oscar Wilde may have always been late on principle, but you don’t have tenure yet!”

✱

I RACED ACROSS CAMPUS, my heels punching holes in the lawn. I hated wearing heels, but since I was barely five foot two, I needed all the help I could get. As I walked, I applied my lipstick and tried to smooth down my hair. I breathed into my palm and sniffed. Not great, but not rancid.

The campus smelled like freshly mown grass. All around the quad, students were sunbathing or playing Frisbee or making out. It was September at Fairfax, a small liberal arts college tucked into the San Bernardino foothills. The town reminded me of an East Coast college town, just transplanted to Southern California. A two-block Main Street held a constantly changing array of frozen yogurt shops, pizza places, and clothing boutiques. There were picturesque Craftsman-style bungalows on streets named after Ivy League and Seven Sisters colleges—Harvard Street, Cornell Place, Wellesley Road. There was even collegiate Gothic architecture. One of the college's early benefactors, a railroad tycoon, had donated his fortune to the school under the stipulation that all campus buildings be modeled after his alma mater, Yale. If it weren't for the palm trees on the edge of campus, you would think you were in the middle of Connecticut.

Adam Martinez. It couldn't be him, I thought as I cut across the quad. I pulled out my phone and tried to search through my inbox for the invitation to the candidate reception. I had 14,335 messages in my account. Apparently, I hadn't deleted quite *enough* e-mail. I searched for "Adam Martinez" and came up empty. Maybe it had gone into

my spam folder. Or maybe Larry had just gotten the name wrong.

I reached my classroom just as the campus clock tower struck ten. There were maybe twenty-five students in the class, minus one or two or five who were stuck at Burning Man or “sick” or hungover. As I’d expected, most of my students were women. The class was “Introduction to the Nineteenth-Century British Novel,” and it was full of wide-eyed English majors who had read too much Austen and Brontë when they were in middle and high school. I could spot them a mile away because I used to be one of them—young, mousy, and naive enough to believe Darcys and Rochesters existed. My job, I often told myself, was to force my students to look at the novels critically, analytically. These novels weren’t about love. They were about money, and power, and imperialism, and real estate. At least that’s what I said to them, even though, deep down, I was as big of a sucker for the romance as they were.

I’d assigned the first few chapters of *Middlemarch* to kick off the class, but it was pretty clear that many of the students hadn’t finished the reading. I knew what they were thinking: Casaubon was a loser, and Dorothea was an idiot, and God, how annoying was it that the Victorians were paid by the word? I could just imagine my students furtively texting each other beneath their desks:

Student 1: “u read the book?”

Student 2: “TL; DR.”

Besides that, school had just started, so we were still in “shopping week,” that period of free choice and zero com-

mitment that students loved and professors resented. Most of my students were still in vacation mode, relaxed and giddy at reuniting with their friends after the summer.

I briefly lectured, then broke the class up in smaller groups and had them analyze passages.

“Don’t just give me a plot summary of the passage,” I told them. “Trust me—I’ve read the book.” The class snickered. “Slow down and look more closely at the language. Why does Eliot make certain word choices? What metaphors does she use and why?”

As I walked around the classroom, dipping in and out of group discussions, I scolded myself for being so distracted. I was as bad as my students, counting down the minutes until class was over, desperate to check my phone to see if Larry had texted or e-mailed me. A student raised her hand and I hurried over, grateful for the interruption.



ON MY WAY TO my next class, I checked my phone again. Larry had forwarded me the message with the reception info. I scrolled through the event details, and there he was. The new president was named Adam Martinez, and he had previously been provost at the University of Houston.

*It can't be*, I thought, stopping dead in the middle of the quad. Hands shaking, I clicked on the attachment. Slowly, Adam Martinez's CV downloaded onto my phone. I frantically scanned his work history. He'd been provost at the University of Houston for three years. Before that, he'd served as

dean of their law school. Before that, he'd worked in something called "private equity." And before that, he'd worked as an in-house counsel for a Wall Street bank. I searched for his degrees. JD/MBA from Columbia University. Bachelor's in English from Princeton.

I suddenly felt faint. My former fiancé was my new boss.



## chapter two

**A**DAM MARTINEZ, *THE ADAM* Martinez, was my college boyfriend. My first boyfriend, my first (and only, really) love. I hadn't spoken to him in more than ten years, ever since we broke up in spectacular fashion the night before our college graduation.

