

THE
BREAKUP
EFFECT

a novel

JODI LAPALM

Copyright © 2018 Jodi LaPalm

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the copyright owner except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, products, businesses, places, and incidents are the result of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

www.lapalmbooks.com

one

It has been twenty-four hours since Jason left. The arrogant smirk on his face as he told me to essentially screw off lingers in the air along with his musky scent and favorite Chinese takeout.

I am sitting in the very same spot where he lashed out at me. I have rarely moved other than to use the bathroom, hunt down a phone charger, and refill my wine glass. My phone dings an incoming text, but I refuse to look at it. I do not want to know if he is sending a “forgive me” message like the other half dozen times he stormed out. And I do not want to know if he isn’t.

I do not care.

At least that is what I tell myself when my eyes disobey the rules of my mind and gaze at the still-vibrating phone. The message is not from him but my best friend, Cara. *I’m coming over.*

No. Not yet, I type and while I wait for her reply, I double-check missed calls or texts. I know there are none because I have had my phone with me and the volume on maximum level. But still, I believe there must be something more.

There is not.

In perfect working order, my phone dings its notification for a new message. *I’m here. Open the door,* Cara texts just as I hear the loud knock.

“Come in,” I mumble. Her key quickly turns the lock, and she pushes the door open with ease. “That key is to be used for emergencies only,” I tell her.

“This qualifies as an emergency,” she deadpans and nudges her shoulder against the door to close it tight. She knows everything about me, including the magic trick for shutting the ancient door. “Not using the deadbolt? Taking a risk there, aren’t you?”

Afraid to tell her I left the deadbolt unlocked in case Jason came back when I was sleeping, I stare a blank response.

“You left it open for him didn’t you, Anna?” she is tight-lipped, and I prepare myself for her lecture. The one she has given since Jason moved in. The one where she lists all his terrible characteristics and points out every insensitive and rude thing he has done to me. The way he takes me for granted, disrespects me, and treats me like his own personal doormat. But none of that comes.

“No,” I lie. “I was tired. I must’ve forgotten.”

She shoots a frustrated scowl my way and as the nostrils of her perfect button nose flare, I am taken back to the fourth grade.

We met in Mrs. White’s class—a combination of fourth and fifth graders cramped in a sunny classroom at the end of the hall at Montero Bay Elementary. This, of course, was before our small town erupted into an eclectic blend of suburbia thanks to an elaborate resort and quirky surfboard museum. Before strangers realized we existed. Compared to other towns dotting the coast, we are still a hidden gem, just not as hidden as we once were.

Cara came up to me on that first day of fourth grade, studying me with wide charcoal eyes and a serious smile. “That is my desk. See, I put my pencil case on it.” My obedient eyes followed her pointed finger to an elongated denim bag hand-stitched with pink flowers. I shrugged and got up, silently moving to the next desk. All through grammar, I pretended not to notice how she would occasionally glare at me. Finally, at our break for recess, she spoke. “How come you didn’t even try to stop me? You just gave up the desk so easily. You should have tried harder to keep it.”

I watched in awe as her nose flared with bubbling nine-year-old frustration. “It didn’t matter,” I told her plainly.

She had then placed hands on her hips in dismay. “Stick up for yourself. This is going to be a rough year with the fifth-graders breathing down our necks. You have to claim what is yours,” she lectured better than any teacher.

I remember sinking into myself, ashamed at my apparent indiscretion. I looked around, sure everyone was watching me get scolded for the error of my ways. There was no one there. Recess had that kind of power.

“You have to claim what is rightfully yours,” she repeated.

“I didn’t want it that bad,” I told her. “It’s just a desk.”

At that moment the nostril flaring stopped, and a beautiful smile sprung from rosy cheek to rosy cheek. “Well then, that’s different. My name is Cara. Cara Delaney.”

“Joy. Joy Anna,” I said as she shook my hand so wildly I thought I might re-dislocate my bad shoulder.

“Joanna?” she had parroted. It was a common misunderstanding and at the ripe old age of nine, I was tired of explaining.

“Joy Anna. Two words,” I emphasized.

“I’m going to call you Anna,” she said, using my middle name like she was already part of my family. “Let’s go rule the playground.” And as she entwined her arm in mine and shepherded me out the side door, I knew I had found my new best friend.

Snap! Snap! Cara clicks her fingers dangerously close to my face. So close, I can smell the twenty-dollar hand lotion she buys online. The cherry sweet smell makes my empty stomach tumble, and I wonder how she has the forethought to be so put together that she can remember to soften her hands before coming to save me from my own destruction. I can’t even remember to pee at this point.

“Stop thinking about that louse!” she shrieks.

“I wasn’t thinking about him,” I counter.

“Liar, liar, pants on fire,” she says, and I am thrown back to where I was. The fourth grade. Even when kids taunted me with names or ignored me altogether, it was a better time of life than where I am now.

“I was thinking about us. And how we met,” I tell her.

“That was a great day,” she smiles. “A day to be celebrated. Much like now. He’s gone. Let’s get you out of here. Go do something. I’ll buy you breakfast and as many Bloody Marys as you can drink.”

I cross my arms in a lame attempt at defiance, body odor wafting beneath my nose. I need a shower. Bad. “I don’t want to go out.”

“You are not going to hang around here waiting for him,” she orders. “That is the epitome of weak. And pathetic. And sad. It’s *pathetisad*,” she giggles. “See what I did there? Another new word.”

I grimace. Not at the newly-made-up word but at the truth of it. I am all those things. I feel weak. I am sad. And yes, pathetic. I want to be those things. They feel comfortable. Safe. It is where I belong.

“I don’t want to go out,” I repeat.

“Fine. We’ll stay in. I’ll make breakfast while you shower. I can smell you from over here,” she sniffs as she rummages through the cupboards for coffee cups. “When is the last time you went to the store? All you have is pre-packaged junk food.”

“Jason likes junk food.”

She tosses boxes and bags into the overflowing trash can. “Well, no more of this processed crap. We are starting you on a detox. Low sugar, low carb, low dairy, high protein, fibrous veggies.”

“Geez, can I still drink?”

“Of course,” she laughs. “Alcohol is a major food group and non-negotiable.”

“Great,” I grunt and drop back into the chair. I do not want to shower. Not yet. It seems too much for me right now. Besides, showering would admit defeat. The cleansing of my body somehow represents that I am ready to move past what happened. I am not.

“I thought you were going to shower? And be sure to scrub your skin. You’re breaking out like crazy.”

I touch my chin with greasy fingertips. It is pretty gross. “I’m not up to it.”

She punches a fingertip against the coffeemaker’s start button and spins around to look at me. Her chest has the beginnings of red blotches creeping from her collarbone up toward her neck, a true sign she has reached her limit with me.

I should probably feel ashamed, but I do not. Not with her. She has been here before, picking me up off the ground and drying my tears. But I can sense her impatience with the process. She wants to move this along before I sink too deep or do something stupid like call him. I muster a broken smile. “I will clean up. Soon. I promise.”

She comes to where I sit. Grasping my hands in her own, she looks up to me. “I know you are hurting, Anna. If anyone knows, it’s me. But please, please, please, just try to understand how much I love and care about you. You are my best friend, part of my heart. And though I know you are in pain, I wish you could see what I see. His leaving is the best thing that could happen to you.”

“But we are so good together!” I cry.

“Oh, you were never good together,” she pats my hand with her own. Perfectly tanned skin and impeccably manicured nails grip my pale oily fingers with bare, bitten tips. She is the yang to my yin. The one person who would never lie to me or wish me harm.

