

Prologue

We were young. We didn't have a lot. Scratch that, we didn't have anything. But we had each other, and that was enough. We thought it would always be like that. Maybe that's why we made that promise, the one where we said we'd never leave each other, forget each other, or get married to another. Turns out, he was the first to break that promise. He left me, and then he forgot. That last part though was me. I broke that part.

Anna

Do you want to know what is more embarrassing than falling on your face in front of your ex-best friend/childhood crush? When the said person doesn't recognize you. Although, the more I thought about it, the more I began to wonder if that was a bad thing. All that aside, I hadn't even known he was back.

Daniel and I were best friends growing up. In a world where no one cared about us, we were all we had. We watched each other's backs and the little we had, we shared. He had such an amazing mind, one that could imagine anything and everything. It made for interesting adventures. Everything came to an end the day he was accepted for a sports scholarship program. Ten years later, he's a star basketball player. I was arguably one of his greatest fangirls, at least, until the day I decided to watch a game live. Perhaps ten years was a lot of time. I had grown and so had he. Perhaps that was why he didn't recognize me. Why he looked at me with a blank face, asked what I wanted signed, and told me he didn't do Jersey chasers. Safe to say I never went for a live game again and he never came back.

Which made me wonder, what exactly was he doing back. This was a charity event, organized by my husband-to-be, five years after what I termed the 'incident'. The last memory I had was trying to get some food for some "special" guests per my fiancé's request. I must have had one of my pesky fainting spells because I woke up to a very familiar face looking over me and talking. It took a while to process what he was saying but it looked like "Are you okay?". Taking a moment to ensure I could stand without embarrassing myself again, I replied with a cool "Yes, thank you" and stood. Having assured everyone that I was fine, I looked at my ex-best friend, nodded my head in greeting, and left. There was no point standing and staring like a fool.

Daniel

Whoever she was, she was really beautiful. I watched her walk to the back of the room, towards where I assumed the kitchen was and there was this niggling feeling somewhere in my mind that I knew this woman. Her fainting had gotten me worried, but it seemed I was the only one because her fiancé had looked away when it happened. It wasn't my business, but, as always, I had never been able to mind my business.

Despite that, I resisted the urge to follow the beautiful, familiar-looking woman and instead, made my way around the room and greeted friends and acquaintances, wanting to be done with the whole evening. I wasn't sure why I had accepted the invitation in the first place. Parties weren't my scene, good cause or not, and I had a whole lot to do. First, I needed to find Anna. I wasn't sure where to start, but I knew she had stayed back. It had baffled my mind then. Why would she stay? Then again, I was back, and for what reason?

Still in my thoughts, I walked out of the hall to drive home, and then outside, I saw a figure seated on the floor, a jacket hanging around her shoulders. Realizing it was the woman from earlier, I walked towards her and sat right next to her. "Are you okay?" I asked, still worried about the entire fainting episode from earlier. Her response was a low "Yes" and she turned away slightly, like she was avoiding me. Not willing to give up, I asked another question "Does that happen often?"

"Yes"

"How often?"

"Often enough"

Okay, she either wasn't the talking type, or she just wasn't interested in talking to me.

"Did it hurt?"

"I swear if this is some ridiculous pickup line, I will shoot you."

At that, I burst into laughter. "No, it's not. Was genuinely wondering if it hurt when you fell the other time."

"Oh," she said, looking less guarded "Not really."

We sat in silence for a while, until I broke the silence with a quiet,

"Do I know you? I feel like I know you."

"Wow, this night just keeps getting better and better." She said under her breath, with a laugh that sounded almost pained.

Suddenly, everything clicked into place. I knew then, why she looked familiar. The hair, her eyes, the fainting spells, and that laugh, the one that she used to give when she didn't want to explain something.

Anna

He was staring at me for quite a while, but I don't think he was seeing me. It was almost like he was somewhere else. I was done with all the drama that night and I wasn't interested in another, so, I picked up my purse and started heading towards the car park. I had promised myself not to encourage a conversation with him. I had convinced myself that my life could go on without him since I did fine without him.

“Anna-Beth?”. And then, hearing him call my name after 15 years, I made another promise to myself- *‘We’ll just hear him out. Everyone deserves a chance to explain’*.

“Anna, wait! Anna!”

“What, Daniel?!” I say, turning to face him.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really”

“And considering up until a few seconds ago, you didn’t even know what I looked like, how exactly were you planning on finding me?”

“I could have asked around...”

“And then what? What was the plan for whenever you found me?”

“I hadn’t thought that far yet.”

I laughed and then decided to lay it all out. “I have nothing to talk to you about. Not now. You left and the one time I wanted to talk to you, you said something along the lines of you and

Jersey Chasers. All that needed to be said has been said.” I watched as his face paled in realization and with just a tiny bit of satisfaction, I walked away. I didn’t get far before I was pulled back into a hug.

“I’m sorry. I, really, am sorry Anna.” To be honest, I wasn’t that mad about it anymore, just hurt. His apology was enough to soothe the hurt I had felt. At that point, I was just glad to have someone in my corner again.

“I only partly forgive you,” I said with narrowed eyes (I couldn’t let him get off that easy), but the full-on dimpled smile I got back in response was enough to soften whatever expression of anger I had on my face. I didn’t even know when I smiled back, and my God! It had been a while. It felt good to smile again.

Anna

“Pops’ is still open?”

“Yes, it is. It’s a bit different now, but the food’s still the same. Really, the whole town is a bit different now. Pops is the only one still actively running his business. Sarah travelled to live with her child, Ben sold his auto repair shop to some huge corporation, everyone is doing their own thing” I replied. Daniel and I had been catching up on our lives when he said he was hungry. Deciding to give him a tour of the town, I led him to all our favorite spots when we were younger including Pops’.