I looked around the quad in a daze. There were dozens of young couples sprawled out in the sun, oblivious to the world around them, oblivious to me standing frozen beside them. It was September, they were eighteen, nothing else was important except the warm body next to them. In class, I'd assume they were paying attention to my lectures and taking notes, but then I would notice the wandering glances and dreamy eyes and realize that the real drama was right there in front of me. Crushes, jealousies, misunderstandings, heartbreak—it was like an endless soap opera, with new cast members introduced every semester.

Most of the time, I found it entertaining. The romantic

travails of undergrads were as predictable as the academic calendar. This was the day school started. This was the day finals began. And this was the day you ended up in the infirmary because your boyfriend cheated on you with your best friend and you drowned your sorrows in a handle of tequila.

Every once in a while, though, I'd be reminded that what I found amusing was, for my students, practically a matter of life or death. Once, a young woman dressed in ROTC fatigues had tearfully approached me before class, asking if she could please go home. She was usually impeccably made up, crisp in her uniform and with her hair pulled back in a neat bun, but now her face looked raw, her eyes red and swollen and her cheeks wet with tears. "Of course," I'd said, assuming someone had died. "I'm so sorry—are you OK?"

The girl glanced despairingly over her shoulder, toward a handsome classmate with a crew cut. Crying so hard I could hardly understand her, she wept, "My fiancé just broke up with me."

I felt a sudden pang of recognition and sympathy. I'd been like her once, convinced that my life was over after Adam and I broke up. "You're so young," I wanted to tell her. "You're about to deploy to Afghanistan. You should be worried about coming back home safely, not about some stupid boy. You'll find someone better, and one day, you'll think back to how dumb you were for shedding a tear over this guy."

But I didn't say that to her. Instead, I gave her a hug and told her to go home.

That was years ago, but I thought of her now, her face so

full of anguish. I felt my own face tighten and fiercely told myself to get a grip. I had another class to get to.

By the time I arrived at my next class, I'd successfully composed myself and put on my game face. Inside fifteen students were seated in three rows, waiting for me expectantly.

"Pop quiz!" I announced.

The room erupted into groans.

"Already?"

"But it's shopping week!"

"I haven't even bought my books yet!"

"Try your best," I said, pulling a stack of papers from my bag. "I'll drop your lowest quiz grade at the end of the semester."

One of my students, a premed with sandy hair and glasses who had taken my class the previous spring, groaned theatrically and pretended to face-plant on his desk. His girlfriend, a no-nonsense senior, patted him on the head and said, "I told him he shouldn't play *League of Legends* all night."

"Is there extra credit?" another student asked, vibrating nervously at her desk.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there is." I walked to the board and wrote down a question: "What is EKPHRASIS?"

The premed whimpered quietly in his corner.

"Can I write in pencil?" someone else asked.

"Pencil, pen, your own blood, I don't care," I said. "Just make it legible."

I passed out the quizzes, stepping carefully over students' legs, backpacks, and the occasional skateboard. At the last row, I got to Chad Vickers, good old Chad, who always started

the semester off strong but then imploded halfway through, showing up erratically and then not at all. This was the third time he was taking my class, and he'd vowed to me he'd actually complete it this time. Last year, he'd disappeared for two weeks. Turns out he'd gotten drunk, punched out a cop ("I didn't realize he was a cop until later!"), and spent those two weeks in jail. It was a new school year now, though, and Chad was riding the optimism of new beginnings and fresh starts. He pulled out his earbuds and grinned at me, giving me a thumbs-up.

After passing out the quizzes, I sat at the front of the room and watched the students with their heads studiously bent over their papers, periodically giving updates on how much time was left. For the next twenty minutes, they'd be focused on Victorian poetry while I waited to answer any of their questions. I let my eyes drift across the classroom and toward the large windows facing the quad. They were closed, but the sounds of laughter and distant music still filtered in from the outside. Distracted, I began leafing through my poetry anthology, pausing when I got to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott." In spite of myself, I began to read.

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ADAM AND I HAD met in English class. I was a freshman, a shy, bookish girl from Florida who had never been away from home before and who found the Northeast practically a foreign country. In high school, I'd been editor of the lit magazine, a member of the swim team, and concertmaster of the

local community orchestra. At Princeton, I was a nobody. I tried out for the school lit society and was rejected. I was too slow to be on the swim team. And while I successfully auditioned for the college orchestra, the conductor asked if I might be willing to switch from violin to viola since they were a little thin in that section.