“He has never been gone this long. He could be hurt, lying helpless in a ditch somewhere, unable to call me or anyone else for help.”

She exhales a slow, even, yoga-mastered breath. “Rick called on his way to work this morning. Says he saw Jason at the gas station on 3rd Street.”

“Rick saw him there?” She nods, and I realize there is no reason for her or her husband to lie. “Did he talk to Jason? Did he say anything about us? Was he sad or upset?”

“I don’t know. Rick was just driving by and caught a glimpse of Jason gassing up the jeep.”

“That’s all?”

She releases my hands and gets up to stand. “I shouldn’t have told you.”

“No! I haven’t heard from him, so it’s good to know. Really.”

“He had the trailer attached, with the two jet skis on it,” she sighs. “I know nothing more than that.”

“Oh,” I say quietly and curl my aching body tight as it can go. “Probably had something set up with one of the guys.”

With light fingertips, she brushes greasy bangs across my forehead. “I’ll go make you something to eat.”

I watch her walk to the kitchen but in my mind, I am weeks in the past. The image of Jason making a fool of himself and flirting with a co-worker of mine at my company Christmas party stands out. I ignored it at the time, believing it was the spirit of the season and cocktails taking over. But now, I wonder. He had been acting stranger than usual since that night. And come to think of it, Trina seemed to avoid me at work. Could he be seeing her?

He was seeing her all right. I knew they would hook up the moment I saw him talk to her. I knew because it was the same exact way he hit on me.

Cara’s humming drifts from the kitchen along with the smell of toasting bread. My stomach instinctively rumbles. I am hungry. My heart may be broken but apparently, my stomach works fine. She continues to hum louder, eventually breaking out into song. It’s her favorite carol. One of sleigh rides and hot chocolate by the fire. It is everything we do not have here in California. As a young girl, I dreamt of a wintry holiday complete with snowball fights, forts, sledding, and ice skating. Somehow, I believed that to be Christmas.

Caught up in the imaginary perfection, I talked myself into thinking this would be the year. The year Jason bestowed *the* ultimate gift. The holidays were an ideal time to propose and after so much time together, it was inevitable. This was to be the Christmas he asked me to marry him.

At least that is what I believed. All signs pointed to it. He was evasive and shy when I asked about exchanging gifts. He did not take me out for drinks or dinner as much, claiming he wanted to save money for something big. I was sure the something big was an engagement ring.

In my euphoria, I ignored his suggestion of a simple, inexpensive gift, opting instead to splurge my meager savings on the new diving camera he had been eyeing. I thought how wonderful it would be—him with his coveted camera, me with my coveted ring.

I look at the barren space beneath the artificial tree. The underwater camera, the accessories, the case. Everything is gone.

He took it all.

two

There must be worse scenarios than having your boyfriend walk out in the days between Christmas and the New Year, but I can't seem to think of any.

Post-break-up—if that is indeed what this is—leaves my mind without direction. I cannot focus on one thought for long. Staring at the computer screen, I watch as the little 42 highlighting the new messages in my inbox changes to 43. I have 43 unopened emails. Unwilling to read even one, I close the laptop and set it on the coffee table. Glancing around the room, I see the stack of mail piling up. Brightly colored envelopes peek out between bills and magazines. Holiday cards I refuse to open.

I am not in the mood for tidings of great cheer. I am not feeling festive. I do not feel much of anything.

Normally, I would be enjoying the season with Jason. We always took the week between holidays off from work. After lazy mornings and hearty breakfasts, we would head to the beach. He preferred late afternoon tides for winter surfing, and he would spend those hours searching for the perfect western swell while I cheered from the warmth and security of the shore. Bundled in a blanket, I would watch him paddle out and wait in anticipation for him to ride in and return to me. Unlike most locals, I fear the unknown that lies in the deeper depths of the ocean and am content to limit my adventures to wading in shallow areas and reading beneath my umbrella with toes snuggled in the sand.

This was to be our time together. Relaxation. Renewal. Romance.

Without him here, I consider my options. Returning to work earlier than planned seems like the best idea until I realize how mentally absent I am. It would do little good to get back to technical writing when I can't even read a simple email. Staying home and doing nothing has been my choice thus far, but all that does is trigger more thoughts of him.

In his rush, he took the bulk of his clothes and all his electronic devices. I also noticed the items are gone from his shelf in the bathroom. Even his extra supply of contacts. He has never taken them with him before.

Yet, in his haste, he left most of his belongings here. After so much time together, it was expected that our lives would merge into one. All around me, I see traces of him. A half-empty six-pack of his favorite beer sits on the top shelf in the fridge. His collections of sports memorabilia and CDs and books are scattered among my own keepsakes and photos on the built-in shelves. The dishes and other miscellaneous items he brought with him from his old apartment fill the kitchen cupboards.

I wonder where he is staying now. With his parents? His brother? Maybe a friend. Or another woman.

With the remnants of our relationship surrounding me, I realize he will have to come back. Sometime. Eventually. Perhaps soon. Too much of his life is here in this apartment for him to never return.

For a moment everything feels off, and I immediately understand why. I am smiling. For the first time in days, I am smiling. The thought of Jason coming back to this apartment, to our life ... to me. It is the little nugget of hope I needed.

Rather than wallowing in a pit of worst-case scenarios, all things now seem possible. Perhaps he needed a simple break from it all. His job has been stressful with more hours and responsibilities. Or maybe he felt I neglected him. After all, I was working more, too, both at the office and here at home.

I slap the palms of my hands on bare knees and feel the stubble of unshaven leg hair. Cara was right. My face is breaking out, my hair is frizzy, my legs are scratchy. I have not only become complacent, but I have also totally let myself go. In my comfortable mind, Jason's silence about my dwindling self-care equaled acceptance. He loved me so much, I believed, that he did not care how I looked.

But maybe he did care. He paid great attention to his appearance, always working out and grooming himself. It was no secret he spent more time shopping for clothes and getting ready than I did. The bathroom shelves and bedroom closet were filled with his things. He pushed himself to be better, but he never pushed me. In fact, he hardly ever mentioned my appearance.

All this time, I thought that was what he wanted. A no-frills, no-fuss girl. He always seemed to compliment me more when I dressed casually and wore little makeup. He claimed to like the fact that I was a low maintenance person. Those were the moments when he said I was pretty. I remember. He called me pretty.

Could it be he was turned off by my lack of femininity?

Maybe what he really wants is a woman who takes more pride in herself. A woman who is confident and adventurous. Someone like the woman he flirted with at my Christmas party. I know Trina spends a lot of time and money on herself. She talks about it constantly during lunches in the breakroom. Hair, nails, workouts, shopping. She rides horses up north, water-skis and surfs, drives a sporty car, travels, and goes to the racetrack with her guy friends. According to her, she does it all.

Well, I can do it all, too. I can find a way to make Jason realize I am the one for him. But first, I need to get better. Be a better version of myself. Anna 2.0. If I can change what is wrong with me, then he will come back.

I need to fix so many things about my life, it is hard to know where to start.

Reaching for my laptop, I look at the keyboard. I am due for a new computer but there is not enough money right now. And with Jason gone, things will be extra tight. Rent. Utilities. Food. I am responsible for it all until I get him back. If I get him back.

The buttons are so worn, I can't see the letters T, A, and E printed on the keys. I consider doing an all clear on the screen because it has been flickering and then freezing. Frustrated, I hit CTRL, ALT, DEL and wait for it to reboot.