Pops was sort of a father to Daniel and I growing up. He had lost his wife years back. His restaurant was what he had left until we came along. He practically adopted us, and considering he saw us as his children, he was also hurt by Daniel’s absence and lack of communication.

Daniel hesitated as we got to the front of the restaurant. “What’s the problem?”

“He’s probably really mad at me.” He responded quietly. He sounded so unsure and just a bit guilty.

“He’s definitely ‘really mad’ at you. But it’s all good. He’s probably just going to ignore you for the first five minutes, pretend you’re a stranger for another five minutes, then hug you. If I were you, I wouldn’t drink anything he gives me until I get the hug.”

The interaction between Pops and Daniel was exactly how I predicted it, and even though I warned the idiot, he still drank the bottle of soda Pops had given him at the “Pretend you’re a stranger” stage. Wasn’t surprised when he spat it out complaining about how spicy it was (I did warn him).

Having left Pops, I proceeded to show him the rest of the town. The new park, the new buildings, the houses. When we got to the house he used to live in before, it was however still the same.

The sounds of joy of the children were gone, and the place felt eerie.

“She’s dead. It’s why I came back now. I’ve been patiently waiting for the day I received the letter that she was gone. And now that she is, I’m not sure what I feel.”

Ms. Willow was Daniel’s mother. She had died only a week ago, although, to Daniel, she was dead long before then. In all the memories Daniel had, she was either drunk, high, or hungover and she just was never there. To be honest, I’m not sure if she remembered she had a child.

Growing up, Daniel resented her, so I didn’t think that her death would have had much impact on him. I was wrong.

“Let’s go, this place is depressing.” He said after a while.

We kept walking down the street in silence, seeing some buildings being pulled down. He eventually broke the silence.

“All these years, I’ve had a lot I’ve been meaning to say to her, but I never did tell her, and now, she’s dead. A lot is hitting me at once. Everyone’s changed, the whole town has changed, Pops is using slang and in the right context, you’ve changed, Christ, you’ve changed a lot, and I can’t help but wonder what would have happened if I had said what was on my mind. Perhaps she could have changed too.”

“Perhaps” I didn’t know what else to say or how to make him feel better.

“Well, I’d never know now. Enough about me. I hear you’re getting married.”

“Yes, I am” The subject of my marriage wasn’t one I liked to talk about much.

“When?”

“In two weeks.”

“Huh”

Okay, some things didn't change. One was the fact that Daniel could make me question a decision with just that one word 'Huh'.

“I do not have the energy for this, so if you have something to say, say it.”

“Are you happy?”

“I don't think happiness is needed to make a marriage work.”

“That wasn't what I asked Anna-Beth.”

After a brief pause, he must have realized I wasn't going to answer the question, so he asked instead “How did you guys meet?”

“I waitressed at a party he attended here some time ago. I don't know how, but next thing I know he's paying my college fees, paying for Pops' renovation, and then, we're engaged.”

“You're telling me you're staying with him out of gratitude?”

“Don't start.”

“Start what? I'm not judging, I'm just worried. We can start with how he was pulling you down in front of his parents. Yes, I heard. Then we can talk about how you fainted, and all the guy could do was look away and keep talking to his friends.”

“The fainting happens a lot. He's just gotten used to it.”

“Yeah, sure...understandable. Until you think about the fact that if no one was there to break your fall, if I wasn't there, you could have hit your head harder than you did. Anna, I know, I have no right to tell you how to live your life and who to spend the rest of your life with but, come on. You could do so much better.”

“Better?” I scoffed, “Let me guess, you?”

“I never said that. I know I can't even bring that up right now. That was not my point. I'm not suggesting we be together. God knows I don't deserve you. But if I'm a bad idea, trust me, marrying a man you feel absolutely nothing for because of some misplaced sense of gratitude, that's a much worse idea. Do you want to spend your life with a man who only shows you off at parties and then ignores you when you're 'creating a nuisance'?” I was about to interrupt him when his phone buzzed. Looking at the message he sighed

“I have to go deal with something now, but I want you to think about it. I leave in about two weeks, enough time to deal with my mum's funeral. Think about it. If you think the wedding is a mistake for any reason, meet me at the airport.” He said, not giving me any room to talk. With another one of those disarming grins, he turns and leaves me standing there, only with my thoughts.

Daniel

I looked at the time again. 3 hours to boarding time. I had this hope that she was going to choose to come with me, but the logical part of me knew that Anna hadn't changed much. If she put her mind to something, she was going to see it through to the end. She would try to make that marriage work. We had texted a lot in the last two weeks and all our texts didn't exactly reveal what she had in mind. I could only hope.

It was almost time to board, and she still wasn't there. It seemed she decided to stay. I was disappointed. I joined the queue, presented my boarding pass, and was about to board when I heard "Danielllllll! Daniel! Wait!". I turned around, looking for her. She made it. I saw her run towards me, bag in hand, still in her white dress.

"Hi"

"Hi"

"I'm here," she said, sounding out of breath.

"You are here."

"I tried to break the engagement off, but he didn't agree. So, I ran."

"You ran"

"Yup. So, what's the plan?"

"To be honest, I hadn't thought that far ahead" I replied with a smile, and she giggled in response. "I have your boarding pass here though. How does an adventure sound?"

"What kind"

“I’m thinking...new places, lots of food, lots of strangers.”

“Oh, I’m so in. So, where’s our first stop?”

“How about another live basketball game?”