About the only thing I looked forward to was English class. I'd already read half the books on the syllabus and worshipped the professor, an eminent Victorianist named Dr. Ellen Russell whose first book, a massive study of nineteenth-century women writers, was considered a landmark work of feminist literary criticism. "That's Dr. Russell," people whispered when they saw her walking across campus. She was a heavysset woman in her sixties, prone to wearing the same outfit day after day (she was fond of one eggplant-colored suit), her gray hair in a nondescript bob. People said she'd once been married and even had a grown son living somewhere in Texas, but no one knew much else about her personal life. "General Russell," her graduate students called her.

We were covering "The Lady of Shalott" the day Dr. Russell called on a dark-haired guy sitting in the corner.

"Adam, could you read the poem for us?" she asked.

I'd never paid much attention to Adam before because he rarely spoke in class and kept to himself, arriving just as class started and leaving immediately afterwards. But that day, I could hear Adam's deep voice clearly, drifting across the room toward me. As Adam read the lines—"And sometimes thro' the mirror blue / The knights come riding two

and two: / She hath no loyal knight and true, / The Lady of Shalott”—he seemed to cast a spell on the class. I looked at him—really looked at him—for the first time. His hair was so dark it was almost black, and it curled over his temples. He had dark eyes, a strong nose that looked like it had once been broken, and the beginnings of a five o’clock shadow. His body was lean and sinewy, his shoulders powerful, his arms tan and muscular. I could see a tattoo on his right arm, peeking out from his T-shirt. *He must be a senior*, I thought.

I felt a tightness in my throat as Adam finished the poem and looked up. I was staring right at him, my mouth agape, and he caught my eye and smiled. I blushed clear to my ears and looked quickly away.

“Thank you for that, Adam,” Dr. Russell said and began to lecture on the poem, talking about Arthurian legend and the ballad form and how the poem could be read as an allegory of female desire and blah blah blah. At least that’s what I wrote in my notebook. I hardly heard what she said. I was too busy trying not to look in Adam’s direction.

Just as class was finally coming to an end, Dr. Russell announced that she was returning our most recent papers. There was a general murmur of anticipation and trepidation in the classroom—Dr. Russell was a notoriously tough grader. “Your prose hobbles along like a lame show pony,” she’d once written on someone’s paper. As Dr. Russell walked over to me, I felt my hands grow cold.

“Come speak to me during office hours,” she said, handing me the paper.

I blanched, flipping through the pages to the back, pre-

paring myself for annihilation. She had written just one sentence in pencil.

“A pleasure to read. A.”

I felt myself flooded with a mix of joy and gratitude. Hugging the paper to my chest, I turned around to leave and walked straight into Adam, who’d been standing behind me.

“Oof,” I said, finding myself up against Adam’s chest. He was tall, much taller than me, six feet, at least. “I’m sorry,” I squeaked, blushing again, hardly daring to look up and catch his eye.

“You’re Anne, right?” he asked, smiling at me.

“Yes,” I said, wondering how he knew my name.

“I’m Adam,” he said. “Listen, I have to run to work, but I wanted to know if you were free for coffee later this afternoon, maybe around four? I get off my shift then.”

“Today? Four? Sure, I’m free. That sounds great!” I babbled.

“Great, I’ll meet you at the student center. See you later.”

I watched him walk out of the classroom, his backpack slung across his shoulder. I was stunned. What did he want to have coffee with me for? I wondered. It couldn’t possibly be because he was interested in me. I was the smart girl, the one boys wanted to hang out with because I was a great study partner. *That must be it*, I told myself. *Adam probably just wanted to borrow my notes.*

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BACK IN MY CURRENT classroom, I heard the university carillon clock chime the top of the hour and loudly cleared

my throat. “Time’s up,” I announced. I gathered the quizzes, glancing at them quickly before I filed them away.

Chad had taken a stab at the extra credit: “EKPHRASIS: a popular club drug.” I stifled a laugh.

When I got out of class, there was a text message waiting for me from Larry.

“Meet you at reception. Heading there now.”

I texted back, “Not feeling well. Might just go home.” My stomach did feel a little queasy.

“No excuses,” he texted back. “Steve will be there. I’ll save you 🍷.”

