

CHAPTER 5



F *uuuuuuuuuuuuck.*

Freddie was dreaming. Or hallucinating. Maybe both.

But as he stared at the dull gray paint of the front door to apartment 4B, he didn't wake up. And if Anne had looked out the peephole right then, she would have seen him standing there, waiting for his brain to reboot. He wasn't even sure if it did, only that he eventually found his way back into the elevator and pressed up.

The doors closed and when they opened again, he half expected to wake up in a cold sweat and realize this was all a dream. That the last ten minutes hadn't actually happened at all.

He didn't, though. When the elevator arrived on the eighth floor, he was left staring out into the hallway, still trying to process it all.

He hadn't recognized Anne at first. When the apartment door had swung open, it hadn't even registered. Her clothes were different from anything he had seen Anne in before—the carefully pressed shirts and pristine sweaters had been replaced by a baggy sweatshirt, and her blond hair was in a messy bun instead of blown out and pulled back, like she used to wear it. But then

he saw her eyes. Those blue eyes were the same, clear and large and locked on him.

There hadn't been any time to figure out how it was possible, why she was standing in a doorway of his new building. Ellis's assistant had interrupted before he'd had an opportunity to say more than hello. Then she shut the door before he could say goodbye.

The elevator dinged, warning that the doors were about to close again, and he finally stepped out. The keys were still in his hand, and he was only half-aware of sliding them into the lock, turning them until he heard the dead bolt echo in the empty apartment beyond. Then he swung it open and stepped inside the hollow foyer of his ex-girlfriend's childhood apartment.

What. The. Fuck.

Was this some kind of twisted joke? He didn't believe in the universe sending him signs, but this was too close to some kind of karmic revenge. A chill ran through his spine as he felt his mental walls crumbling into a pile of dust.

He ran a hand down his face. Had he somehow known that this was the place Anne avoided taking him to for so long? He only knew about an old building in the East Village—she never mentioned the Uppercross by name—but now here he was, the owner of her former home.

He slowly walked through each room, looking for any details he might have missed before. But it was empty. Even worse, the painters would be arriving any minute to apply a clean coat of eggshell white. He had organized her erasure without even realizing it.

Wouldn't you have done that anyway? a voice mused somewhere in his head. *She did.*

That's right. She had.

We were at NYU together. That's how she had described their relationship. Reduced to its most basic form. And suddenly the tinder of long-neglected pain had flared alive in Freddie's chest. There was no reason the words should have hurt as much as they did. It was the truth. But a truncated version of it, one that left out the fine details, the messy, bleeding heart of it.

His wallet suddenly felt heavy in the pocket of his jacket. He let a moment pass before he reached for it, waited even longer to swallow his pride and open it to look inside.

There it was, slotted between his credit cards and a couple of twenties: the very first note to Anne, written on a flimsy bar napkin and folded into a triangle. He had scribbled it down after meeting her for the first time. It was during his first semester freshman year and he'd seen her from across the bar at the Half Pint. Once he built up the courage to introduce himself, they'd talked for hours, only pausing when the bartender announced last call. After he walked her outside to make sure she got a cab, he went back in, grabbed a napkin from the bar, and wrote her a note.

But he'd never given it to her. The plan had been that he would eventually, so he put it in his wallet for safekeeping, waiting until the time was right.

Obviously, it never was. He'd given up that dream years ago. But he never had the nerve to get rid of it. Instead, he'd carried it with him to Argentina, all while ignoring and denying what she had meant to him, painting over the cracks that Anne Elliot had left in her wake.

And now he was about to do it in the most literal sense with Benjamin Moore's eggshell white. Except instead of feeling cathartic, he felt robbed of something. He had never seen this place, never known this side of her, and now it was gone.

But she's not, that same voice whispered.

He ignored that, too. He couldn't start down that road again. His heart had been broken before; he had no interest in it happening again.

No, right now he needed to clear his head.

He shoved his wallet back in his pocket and pulled out his phone, swiping open his contacts and pressing "call."

As soon as it connected, Freddie sighed. "Feel like blowing off work this afternoon?"



"So you moved in with your ex-girlfriend?"

Freddie paused in his backswing to glare at his friend George Knightley. The towering nets surrounding the driving range at Chelsea Piers wafted in the wind, enclosing the long stretch of grass ahead of where they stood on the third level. Sweeping views of the Hudson River and New Jersey lay just beyond, while golf balls flew out from the stalls below them.

"I didn't move in with her." Freddie finally swung his golf club, sending his white ball careening ahead. "I moved into her old apartment."

"But she still lives downstairs," George said, leaning his weight on his nine iron. "With that woman who's interested in you."

"Crane-fly," a deep voice piped in from behind them.

They both turned to where Will Darcy was sitting on the bench along the wall of the building. His blond head was bent down as he stared at his phone, and there was a half-finished beer at his side. They had been here for a half hour, and the man hadn't even taken his suit jacket off yet.

"Cricket," Freddie corrected him. "And she's not interested. She's just . . . a very aggressive flirt."