I wish I had a reset button. I need to reboot.

One hour into the New Year, and I not only have a raging migraine but am also wide awake.

Cara pulled—or should I say dragged—me from my self-imposed seclusion to attend her New Year’s Eve party. I would have gone anyway. I would never bail on her. But I was not my usual festive self. I did paste a smile on my face. I dressed up in my cutest dress. I arrived early to help with preparations, feigning enthusiasm as I arranged tiny puffed and broiled things on ceramic platters and created tiered displays of bite-sized desserts. I marveled at the minimalist yet stunning holiday decorations around their cozy bungalow. And I even mingled with her family and our friends. I participated in the traditional countdown and drank the obligatory toast of champagne. But once things settled down, I gave Cara and Rick big hugs and came home.

I tried. I did. But it was painful. Painful to know I am nowhere near my normal life. Painful to be amid loving and celebrating couples. Painful to realize the excitement and possibilities of a new year are shadowed by the heartache and realities of my current Jason-less situation. Painful to admit he has not even tried to contact me.

The only bright spot in the entire evening was Cara’s news. She had pulled me over as soon I arrived, and I could tell something was up. As she stood there, wringing her hands, and staring at me with wide, vibrant eyes, I knew. “You’re pregnant!” I squealed.

“Shh!” she scolded and peered around the room. There was no need. We were in the master bedroom with the door closed, far from anyone. Besides, it was only her, Rick, and me anyway. “Is it that obvious?”

It was. To me at least. Somehow, I failed to notice it the other day when she came by to wake me from my break-up coma. Too caught up in my own misery, I completely missed her joy. I always believed it to be a myth, but she was actually glowing. Her hair, her eyes, her skin, everything about her seemed filled with light. “Maybe not to others, but I can totally tell,” I told her.

She entwined her arm in mine. “We aren’t telling anyone yet so keep it quiet for a bit. I just had to tell you because you know how hard this has been.”

I did know. For the past year, Cara and Rick had patiently dealt with disappointment and a fear they might never become parents. Still too young to worry, they began to undergo testing and explore other options. Finally, they decided to take a break from the babydreaming and that, of course, is when it happened.

“When are you due?”

“About mid-August. I can’t wait. I cannot wait. Gosh, I hope everything goes well, I can’t take another loss ...”

Pulling her into my arms, I shushed her. “This is the one, Cara. I can feel it.”

“I can feel it, too, Anna. It just seems different somehow. Oh! I can’t wait to get past the first trimester so I can begin to plan.”

“Don’t you worry. We will plan it all—nursery, shopping, the birth. It will be perfect.”

“You will be the best auntie ever. The absolute best!”

“Hmm,” I plopped on the bed, exhausted before the party even began. The emotional excitement too much for my weakened and defenseless spirit. “Auntie Anna. Auntie Anna?” I repeated. “That sounds ridiculous.”

“You could go by Auntie Joy?” she had suggested.

Auntie Joy. I think about it now as I disappear against the welcoming shadows in my living room. Muted strips of light stretch from the kitchen, not quite reaching the dark corner where I nurse a lukewarm cup of peppermint tea.

Joy. I have not used my first name in years. For though it is my legal name on official documentation, most people call me Anna.

Joy.

In a fit of inspiration, I turn on the side lamp and open my laptop. Ignoring the still-unopened emails, I click to compose a new one. Typing quickly, I use the blank space for my notes. Writing down a haphazard list, I include all the things I wish I could change.

Maybe, just maybe, this is the answer. If everything was different, I could get Jason to come back home.

Looking over the items, I realize there are twelve things. Twelve parts of me and my life that need improvement. If I did one per month, I could transform myself, become a totally new person by the end of this year. A new me. No longer Anna but Joy.

Good. But how am I going to organize everything? I have an oversized calendar hanging in the kitchen, but the month still rests on November. Nope. I glance at the small desk tucked against the far wall of the living room. Magenta sticky notes line its scarred oak surface and piles of magazines, mail, and other papers scatter about, waiting for me to deal with them. No. Not going to work. I briefly consider an app on my phone. Other than calls or texts, I hate being on it. The small print and screen give me a headache, and I know I will not keep with it. Strike three.

In that moment, when I believe I should scrap the whole idea, an advertisement pops up on the right edge of my screen. *FREE WEBSITE! No fees. No contracts. Create your own blog now.*

A blog. Why not? I could track my progress online. After all, I am a technical writer. How hard can it be to write a blog? Besides, I will be the person reading it. I will keep it private, restricted to my eyes only.

It will be my secret way of re-programming Anna.

After reading up on tips and researching hosts, I find one that seems legitimate and easy to manage. By 4 AM, I am officially registered under the domain *The Joy Project*. By 4:30 AM, I am writing my first entry.

HAPPY NEW ME

posted January 1st

Hi, I am Anna. Well, my given name is Joy. Joy Anna. I am Joy Anna, and I am stuck.

Stuck in an unfulfilling job.

I like my employer but hate what I do.

Stuck in a rut with my style.

I can honestly say I have never felt beautiful.

Stuck in this small apartment.

I feel the walls are about to swallow me whole.

Stuck in the same daily routine.

I go to work. I come home. I repeat.

Stuck.

I have become so stuck that the morning after Christmas, my live-in, long-term, man-I-want-to-marry boyfriend left. Yep, he walked right out. He has done this before, but he has never stayed away so long.

I realize why he left. Much like every other aspect of my life, our relationship has also become stuck. Nothing has moved or changed since we first began to date.

I thought he wanted it like that. Simple. Routine. No surprises. But now I believe he needed me to be something more. More what? Adventurous? Attractive? Creative? Fun? Successful?

I miss him. And I miss how I am when he is here. He makes me feel safe. Comfortable. Needed. Now, I just feel alone.

I find myself stuck again, this time in the in-between. It is like I am living at the edge of a dream, just about to wake up. My eyes flutter. Open. Closed. Open. Closed. They want to be open—wide—but I don't know how to make that happen.

I am lost, and I desperately need to be found.

A New Year is a time for resolutions, right? Starting today, I will begin "Project Joy." I pledge to become more—more of what my boyfriend wants.

I plan to revamp, redo, remodel one area of my life every month. I already have the categories listed—my very own 12-step program to a new me. And I intend to stay on track by keeping this online blog. It will be a way to journal my personal path to the improved version. I think one big post on the first day of each month (my goal) and one on the last day (my progress) should be enough. In between, I will jot daily notes.

First up for January: HAIR and MAKEUP. I know health is always the resolution to make but I need to take a baby step. Besides, I do not have a plan in place for diet or exercise, and I want something I can make changes with tomorrow. And to be honest, he complained that I never spent time on my appearance. Not in a bad way, but he would mention how cute I would look if I did my hair or wore a little makeup. So, I will:

- get a new, stylish haircut and highlights or color (never done that before)
- research products that are affordable and good for my skin type

—do hair and makeup every day for work. No ponytails, no makeup-free days, no more getting by.

I can do this. I will do this. I must do this ...

Once I finish typing, I am tired, so tired that I do not go back to review the entry before clicking the PUBLISH link. I will look at it again tomorrow in the light of day when I have a clear head and awake body.

I stumble to the bedroom, fall into the downy comforter, and dream of a factory. In it, my body moves along an assembly line. The image is blurred but even in the wavy, fluid movement of a sleep-addled mind, I can see it is me.