I groaned. Steve was our department chair, a rotund medievalist with a Vandyke beard who liked members of the department to be “visible” at campus events. I was eager to prove my devotion to the college, especially if it improved my prospects for continued gainful employment. If I could just show them what a great teacher and scholar I was, how collegial and hardworking and responsible, maybe they’d keep me around a little longer. *I’ll just stop by briefly*, I told myself—mingle a little so my colleagues saw I was there, then duck out without having to see Adam. The reception was bound to be packed, so no one would notice my quick exit.

Still, I spent a few extra minutes in front of the bathroom mirror, fixing my makeup, adjusting my hair, making sure I wasn’t covered in cat dander. I was thirty-two, and while I tried to take care of myself, walking to and from campus, drinking plenty of water, and always wearing sunscreen, no one would mistake me for the eighteen-year-old Adam had fallen for. I’d gotten my hair cut recently—a few



layers, nothing too dramatic—but I thought it made me look more stylish. My hair, once a dark brown, had lightened in the California sun, and I now regularly wore mascara and a little bit of blush. The round cheeks I'd so hated as a teenager were gone, and I'd finally grown into my looks—or so I hoped.

I thought back to when I first started teaching nearly ten years earlier. Back then, I'd had trouble establishing authority with my students because I was so short and looked so young. I took to wearing my hair pulled back, dressing in business suits, and never cracking a smile. No giggling, no bringing in cookies, no ending my statements with a girlish uptick. As I got a little older, I loosened up, partly because I became more confident in my teaching but partly, too, because I no longer looked like such a child. My students now saw me as vaguely “older”—someone whose inner life they couldn't really imagine or identify with, a stranger. I still walked into the classroom wearing my armor, but now I occasionally offered peeks into my personal life, carefully calibrated to offer just a hint of intimacy.

I looked at myself now and thought I looked professional—maybe not beautiful or young, but capable, tasteful, even attractive. *You can do this*, I told myself. *You're a smart, accomplished woman*. I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear and smiled bravely at myself in the mirror. Before I could change my mind, I walked briskly out of the bathroom and crossed the campus toward the faculty club.



## chapter three

**T**HE ROOM WAS PACKED. A buffet table had been set up with trays of crudités and cut fruit, a platter of cheese and crackers, and a pyramid of tea sandwiches. A red Fairfax banner hung on the wall, fringed in gold. I grabbed some grapes and one of the sandwiches as I walked in, less because I was hungry than to have something to do with my hands. I scanned the room as casually as I could. Where the hell was Larry?

Standing there awkwardly, I remembered how anxious I'd felt before meeting Adam for coffee that first time. I'd practically run back to my dorm room, located in an ancient Gothic tower all the way across campus. There, I spent an hour agonizing over what to wear, changing my clothes five times before settling on a black skirt and a cardigan. I even briefly contemplated blow-drying my hair straight, decided that was too obvious and try-hard, and ended up pulling it back in its usual ponytail. Once I got to the student center, I'd spent several minutes strategizing how best to situate my-

self, choosing a table in the corner of the coffee shop, a little out of the way but not so hidden that Adam wouldn't see me. I'd even brought my Norton anthology with me so if Adam just wanted my notes or to be study partners for the midterm, I could act like of course I knew that was why he wanted to meet, no big deal, happy to help out anytime.

Now, though, I was armed with nothing but finger food. Slowly, I walked the periphery of the room, glancing at the various people sitting at the tables or standing in small groups conversing, plastic name badges pinned crookedly to their lapels. Larry wasn't at the bar, which was jammed with people waiting for a beer or plastic cup of wine. I did, however, catch sight of Steve, who was already flushed from drinking and who waved excitedly when he saw me.

"Delightful to see you here!" he said, raising his plastic cup of red wine. "I always like seeing my junior colleagues at these events. Shows a commendable esprit de corps."

"I wouldn't miss it," I said, smiling brightly.

"We should schedule a meeting next week to talk about your, er, your future here. I believe your employment contract expires in the spring?"

"It does—but as you know, I'd love to stay at Fairfax." My voice sounded strained and overeager.

"Oh, and we'd love to have you," Steve said. "But as you know, it all depends on your getting your book published. How's that going, incidentally? You haven't secured a book contract yet, have you?"

"Not yet," I said, feeling my stomach sink. "But I've sent out some proposals, so I should hear something soon."

“Well, my dear, *bonam fortunam!*” Steve said. “I’m glad you’re working on it. You should be just fine so long as you have a book contract by the new year. Any later than that, though, and I’m afraid my hands are tied.” He spied an opening at the bar. “Now please excuse me as I go refresh my libation.”

As I watched him amble away, I wondered what I’d do if I lost my job. Adjunct? Tutor the SATs? Go to law school, like my father had always wanted? Each option was more dispiriting than the last. For the millionth time, I wondered if I’d made a complete mess of my life. Here I was with zero job security and so much student debt that by my calculation I’d be sixty-two by the time my loans were paid off.

I finally caught sight of Larry in a knot of people, talking animatedly, a cup of white wine in each hand. He’d saved me a drink like he’d promised, thank God. I was heading over to him, calling out his name, when the crowd shifted slightly and I realized with a shock who Larry was talking to.

It was Adam, listening thoughtfully to Larry and nodding in agreement. I could feel myself go cold with excitement and anticipation. He was still lean and athletic, with a restless energy that kept him constantly in motion, his hands gesturing, then folded across his chest, then released again. His dark hair was cut shorter than I remembered, and it was turning silver at the temples, but his face—his face was the same. The dark brows, the brown eyes, the sharp profile. In his dark suit and silk tie, Adam looked like the lawyer he once was, someone who took clients out to lunch at the

Four Seasons and had an office in a sleek skyscraper. He was someone I'd see in the airport and assume was off to broker a big deal or pass legislation or counsel governments. I couldn't believe it. He looked presidential.

It was too late to hide. Larry had heard me calling his name and was motioning me over with a big smile. I could see him leaning toward Adam as if to say, "Here's someone you must meet!" and Adam turning slightly to see who it was. I felt myself flush. I wasn't ready yet. I stood there paralyzed as Adam half met my eye and gave me an imperceptible nod. Then he turned away.

Did he not recognize me? I thought. Was he ignoring me? Was he *mad* at me?

Larry was still motioning to me wildly, tipping his head toward the cup of wine in his hand. I had no choice. I had to say hello to Adam. My stomach clenched, and my throat felt tight. *Go*, I ordered myself. *Go and get it over with. At least it'll be quick.*

"Anne!" Larry cried, handing me the glass of wine and giving me a quick peck on the cheek. "Are your ears burning? I was just talking about you. This is President Adam Martinez. But the two of you already know each other, from what I gather."

"Yes," Adam said, shaking my hand. His palm was warm, his grip strong. As he let go, I could still feel the imprint of his hand in mine. "We went to undergraduate together."

He was being so formal. As if we were just passing acquaintances.

"Welcome to Fairfax," I said. "I hope you've settled in well."

“It’s beautiful here,” Adam said.

Polite. He was being too polite. We weren’t friends or former lovers. We were professional associates. Even on our first date so many years ago, he’d been open and warm from the start, our casual coffee date quickly turning into dinner and so much more.

Now, though, Adam was tight-lipped, offering nothing, barely even making eye contact with me. Ten years was a long time, both of us had changed, and apparently he wanted to make that clear to me.

“It’s really a nice little college town,” I ventured lamely. “I mean, it must feel like a huge difference from Houston.”

“It does,” Adam said. He took a sip from his glass of water.

“You must be exhausted, meeting all these new people,” I tried again.

“It *is* busy,” he said, nodding.

“Adam! Here you are!” Tiffany Allen interrupted. The director of the Office of Development, Tiffany was a tall, bubbly blonde who grew up in Newport Beach and used to play volleyball at USC. She was a fund-raising machine, always throwing mixers for young alums and charming large donations out of the old. I sometimes saw her driving around campus in her white convertible, with its USC and Fairfax decals and her sorority letters on her license plate frame.

A group of women hovered behind Tiffany, waiting for an introduction. Adam turned to them and shook their hands, expressing his pleasure at meeting Danielle from the VP’s office, Rhonda from the registrar, Celia from student affairs. They’d worked at the college for years, these older women in

their sensible separates and pumps, quietly keeping the campus running from behind the scenes. I saw how they looked at Adam with delighted eyes, seeing in him someone who could bring excitement to this sleepy college town, someone who was easy on the eyes, someone who they wouldn't mind attending meetings with. I stepped back as Tiffany took Adam's arm and elbowed me aside, guiding Adam across the room.

"Looks like he needs to make the rounds," Larry said.

"Yeah," I said, taking a big gulp of my wine.