My body jerks as it moves down the bumpy conveyor belt and as I come to a sharp halt at each station, a faceless robot removes and replaces a different part of me. This happens again and again—robots undoing and redoing every aspect. And as they do, I feel no pain. There is no worry. I am content that they know what is best.

When I finally reach the end of the line, Jason is waiting beside a wall-size mirror. He grabs my hand and asks if I am ready for the big reveal. I nod in anticipation and just as I step forward to view my reflection, I disappear and fall further into sleep.

three

By the end of the first week, I am a failure.

I woke up after noon on January 1st, groggy from my pre-dawn stint on the computer. At first, there was a terrific fear of what I had done. Like I did some terrible wrong, committed a heinous and horrific act for which I was about to get caught and publicly shamed. But there was something else, hidden beneath. As I shuffled around my kitchen making coffee, I felt lighter. Some of the weight I carried during that time had lifted.

I had a plan.

But that was all I had.

I did possess enough forethought to take a “before” picture. My selfie game is lacking. I hate any type of photo with me in it, especially one where I am the lone subject. But I wanted to document where I began in case I ever made it to some significant end.

And when I returned to work, I managed to avoid the ponytail and remember to put on makeup—for one day at least. Once I got home that night, I was exhausted. I forgot how tiring it can be. It is not as if I perform some strenuous, physically demanding job. Yet somehow, those hours tucked inside my little cubicle drain every ounce of energy. Of course, it was even harder to go back knowing I would hear about how wonderful the holidays were for everyone else. I fake smiled, *oohed* and *aahed* when appropriate, and told those who asked that yes, my holiday was wonderful, too. One of the best.

Lying also makes me tired.

I consider adding deceit and trickery to my ongoing list of changes, but then I realize I am a sincere person. Rarely do I feel the need to lie about my situation. Jason, however, could work on it. More than once I caught him stretching the truth and for such stupid little things like telling me he didn't finish the chips when there was no one else who could have eaten them. Or saying he was at John's house when he was at Mike's. They were never big lies or terrible enough to make me doubt him. But now, I wonder. If he could so easily tell small fibs, could he also tell bigger ones with similar ease?

In my fatigued state, I forgo anything but moisturizer and a headband for the remainder of the week. I am still trying to figure out how to makeover all that is me when my phone chirps. Mom.

“Hi, mom.”

“Joy Anna, dear, I have left two messages on your answering machine. Why haven't you called back?”

My mother always calls me Joy Anna. Never Joy. Never Anna. Always both. She originally wanted to name me Joanna, but my father preferred Anna. And so it was that their strange marital compromise led to my equally strange name. She loves telling that story, of how she and daddy did not even fight about it but just came to the same happy conclusion a week before I was born.

They are divorced now. Living in identical condominiums across the street from each other. And in an odd way, they are happier than ever.

“It’s called voice mail, mom. And I guess I didn’t see them,” I lie. Maybe I am an honest-to-goodness liar. But this time, it is for a very good reason. I don’t want to hurt her feelings. I saw the notifications pop up the moment the messages were left. I just could not talk to either of my parents. Calling to wish them a Happy New Year was painful enough.

“Okay. Well, I wanted you to know we’re having a little dinner for Joe and Marlene. You remember them, don’t you? The couple that lived down the road when we were back on Hill Street? Anyway, they are moving to be closer to their daughter Pam. I think she was a grade after you in school. So, they are shipping out in two weeks, and we want to throw a little shindig next week to see them off.”

“That sounds nice.”

“I thought you and Jason could join us. Your dad will marinate steaks for the grill, and I’ll whip up something salty. And of course, something sweet.” Her lilting laughter seeps through the speakerphone. She is an excellent baker and just the thought of her making something from scratch makes my mouth water.

My parents may be legally divorced, but they still do everything together like a married couple. At first, I was heartbroken when they announced their separation, but it did not take long to realize nothing really changed. They split everything—property, belongings, investments, themselves—with such ease and cooperation, I wondered why they were even doing it. But now, I understand. They are much better together when they are apart.

My mother needs the individuality and freedom a traditional marriage cannot give, and my father loves her enough to give it. We still do everything as a family. They live next to each other. They own a business together. They dine together. Most weeks, they even shop together.

Even apart, they have each other. Theirs is a real love. A love I want.

For the first time since Jason left, I am angry. Angry he has not tried to contact me. Angry he gave up on us. Angry he left me alone to handle the aftermath of his absence.

Assuming he would be back by now, I suddenly realize I have no idea what to tell my mother. Avoiding it at work is easy. No one there knows Jason personally. He is just a name to many of them. My featureless boyfriend. But my parents, I can’t skirt around the issue with them. They know Jason. I *think* they like him. At least that is what they tell me. And they are always nice to him, believing he is the person I picked to be mine.

I consider ignoring the topic altogether. Maybe he will come home soon, and the need to tell my parents will never arise. They have gone weeks without talking to him or seeing him.

“Joy Anna!” my mother’s attempt at raising her voice is amplified by the phone speaker.

“What?”

“How about it? You and Jason come over about six for drinks before dinner?”

“Yeah about that. Um, Jason is—”

“If he’ll be working, dear, that’s not a problem. Though I would like an even number. Perhaps your brother can come by himself and ...”

If I do not stop her now, she will never stop. “Mom, Jason is gone.”

“Gone?” she repeats softly. She understands. This has happened before. Though I have not told her about every time, she knows this is not a new problem of mine. “Oh, honey. Have you talked to him?”

“We’ve been in touch.” Another lie. What is happening? “But um, for now, we decided to keep things as is. So, he won’t be available for your dinner, and I don’t think I can make it either. I’m swamped at work. We just got a new contract, and I’m in charge of it.”

“Of course. I understand.” Her words are presented to me with such affection, so much love. The tears cloud the corner of my eyes before I can stop them. I wish she was standing here in this room so she could hug me, soothe away the tears, make it all better, and do what she does best—be my mom. “How about you come over Sunday night and have dinner with just me and dad? We would love to see you.”

“I will, mom. I promise I will.”

“What happened to you?” Cara asks before I even have a chance to sit down. Although we text every day and talk on the phone, our schedules have not matched and it has been a week since we have seen each other.

Falling into the oversized club chair, I kick one foot under my leg to get comfortable. “Can I at least have a sip of coffee before you interrogate me?” With gentle fingertips, she nudges the cardboard cup across the battered table in my direction. “Thanks for getting this. Next time, my treat.” I lift the latte to my lips in anticipation of its creamy and spicy sweetness.

“You’re very welcome,” she nods.

After a long drink, I lean back and look around the coffee shop. Late on a Sunday morning means it is relatively quiet except for a few people coming in and out. Other than three small groups and us, no one stays. My shoulders relax. Jason is not here. I didn’t expect him to be here, but this is our go-to place.

Part of me is disappointed because I want to see him. A bigger part is relieved he will not see me like this. I am not ready. Not yet.

“So, what happened to you?” Cara repeats.

“Please don’t ...”

“Come on, Anna. Tell me.”

“Promise you won’t laugh or judge or criticize.”

She sets her non-fat, no-sugar, no-flavor soy latte on the table. “Girl Scouts honor,” she proclaims in all seriousness. The fingers on both hands are in some weird formation. I don’t know if it’s legitimate. I was never a Girl Scout.

“I went to the cosmetic counter at the mall,” I confess. “To have one of those makeovers.”

“Anna! Those products are full of crap ingredients not to mention tested on animals. You should have come to me.”