Larry was happily tipsy, taking me by the arm and whispering excitedly in my ear.

"He's divine," Larry said. "You know these admin types, they're usually so stiff and bureaucratic, but this guy—you can tell he's got principles. He really seems to *get* this place. He believes in the humanities! He believes in the life of the mind! I mean, after our last president, that *moron*, Adam's just a breath of fresh air! So you have to fill me in. What was he like in college? Give me the dirt!"

"Um, he was great," I said. "I really don't have any dirt. He was a nice guy, really good student." I couldn't bring myself to tell Larry the truth—not yet, at least. I was still reeling from Adam's frosty reaction to me.

"He's certainly popular with the ladies," Larry said, glancing over at the knot of women surrounding Adam.

I nodded. Adam had always had that effect on people. When we'd first started dating, I could tell people were looking at us, wondering how someone as charismatic and good-looking as Adam could be with someone as regular as me. Adam had laughed when I told him this, told me I was



beautiful and that, if anything, the situation was reversed. In his eyes, I had the perfect heart-shaped face, the clearest brown eyes, the softest skin and hair. When we were alone, he would cup my face in his hands and brush his lips across my face, and in those moments, I believed him, believed that he found me attractive and desirable. But when we were around others or when I was alone, I only saw my stubborn, curly hair, the smattering of freckles on my nose and cheeks, the zit on my forehead that refused to go away.

“Yeah,” I said to Larry, keeping my voice unemotional. “He was like that in college, too.”

“Boo. That’s too bad. I don’t like it when people are too perfect. What is it with this guy? He’s got the fancy degrees, the high-powered CV, and he’s good-looking, too! I mean, why do some people get all the cookies? I want some cookies, too!”

“Larry, you’ve got plenty of cookies on your own,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I mean, give me a break, you’re a tenured professor with a PhD from Harvard. What more could you want?”

“Oh, a *personal* life, maybe. Or some more hair would be nice,” Larry said, pretending to pout. “*I just want more cookies.*”

I started laughing, and Larry joined in. When we finally caught our breath, Larry paused to take off his glasses and clean them with his handkerchief.

“But seriously, Anne,” he said, putting his glasses back on. “Why is he still single? There must be a reason.”

“He’s single?” I gulped. “How did you find out?”

“I just asked him.”

“Larry!” I yelled, whacking his arm. “That’s so tacky!”

“Anne, honey, calm down. I don’t like being physically assaulted,” Larry said, rubbing his arm ruefully. “I did it *discreetly*. And *obliquely*.”

“How?”

“I told him that our local public schools were excellent and that if he had kids, they would thrive here. Clever, yes?”

“And what did he say?”

“He said, ‘Oh, I don’t have kids. I’m not married.’”

So he was single. I felt a prick of hope inside. Maybe we could rekindle things? Maybe he could forgive me and we could start over? If we could just spend some time together and I could explain myself, explain how stupid I’d been, how sorry—

Larry yawned. “It’s really too bad you two didn’t know each other better,” he said. “I was hoping that seeing you might help jog his memory, but when I first waved you over, he had no idea who you were. ‘That’s Anne?’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t have known her.’”

*I wouldn’t have known her.* My heart sickened. Of course. How dumb I was to think there might be something still there. He might not be married, but for all I knew, he probably had a serious girlfriend, maybe even a fiancée. It had been more than ten years, after all. Of course he’d moved on.

And I’d moved on, too. After our breakup, I’d dated plenty of other guys—a fellow grad student in my program, a musician in a terrible rock band, even Larry’s brother, Curtis. None of the relationships had worked out, but it wasn’t as if I’d been sitting around, waiting for Adam. I’d grown up, become a different person. I wasn’t that girl anymore—he’d

said so himself. If Larry hadn't pointed me out to him, he would've had no idea who I was. I was just another face in an endless sea of academics and administrators.

The only problem was that Adam still looked exactly the same—better, even. The years had made him more attractive. He looked worldly and sophisticated, secure in himself, accomplished. Even the traces of gray in his hair just made him look more distinguished. I felt a tug of longing and shame. Adam might not have recognized me, but I—I definitely recognized him.

"Hey, Larry, I think I'm going to head home," I heard myself say. "I have a ton of grading to do."

"Good luck," Larry said, giving me a sympathetic look. "Set an egg timer. And have a double scotch. It will fortify you." He kissed me on the cheek and headed back to the bar.

I walked home in the late-afternoon sun, down the tree-lined streets of Fairfax with its rows of charming cottages and meticulous hedges and lawns, past the president's mansion, a turn-of-the-century Craftsman covered with red cedar shingles, and around the corner to my apartment, the top floor of a three-story Victorian. "The Garret," Larry called it whenever he visited.

The place reminded me of my undergraduate dorm room, a tiny single on the top floor of a Gothic dormitory, with diamond-shaped window panes oxidized green around the edges and tendrils of ivy that crawled in through the gaps in the stone. I remembered how Adam could always pinpoint my window from across the quad. "See?" Adam had said. "That's your room over there, to the right. The window that's dark." Sure enough,

there was a row of windows lit up like a string of Christmas lights, with one light missing. My room. “That’s how I know you’re not there,” Adam said. “That you’re here, with me.”

I sighed. My apartment now was dark, but no one was around to notice if I was home or not. No one except Jellyby, who was waiting for me by the front door, mewling for her dinner. I ran my hand over her back and down her plume-like tail, then walked to the kitchen, where I scooped out some dry food and watched her eat. I poured myself a glass of wine from a half-empty bottle and sat on my couch, watching the sun go down.

On a whim, I stood up and walked to my bookcases, packed floor to ceiling with novels and reference books and journals, the tools of my trade. I cast my eyes on a far corner of one bookcase, running my fingers along the dusty spines until I found what I was looking for, a slim, well-worn Penguin Classic with its distinctive black binding.

✱

THE BOOK HAD BEEN a gift from Adam my senior year.

Our relationship had begun slowly at first, over coffees and dinners, talking about class and about the books we were reading and the papers we were writing. Over the summer, between my freshman and sophomore years, Adam returned to Los Angeles to work construction, and I returned to Florida to help my father run credit checks and field tenant complaints. Out of boredom and loneliness, we wrote each other long letters, mine filled with gripes about

my father and sister, his filled with descriptions of his co-workers and high school friends. He usually signed his letter “*abrazos*,” but sometime that summer, it changed to “*besos*.” When we returned to school in the fall, he came straight to my dorm room from the airport, his luggage in hand. When I answered the door, he was standing there trying to catch his breath, unshaven, his hair longer than I remembered. I reached out to give him a hug, but he grabbed my hands and pulled me closer. I felt myself stop breathing. Adam was looking at me so intensely that I nervously dropped my eyes. “Anne,” he said, and I looked up, my whole face aflame. The next minute, he was kissing me full on the lips, softly at first, then with growing passion. I felt the scratchiness of his stubble and the warmth of his lips and I went limp with joy.

Over the next few years, we became serious about charting our future together. Back then, both of us were planning to go to graduate school, me in English, him in education. While studying together in the campus library one evening, Adam asked me to find a reference book for him while he put more money on his copy card. I took the stairs down two flights and wandered into the deserted stacks, breathing in the cool basement smell of old books. The motion-sensor lights switched on row by row as I scanned the catalogue numbers. At the correct row, I skimmed the book spines for the number Adam had jotted down for me on a slip of paper, my eye eventually coming to rest on a paperback book that looked curiously out of place among all the drab green and brown library-bound hardcovers. The book had no identification number, but it was in the spot where the book Adam wanted should have been.

Pulling it out, I saw that it was a pristine copy of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, my favorite novel, which I'd recently lost on the train to New York. I looked up, and Adam stepped out from behind a neighboring stack, smiling broadly.

"You replaced my book!" I said, holding it to my chest.

"Open it," he said.

I did and found a slim silk bag tucked between the pages.

"What's this?" I asked, tugging at its strings. A delicate pink-and-gold cameo ring fell into my palm.

Adam came over to me and closed his hands over mine.

"Annie," he said, "will you marry me?"

I looked at him, my heart painfully thumping in my chest.

"Aren't we too young?" I asked.

"I'm twenty-six, Annie. I'm ready to get my life started. And I want it to be with you. I know it's not a diamond—I can replace it with something nicer, once I pay off my student loans—"

"No! Don't you dare! It's—it's perfect."

Adam took the ring from my hand and dropped to one knee on the linoleum floor of the library, surrounded by a thousand silent books.

"I love you, Annie," he said, looking up at me. "Will you marry me?"

I felt myself overwhelmed with emotion. He loved me as much as I loved him—more, even, if that were possible.