I do not want to tell her that after a week of attempting to research products online, I became so confused and frustrated I gave up. That I went to the mall just to say I accomplished something to advance my plan. “I know they aren’t cage free, non-GMO, preservative free, blah blah blah, but I needed to do something for myself,” I add in hasty explanation so she will not demand anything more.

“That’s all for food, silly. But the mall?” she shudders. “I hate that place.”

“I hate it, too, but I was desperate.”

She wrinkles her nose and squints her eyes to get a better look. “Does it itch? It looks like it would itch.” She scratches a nail tip to her own face in solidarity.

“No, it doesn’t itch. It just feels ... weird. Like I’m wearing a mask.”

“That’s because you are!”

I attempt to give her the evil eye, but the mascara on my right lid has crusted over, fusing the upper and lower lashes together, forging an impenetrable barrier for me to see through. The result is one closed eye and a growing headache. With my thumb and forefinger, I gingerly pick them apart to restore my vision.

“I think I might be allergic. My eyes keep watering.” Rather than come to my aid, Cara continues to study me. After a full minute, I become wildly uncomfortable and instinctively squirm in my chair to ease the restlessness. The scrutiny is unsettling, even from her. “Stop staring at me. You’re freaking me out.”

“You know, this could work for you. The colors, I mean. That shadow and eyeliner make the dark specks in your eyes pop.” She leans in closer and points a finger at my weeping eyes. “Ditch that mascara though. Find something lighter in color and texture. And that blush is horrible, but that might be because there is too much of it. I use an organic moisturizer with a hint of foundation that would be great for your skin. It would barely conceal the smattering of freckles you have across the top of your cheeks, leave a few of them for their wow effect.”

She swipes a finger across the area, and I push her hand away. “Stop! I already feel like I’ve been manhandled enough for one day.”

She leans back into her chair with a smirk. “Maybe *that’s* the solution. You need to be handled by a man.”

“Not funny.”

“Oh, come on. It’s kind of funny.”

I intentionally avoid any mention of Jason. For though I have told her about my overall plan to alter some areas in my life, she does not know the true motivation behind it. I will tell her more at some point. I always do. But for now, she thinks this is all about focusing on myself. No discussion about my early morning revelation, the blog, or my diabolical plot to get my boyfriend back.

“It was funny,” I smile extra wide to throw her further off track.

She looks down and pats her small belly. “See, peanut. Mommy’s still got it.”

“Your mommy never lost it, peanut,” I add. “Um, speaking of lost, I do need some help with this.” I twirl a finger around the hair hanging beneath my right shoulder. My initial vow to go this alone is failing, especially after the epic waste of hours shopping online for my face. There may be some benefit in Cara knowing my plans: time. She has been taking good care of herself these years, finding the best quality products. Maybe she can eliminate some of the frustration.

“I have been telling you. Go to my salon over on Woodbine. Sherilyn is a fabulous stylist. Very up on trends but not into the overdone stuff. She is also a straight talker and will be honest about what will or won’t work for your hair type. Come to think of it, anyone there would be good. They’re all great.”

I consider it. The salon is a bit pricier than my budget. But, it would be nice to get a professional consultation, some idea of what I should be doing. I usually go to the walk-in place in the strip mall near work. They are inexpensive and fast—my two favorite requirements for most anything—but they are not trendy. “I think I might do that.”

Her eyes light up. “Great. I have an appointment in three weeks. Maybe we can go together.”

“I want to get in earlier than that. In fact, as soon as possible.”

Already two weeks into January, I had hoped to be further along in this part of the transformation. Yet, here I was with no new ideas for hair or makeup. If I was going to get to the next step, I would need to overcome this hurdle first.

Focus. I need to focus.

And time. I need more time. But the reality is the more time passes, the more I fear I am losing any chance I have of getting him back.

PROJECT JOY

posted January 15th

This is all proving harder than I thought it would be. His leaving. My changing.

I miss him. And when I miss him, I feel sorry for myself. I am not sure how this will pan out in the long run. I am not even sure if I am strong enough for a long run. Even breathing seems like a herculean task right now.

But, I am determined to stay focused. I have come up with ideas to simplify the process so I can (hopefully) see more success.

My original belief that I would journal notes every day lasted just that—the first day. Then I thought, I can do it once a week. That did not work either. So, I am rethinking things, trying to find a way to keep myself accountable and motivated without driving myself crazy. My job is writing during the day and that makes me not want to write any more than I must. Which means I will:

—journal on the last day of the month. In this post, I will provide a success/failure recap of the previous month's goal. I will also set goals for the next month.

—post Before and After pictures (if I remember to take them). I read somewhere that visuals and imagery help in reaching goals. I think it would be helpful to see where I made some effort and definitive change—however small that may be. I need something tangible to show progress. Please, let there be progress.

—post in the middle of the month to check-in. It will be brief and highlight what is working and what is not so I can adjust as I go along.

This post will serve as a check-in for January. My plan to do hair and makeup fizzled in the first week. I was sad and returning to work after time off left me tired. Well, those are my excuses.

But, the good news is I have made some strides.

MAKEUP—I did extensive research and found a tinted moisturizer that gives my skin a healthy glow without looking like an oil slick in the middle of Interstate 96. I also bought a couple of products from the local department store after undergoing a makeover (which I do not recommend). I am a simple girl so I kept it simple: powder and lipstick. I am still working on the mascara and the face wash. Though I do like the cleanser I have so maybe I will keep it. If it ain't broke don't fix it, right?

Except, why do I feel like everything is broken?

HAIR—I have not styled it every day, but I am doing it more than before. I only pony-up a few times a week now. I can tell my hair is happier—less breakage and frizz. I still need to update

my cut. I have an appointment for a haircut and style at a grown-up salon this weekend. Looking forward to it.

That is enough for now. I am trying to stay focused on the reason for doing this but the more time passes, the more I fear it is for nothing. Not one word from him. I did text him last night. It was just to ask if he wanted to come get some of his things.

Everything is still where he left it, waiting for him.

four

With an angry sigh, I push open the glass door and enter the shop.

“Geez, Anna. I’ve been waiting twenty minutes for you!” my brother yells from the back of the store.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m late because I don’t want to be here.”

He walks up to me, easy and relaxed, all tan and blond and with such a big smile, I cannot help but smile back. “Good one,” he laughs.

At a stable twenty-six, my brother Harrison McKenna is three years older in age and light years ahead of me in maturity. He is engaged to be married. He owns a house with the appropriate furniture. He graduated from college with a degree in Business. He runs the family shop full-time, knowing his future is to assume ownership of The Surf Life once my parents retire.

His path is mapped out with clear directions. He has it all together while I silently rage that it is my day off and I still must work.

“Hey, Anna. Sorry to hear about you and Jason.”

I stare at him. It is for too long and extremely awkward, but neither of us cares. Harrison knows me. He gets me. And he loves me anyway.

“How long are you going to be gone?” I ask, killing any chance of allowing the tears to fall. Even though I have talked to my brother since Jason left, seeing Harrison look at me so compassionately is more than I can take. Using the sales counter as a shield, I kneel and set my purse on the bottom shelf next to a box of gluten-free, taste-free organic crackers. Good thing I brought a candy bar.

“A couple hours. Maybe less. Liezel has us scheduled for an hour.” Liezel is my brother’s fiancée. She is a kind, petite, bubbly redhead who loves everything Harrison does, and they are so perfectly perfect together it depresses me.

“Okay, have fun tasting cake!” I feign enthusiasm and push him out the door. Their recent house purchase and upcoming marriage are additional reminders I am slacking in the life department. Add in Cara’s pregnancy, and I feel like the odd girl out.