"Yes," I said, my eyes filling as Adam slipped the ring on my finger. He stood and swept me up against the book stacks, knocking a few books onto the ground. A little while later, we crept out of the library, guiltily glancing at each other and stifling our laughter as a reference librarian looked

at us, eyebrows raised, as we scurried past the circulation desk and into the cool autumn night.

✱

THE BOOK WAS NOW yellowed with age and soft from use. I flipped to the title page. *Persuasion*, by Jane Austen. Written underneath in pen was the note:

*For Annie,*

*I have loved none but you.*

*Besos,*

A

Staring at the familiar handwriting, the slanted capital letters scrawled across the page, I felt a surge of bleak certainty. Adam had once cared for me. He had loved me enough to write dozens of letters, to give me books, to want to marry me one day. And it was my fault that I'd turned him away. I'd listened to others instead of trusting myself, and in the process, I'd hurt him badly. So badly that it was no wonder he wanted nothing more to do with me. I was a traitor, weak-willed, and so, so naive. I didn't deserve him.

I threw the book to the ground, where it landed facedown, pages ruffled, prostrate. I stared at it for a few seconds. Then, feeling guilty—it wasn't the book's fault, after all—I picked it up, dusted it off, and mutely shoved it back into my bookcase.

**From:** Stephen Culpepper <S.Culpepper@Fairfax.edu>

**To:** <English Department Faculty>

**Subject:** Presidential Inauguration

**Date:** September 10

Dear Esteemed Colleagues,

As you are well aware, the inauguration of President Martinez will take place *this Saturday*, September 15, and will serve as an official convocation for the beginning of the school year. As such, the entire department is expected to attend in *full regalia* (gown, hood, and cap).

Faculty members are expected to arrive no later than 2:00 p.m. Many of you have not yet RSVP'd to the reception afterwards at the President's House. Please do so *magna cum celeritate*.

I am, yours faithfully,

Steve

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Editor, "*Piers Plowman*" Reader (Cambridge UP, 2011)

Coeditor (with Ron Holbrook), *Early Medieval Grammar* (CLIO Press, 2006)

Editor, *Journal of Anglo-Norman Studies* (2005–present)

Member, Medium Aevum, the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature

✱



**From:** President Adam Martinez <A.Martinez@Fairfax.edu>  
**To:** <Students and Faculty>  
**Subject:** A Message from the President  
**Date:** September 10

Dear Members of the Fairfax Community:

Many thanks for your warm welcome to campus. I have only been here for a couple weeks, but I have already been struck by the passion and commitment of Fairfax students, faculty members, and staff. I very much look forward to the year ahead.

The coming months will see the launch of several ambitious projects essential to Fairfax's future. Tiffany Allen, Director of the Office of Development, is in the midst of planning a major fund-raising campaign, with a public launch in October of this year. As college costs continue to rise across the country, this campaign will focus on defraying the cost of tuition through scholarships, grants-in-aid, and an expansion of the college endowment. As well, we will begin a major multiyear program to renovate Chandler Library, update student dormitories, and transform the plaza outside the Student Center into a central meeting place that will host outdoor activities, student groups, and other community events.

I will be in touch in the months ahead with more news and other announcements. In the meantime, please stop by my office with any questions, thoughts, or concerns you might have. My door is always open.

Sincerely,  
Adam Martinez

\*

**From:** Sallie Mae <CustomerService@salliemae.com>

**To:** Anne Corey <A.Corey@Fairfax.edu>

**Subject:** Your Sallie Mae Statement is Available

**Date:** September 7

Dear ANNE COREY:

Your monthly statement is now available. Please log in to your account at SallieMae.com to view and pay your bill.

**Total Payment Due: \$498.04**

**Current Amount Due Date: October 13**

**Balance: \$96,194.25**

As the nation's No. 1 financial services company specializing in education, we appreciate the opportunity to serve you.

Sincerely,

Sallie Mae Customer Service

\*

**From:** Linda Hacker-James <hackerjames@bloomsburypress.com>

**To:** Anne Corey <A.Corey@Fairfax.edu>

**Subject:** book proposal and query

**Date:** September 7

Dear Dr. Corey,

I've read your proposal and am afraid we will have to pass on your manuscript. While *Ivory Tower: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers and the Literary Imagination* has an interesting premise, we do not believe there is a market for such an esoteric topic. I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,  
LHJ