I walk circles around the perimeter, rearranging already pristine displays of surf paraphernalia and organizing the racks of t-shirts and hoodies. I stare at one with our logo on it.

I have seen the image a bazillion times since my youth and yet today, its design seems unfamiliar and foreign as if I am viewing it for the first time. The lines and color are simple and clean. Straightforward, like my parents and Harrison. They have always known the store was their path. And when I did not feel the same pull, they let me go do my own thing. No questions. No argument. No judgment. No begging for me to join them. And all along, I felt so lucky to have a supportive and understanding family.

Yet now as I stare at the rugged surfboard sketched by my mother's hand so many years ago, I wonder. Did they even want me? Maybe they were relieved, happy with my disinterest because I did not fit into the plan.

Knowing this is not true, I walk the center aisle in the direction of the counter. My parents have included me. In every aspect of the business. Since I can remember, I have spent hours here, first playing while my mother worked, and later working myself. It was my job before the one I have now. I was part of the family business meetings—little discussions my parents would hold as a way to integrate their children into the fold. Nothing vital was decided at those meetings other than what color paint to use when we remodeled or where to display an item, but it made me feel important. Accepted. Needed. Valued.

My parents wanted me involved and made every effort to do so, I just fought it. And I continue to fight it because I do not love it like Harrison does. I believe this place should be loved and cared for as my parents love and care for it.

If only there was more traffic coming in. The Saturday morning rush had come and gone before I got here. There would be a few customers trickling in but at this time of day, they were all at the beach or doing other things while wishing they were at the beach.

I suppose I could be thankful my brother picked this time. Knowing I would be alone, he and Lielzel scheduled their cake appointment intentionally over a lull. Mom and dad were on a trip up the coast to visit a friend. The one part-timer was not available nor trusted to run things on his own. There was no one but me. The only choice. Their last resort.

Just as I reach into my bag for the paperback I started last night, the door opens. I pop up in surprise to see a man standing there. Prickly heat itches along the back of my neck as I worry about being here alone. He appears to be in his late twenties, maybe early thirties. It is hard to tell here as so many are perpetually tan from years in the sun. It makes a lot of people appear older than they are—especially surfers. “Can I help you?” I say with imagined force.

The man approaches the front display as if he owns the place, and his seemingly warm smile is canceled by the intensity of his stare. Casually tossing a circle of board wax from his left hand to his right, he says, “Just need to stock up on some things.”

“Take your time and let me know if you have any questions.”

I pretend to busy myself while he walks around the store. Gazing over the boards, he pulls a couple from where they lean on racks custom-built by my dad. He skims gentle fingers along their edges, studying them for shape and weight. He then begins to methodically work his way through the inner aisles and displays. Upon closer inspection, I guess him to be about Harrison's age. He has the same build—tall, lean, muscular. But unlike my brother's sandy blond waves, this man has auburn-tinted hair cut short. Though he has a rugged, outdoorsy vibe to him, he does not look like the surfers I know. I definitely would not peg him as someone who hangs ten on a regular basis.

After about twenty minutes of looking over everything, he comes to the counter and sets down his purchases. "I'm all set. You don't happen to have any more of this, do you?" he holds up a special brand of board wax.

Worried now that he is trying to bait me into the back room so he can do harm, I say "no" a little too fast. "Um, we keep all of those out on the floor."

"That's what I figured. Just hoped you had an unopened shipment or something." I ignore him and begin ringing up. He leans his left arm comfortably on the counter and peers through the glass at the high-ticket items locked in the display case. "Harry and his dad always check when I ask," he explains.

Harry? This guy must know my brother pretty well to be able to call him that. Only a few people do. I begin entering the codes in the cash register. We are still old school, needing to input each item separately. By the third one, I am wishing for a scanner. Bad. "Well, Harry is not here."

He glances up at me, quick and with dark milk-chocolatey eyes. A half-smile crosses his face. Apparently, his sarcasm detector is in good working order, and he caught mine. "You must be new here. My name is Will. I'm a regular," his smile widens as he holds out a hand.

I ignore his attempt at a formal greeting and tap the counter with a fingernail. "Nice to meet you. I'm a regular, too. My parents own this place."

"I've never seen you here before."

"Total comes to \$62.43. How would you like to pay?"

He reaches into the back pocket of his jeans and produces a brown leather wallet. "So, Harry has a sister. You two look nothing alike." I stare at him and wait while he thumbs through the bills and produces four crisp twenties. "It's just that you don't look like most of the other girls around here so I assumed you were from somewhere else."

This is not the first time I have been told that. My dark hair, green eyes, and pale skin are a stark and often embarrassing contrast to the sun-kissed blondes running around town. My mother, of course, loves it because I look a lot like her. "We were not meant to fit in, Joy Anna, we were made to stand out!" she chimes whenever I complain. More of her inspirational meditative motivational uplifting crap.

"I guess I didn't get the surfer girl gene," I snip and then immediately regret it. If he is a frequent shopper, Harrison and my dad will be livid if I scare him away. I force a smile and hand him his change. "It's all right. No harm done."

"Good. I wouldn't want to burn any bridges. This is my favorite place to shop for supplies."

"Really. Why?" I ask. There are at least two others within the half-mile between here and the beach. One is even across from a public access. They carry lower end items and cater more to tourists and amateurs, but they also offer many of the basic items at a lower price.

"The service," he deadpans. And before I can feel insulted, he waves goodbye and walks out the door.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror above the bathroom sink. Moving puckered lips from one side to the other, I press fingers into my skin and pull. The woman at the makeup counter had mentioned something about elasticity and that I was young enough not to worry. Yet. Of course, she had a miraculous new product to help prevent such a problem from ever happening. All I had to do was shell out \$49.99 for three ounces.

Fat chance. Cara has a home remedy which sounds sketchy but if—and that is a big if—I ever decide to tackle the stretch in my skin, I will take her advice over a woman who works on commission. Cara’s face, teeth, hair, nails. They all glow and scream healthy. For as much as I tease about her natural habits, they certainly seem to help.

That and genetics. Cara has the gift of good genetics.

Not that my heritage is so bad. My parents are both very attractive people and aging well. Of course, they also take great care of themselves with exercise and eating right. Two things on my personal to-do list.

Frustrated to see little change in my skin from the extra care I have been taking, I move the focus to my new haircut and highlights. Cara was right about the salon. The stylist I had clearly knew what she was doing. I told her I wanted to keep some length and not do anything drastic but otherwise, it was up to her to surprise me. And when she turned the chair around I was shocked to see an amazing cut with longer layers in the front and shorter ones in the back. She had given me minimal yet stunning highlights, explaining they were to “break me in.” That and the long side-swept bangs made me look put together, even a bit sophisticated.

Getting a closer look at the style, I realize I love how the length rests just below my collar line, still long enough to pull back if needed. Which, I realize with pride I have not done since I got this cut. My skin may not show obvious improvement, but my hair looks healthy and completely different than what I had before. A definite change. One goal accomplished.

With that, I smile at the face staring back at me. And then with victory comes the tears. There have been tears behind every small bit of joy. The ringing of my cell cuts off any chance to release the hurt and when I see it is Cara, I know I can’t ignore her. “Hey.”

“Hey. Did you check your mail?”

“No.” I switch off the bathroom light, pad barefoot through the dark, and crawl into the comfort of my bed. It is only eight-thirty, but I am ready for sleep.

“Well, check it.”

“I can’t. I didn’t get it today. I forgot.” I prop the pillows against the padded headboard, lean back into them, and when I do a whiff of Jason’s cologne drifts into the air. I am still not accustomed to being surrounded by his things rather than him, but I refuse to pack anything away in case he decides to return.

I do not want him to think I gave up on us.

Holding the edge of the comforter close to my nose, I inhale so deeply my throat and chest begin to burn. There is something about scent. The memories it carries along its invisible path. The pain it can bring.

“It’s time for our five-year reunion!” Cara sings.

“Um. Thanks, but no thanks,” I cough.

“Come on. You have got to go.”

“No, I don’t.”

“But I’m going which means you will need to go because you know we do everything like this together.”

“So, don’t go,” I tell her.

“You know I can’t do that.” And yes, I do know she can’t do that. Much like her natural beauty, the fear of missing out is embedded in her DNA. “Just think about it, please. It’s not until July. Plenty of time for me to talk you into it. Have a good night, Anna.”

“Goodnight, Cara.”

Resting my head against the pillows, I stare into the dark, trying not to think about him but only thinking about him.

The room is too quiet without the sound of his breathing to fill the air. I never needed a noise machine when Jason was right beside me. His steady inhale and exhale pattern was rhythmic, lulling me to sleep. And if I breathe in just right, I can still smell his scent hovering above me.

Frustrated, I turn onto my side and reach one hand into the shadows to caress his pillow. It feels warm from my body, but I pretend the heat is from him. In my sleepy fog, I even imagine there is an indentation from his head as if he has just gotten up to use the bathroom and will soon return to me.

I pretend the past is not real, that time has lied and we are together.

First seconds, then minutes tick by. The pillow cools to my touch. And as any trace of his cologne disappears, the emptiness engulfs me. Missing him is much like losing a limb. I ache for something that was always present and part of me. In times like this—the silent beginnings of night—I can almost convince myself he never left. The sensation is so strong, I could easily fall asleep believing he was out with his friends and on his way home.

I shut my eyes tight to block out the images and beg the sleep to come so it can provide some relief, pause my mind. But like a phantom, all I feel is the lonesome ache for something that is no longer there. And as I drift closer to unconsciousness, I begin to wonder if I miss something that never really existed.

PROJECT JOY

posted January 31st

I made it. I made it through the month.

I must admit I am relieved. Though it was not as difficult as I thought it would be, it certainly was not easy. Finding time to research, try, and buy the products? Fine. But setting up a habit? Hard. I am a routine driven person and a lazy one at that. I want fast, non-complicated tasks, things I don't have to spend much thought on. After tweaking here and there, I have figured some things out.

HAIR—My new haircut and color work. Going shorter with some built-in style has meant I rarely put it into a pony. I do tie it up about once a week, but that is a big improvement from every day. Bonus: I have gotten many compliments from family, friends, and people at work.

MAKEUP—My facial routine is coming along. I like the skincare products I found, and they don't take much time. Makeup still trips me up. I think I have nailed down colors, but I hate applying it so I have been doing it halfway. Bonus: When I use a slight amount, my face looks fresh and healthy which makes me feel better.

I promised myself I would document possible changes with photos.

It took a while to find one to represent the Before that didn't have him in it. In my search, I also noticed I don't have many pictures of me at all. Most are of him surfing or hanging out. But I found one from last summer. I am standing on the boardwalk down by our favorite stretch of beach wearing paint-stained cutoffs and a concert t-shirt. My best friend took it while the guys had a drink at the bar. I'm squinting because of the sun in my eyes, but I also realize that my gaze is not focused on her. I was watching the bartender flirt with my boyfriend.

As for the After, I took a selfie. I am terrible at selfies. I hate them which is why I never take them. But I was desperate to do this in private. The awesome highlights in my hair are not easy to see and the makeup comes off as a little too harsh but overall, it looks good. Of course, it is not a full body shot either because I don't have any clue how to do that. But, it gives an idea of where I came from and hopefully where I might go.

I have been thinking about some things this month and though I should write everything down I tend to process them slowly, let them simmer. What has stuck with me ... I have a friend who has moved four times from one state to another. She claims she gets excited at the prospect of the unknown. Loves starting fresh, exploring new towns, meeting different people. I guess some people like the chance to do things over, correct their mistakes, maybe get it right the second time around. Some people like that. But not me.

I want things to be like they used to be. I want *him*.

Stay focused, Anna. No pain, no gain. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. You need to go through the bad to get back to the good. Blah. Blah. Blah.

Which brings me to February. What to do for February?

I think my wardrobe deserves some attention. And though I originally planned to limit this to one change per month, I like the option to switch between goals if I become stuck on one. So, I am going to add my living space in there, too. Nothing drastic for either, but both areas need a re-do.

Maybe doubling up will help me get him back soon. A girl can dream.

five

I am getting bored with my job. So bored I consider bumping “career change” to February and pushing my current goals off to another month. The reason I don’t? I have no idea what else I would do. There is no Plan B. I only have a Plan A—this job as a technical writer.

It’s not that I hate what I do. I love writing. But documenting detailed manuals and training guides is not what I had in mind. Writing should be an intimate act, one that forms connections and expresses emotion. There is none of that here. The words I use are for a utilitarian purpose. What I create is impersonal, sterile. Boring.

Perhaps I don’t get enough interesting projects. I am still entry-level. A fresh out of college employee responsible for research, content specs, and first drafts. I am the builder of information while those with more finesse and experience are the crafters.

There are definitely some challenges, but they are not the kind I want. At first, I wanted them. At least I thought I did. This is what adults do. They get a job.

Everyone else in my department is outgoing and ambitious. They view this as a stepping stone, a notch on their belt, a way to move on to the next level of whatever there is in life. I see it as the lone opportunity for steady employment. A job I interviewed for at the suggestion of an old friend who knew I had experience as the editor of our high school newspaper. The position was a slam dunk because her parents run the company. They know me and my family. I know them and their family. They trust me, and I trust them.

This job was the easy choice because it was precisely that: easy. Little stress to interview, guaranteed offer, and now a predictable and stable job where I am not required or expected to go too far beyond my skill description or pay-scale.

With a loud sigh, I click to save the latest document file and then grab another folder from the stack on my desk. The sound of Trina’s voice floats above the tidy row of cubicles, and her laughter pulls me back to the memory of her and Jason at the holiday party.

She is talking to another girl about shopping for Valentine’s Day. I cannot decide what makes me more upset: that every time I hear or see her I think of Jason or the fact she mentions the very holiday I desperately wish to ignore.

Valentine’s Day. The cruelest reminder that loving someone carries a price. And for me, the cost is paid in heartache. Jason never cared much for the fuss of the holiday and I did not push it. I was content in the knowledge I had the man of my dreams. He mattered more than flowers, candy, or an expensive dinner.

Moving my office chair as quietly as I can, I lean my head against the half-wall of my workspace. The natty fabric carries an odor I never noticed before. But now, I know why I always thought someone had a too-ripe banana at their desk.

Inhaling to both hear better and block the stench from making me gag, I only capture snippets of their conversation over the hum of the copier down the hall. Something about no plans yet and maybe they should throw a party instead.

I roll my chair back and exhale long and slow. No plans mean no date. At least not with my Jason.

I pick up a throw pillow and inspect the stitching while Cara peeks down other aisles. We are in her favorite store searching for nursery ideas. Lifting the fabric closer to my eyes, I try to determine if the pattern knit on it is orange or coral or salmon or ...

“That would go great in your living room,” Cara peers over my shoulder. Not realizing she was there, I jump. Even pregnant, she has moves like a cat.

“You think so? I can’t tell what color it is.”

“Coral. And the feathers on that bird are eggshell blue. Perfect for you.” I toss it into the cart without looking at the price tag. “Wow. I’m impressed. You never do that.”

“What? Take your advice?” I laugh. “I take it all the time.”

“No. Just put something in that quick. Usually, you spend forever making the decision and mulling over the price.”

“I’m in a hurry today,” I tell her.

Her face falls as she looks to the things piled in her arms. “Oh. I’m sorry. I thought we had more time. I was hoping to look at some pictures and rugs for the baby’s room.”

“We have time. Plenty of time. I’m just a bit antsy I guess.”

“Uh-oh. What’s up?” she gives the side eye while placing her new treasures into the cart. I see pillowcases and kitchen towels and a book about artists. No baby stuff. I know she is wary of buying any actual things at this early stage in the pregnancy. But we both want to.

I have been eager to tell her about my plans for change every minute of every day but never found the nerve. Part of me wants to share it with her because we share everything. Yet, the other part says to leave it be, have something of my own. Of course, I am realistic. I know I fear telling her—or anyone—because then I would have to follow through. Be held accountable.

“I’m trying something ... different,” I say while studying the wall of hanging rugs.

“Ooh! A rug? A huge rug would look great in your living room. Maybe this one?” she pulls on the metal display to see it better.

“I like the colors. But it’s too flowery. Jason would never ...”

She directs her gaze at me, and a shadow falls over her eyes. In them, I see impatience, frustration, and my all-time favorite—pity. “Jason does not live there, remember? You do. If you like it, you should get it. For you.”

I pretend to study the pattern. “Actually, the something different has to do with me. Since the New Year, I’ve kind of been on a mission to redo parts of my life. I know I’m not always great at following through so I made it like a game. I pick an area to work on for a month and dedicate

time to it. And I've been journaling notes on a private blog so I can track how I'm doing, keep me accountable, you know. So far, it's going well, but I hate that you didn't know this whole time. I mean seriously, Cara, I feel off because of it."

With a tilt of her head, she stares at me. I know better than to push her because when Cara is processing something she needs time. One of the reasons she is such an incredible friend? Sometimes she gives advice, and sometimes she just listens. Even more important, she knows when to do one or the other.

"That's why you changed your hair and makeup," she grins. "I knew something was up. I just couldn't figure it out."

I can feel the heat take a slow burn, from the top of my chest to my neck to my face. Other than the first time we met, I have never felt the need to blush in front of her. Apparently, the toxic blend of embarrassment, relief, and confusion is too much for my fragile psyche.

"I think it's a fabulous idea, Anna. Jason is gone. For good. This is your chance to shed the crap he did to you. Redefine who you want to be. This is your time. Your moment."

She says everything I need to hear, except for the Jason part. Unwilling to ruin her happy buzz, I decide to skip over it. "Thank you. I knew you would understand. And I apologize for not telling you sooner. I just needed some time on my own."

"You don't need to apologize to me for doing something for you, Anna. Never."

"I think I'm going to get that rug."

She claps her hands together in excitement. The only thing she enjoys more than spending her own money is spending mine. "Yay! It will be a perfect way to wipe the slate clean in that room. But now, back to your plans. I need details. All of them."

"There isn't much to tell. I'm tackling a couple of things every month. January was hair and makeup. This month is clothes and living space. And next month will be something else, and so on. I write about my goals at the beginning and middle of each month so I can track if there is progress."

She whips out her phone. "Tell me the name of your blog."

"No way. Besides, it's private. No one can read it but me."

"But I *love* the idea of what you're doing! I want to read it!"

"No!"

"Please ..."

"Cara. Stop. I'm getting the rug, isn't that enough?"

"No. You are my BFF. I need to be entrenched in every little morsel of your life."

I wrap an arm around her shoulder and pull her tight into a hug. "And you are. Except for this. I need this to be mine and mine alone." Just then we hear a ding and both raise our phones. "It's mine," I say and type in my passcode to read the incoming email. "Oh my god!"

"What?" she asks.

“Someone commented on a blog post. How can that be? I made it private!” Livid, I scramble to find the internet browser and plug in my web address, unaware Cara is spying over my shoulder. The blog pops up, visible for the whole world to see. “I thought I marked it as private.”

“How can you forget something like that?” she laughs.

“I don’t know. I set it up at like 4 AM on New Year’s Day. I was exhausted from your party, from Jason, from everything. I must have forgotten to save the changes.”

“What does the comment say?”

Afraid, I open the email but stop before I get to the actual content. “It’s nothing.”

She furiously taps into her phone. “I’ll find it.”

“No, you won’t!” I scream so loud a woman at the end of the aisle raises her head.

Frustrated, she scrolls and scrolls. “I can’t find the comment. It must be the kind you have to approve first.”

I look at my phone. It is. As the administrator of the blog, I approve any comments before they are made public. Thank god. Maybe this means only one person read what I wrote.

“Oh my goodness, Anna.” Make that two people.

“Don’t. Cara. Please don’t read any of that. Please.”

“This is about Jason?” she asks quietly. “I thought it was about you.”

“It is about me. He was just the trigger. The push I needed to make some changes.”

“But you are changing things you think he didn’t like. In the hope he will come back. What about changing for you?”

“It’s a win-win, Cara. I get Jason and I make me better, see?”

“No. I don’t see it.” She glances at her fitness watch. “I promised Rick I’d be home for dinner. Are you ready to check out?”

“I want to get the rug. It might take some time.” I reach into the cart and grab the pillow. “You go ahead.”

“Thanks. I’ll talk to you later, Anna.”

“Okay. Bye.”

After waving down the nearest worker and asking him to get the rug, I make my way to the front of the store. This purchase is going to set me back on my transformation budget for the month. I consider offering to watch the shop for my brother. The pay is small but the only option for extra cash. Maybe I can go through my closets and the rest of the apartment, sell some things online? My thoughts flash to Jason’s records. They are the only thing of real value in that apartment, aside from sentimental stuff. I can’t do that. I wouldn’t do that. He will want them. I know he will, and the very fact they are still there makes me believe he will return. Otherwise, he would have come and got them by now.

Even if I did make more money, any extra would go right back into covering basic expenses. I may need to rethink this whole thing. Or find a second job.

While I wait, I give in to curiosity and open my inbox. The initial shock of someone commenting on my blog has somewhat worn off. And I realize it could be spam or a robot-

generated message with no threat or purpose. It could be a lot of things, but I won't know until I read the actual comment.

I skip the canned email greeting and scroll down to read the context. *It is never too late to start over. Or begin ...*

Confused on whether it is from a real source or not, I click through the scrambled username. All that comes up on the profile is a link to another blog hosted by the same site I use. No picture. No name. No description. No contact information. Nothing other than a blog. A blog managed by someone with the initials JR.

With a hesitant tap of my finger, I click to approve.

"Excuse me, ma'am? Are you the one waiting on the rug?"

I turn to see a young man with a green vest pulling a rolled floor rug on a cart. "Yes. I am."

"If you're ready to check out, I can help you get it to the car."

"That would be great. Thank you."

I forget about Cara, my blog, and the anonymous stranger who read thoughts I believed to be private. Instead, I focus on the excitement of my new rug and the possibility of a new me.

After all, it is never too late to start over. Or begin ...