“That’s not helping your case, Freddie,” George replied with a smile.

Freddie shook his head. He had known George for years through his brother, Ben, though they hadn’t become friends until recently. In college, Ben’s restaurant bought the microgreens Freddie harvested from the hydroponics system in his parents’ basement. George found him a few years later, after Freddie had moved to Argentina permanently. Freddie had applied for a few patents, and George was just getting his venture capital firm off the ground. He saw the potential in Freddie’s work, and after a few video calls, decided to be the first investor in Wentworth Hydroponics. And now, a good friend. George had been Freddie’s sounding board as he debated whether to sell his company, and he had introduced him to Will, whose mergers and acquisitions firm negotiated the deal. And even though all the documents were signed last year and the sale was old news, the friendship between the three of them remained strong.

Except for moments like this, when he wanted to throttle both of them.

“Did you guys come here to hit balls or give me shit?” Freddie asked the two men.

“Neither,” Will replied, his tone bored. “I came for a drink.”

George chuckled as he walked toward the tee. “Come on, Freddie. You have to admit, if this had happened to either of us, you would be first in line to give us endless shit.”

Freddie frowned. George was right, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to admit that.

“Shut up and hit the ball,” he murmured.

George smiled, then swung his club through the air and sent the ball flying. “So what are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure what I can do.”

“You could sell the apartment,” Will replied, as if it was obvious.

Freddie threw him a dubious look. “I just signed the papers. I’ve got furniture being delivered in a couple of days.”

He also didn’t want to sell. He had loved it even before he’d known it was Anne’s, and now that he’d learned the truth, he felt even more responsibility for it. But he also didn’t know how to be there without thinking of her. He dreaded having to learn.

George leaned down and set up another ball. “What happened between you two?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, feigning ignorance.

“You and Anne. Why did you break up?”

How many nights had Freddie lain awake wondering the same thing? Over the past eight years, he had his stable of working theories, but no definitive answer. After he gave her the charm bracelet at the Half Pint all those Christmases ago, it felt like something broke, and he had no idea how to fix it. Anne hadn’t even tried. Over the next few weeks, she forced more and more distance between them until she finally called and laid out the simple truth: They wanted different things. But even though she was going to Columbia, and he should go to Argentina, she still wanted to be friends. Then she had said the words that had hurt more than anything else anyone had ever said to him.

“I wish you the best.”

Like their relationship had been a sidenote in her life. Something that could be summed up in a greeting card.

He was so confused and hurt that all he could do was block her number.

There were times when he was tempted to look her up, to unblock her and send a text. The anger maintained his resolve, though, and over the years the pain had crystallized. It wasn’t just that Anne had broken his heart—she had found fault with

a fundamental part of him that always aimed for the big picture and figured out the details later.

It was what drove him to the engineering program in Buenos Aires in the first place. He wanted to do it, so he did. The hows and the whens would work themselves out; they always eventually did. That's how he lived his life: Zero in on a goal and go for it. He acted on instinct and dumb luck, and it served him well.

He had always assumed Anne loved that about him, but in the end, maybe that was the ultimate problem.

"I went to Argentina. She stayed," he replied simply.

"And then?"

Freddie shrugged. "And then nothing. I haven't talked to her since."

George winced, while Will let out a loaded sigh behind them.

"Be careful," he murmured, his attention still on his phone.

"Of what?" Freddie asked.

"Getting back together with her. If it goes south, you can't exactly pick up and move out of the country again."

Freddie forced out a dry laugh. "Not going to happen."

George turned around, frowning. "Then what are we doing here?"

"I just need something to do," Freddie said, running a hand down his face. "Half my problem right now is that I have too much free time to think about all this shit."

"And convince your friends to blow off work to listen to you work through it out loud," Will murmured, sending him a wry grin before taking a sip of his beer.

"Let's be honest. It didn't take much convincing," George said, lining up another shot.

Freddie let out a long breath as he shook his head. "What's funny is I actually *miss* work."

George paused. “I thought you were looking forward to some time off?”

Freddie scratched his jaw as his gaze wandered out to the far nets and the boats drifting by on the Hudson just beyond them. That’s right, he had said that. He had meant it, too. After spending almost a decade building Wentworth Hydroponics, and working so hard to use his technology to help people who needed it most, he had been almost relieved to sell and have some time to himself. But now, the long stretch of idleness felt daunting, and he had no previous experience to help him through it.

“I was,” he finally replied. “But I think I suck at relaxing.”

Will scoffed. “I could have told you that.”

Freddie couldn’t help but laugh.

“Well, if you’re looking for something to do, Mark Segel over at AirSoil is still asking to talk to you,” George said.

Freddie paused. “Who?”

George frowned. “Do you read any of my emails?”

“No.”

Behind them, Will chuckled.

“Mark Segel,” George repeated. “He founded this green energy start-up last year, AirSoil. They’re one of our companies who just had their Series B funding round and look pretty solid. Mark wants to build out a sustainable farming division and was asking if you’d be up for a meeting.”

“Is this a job interview?” Will asked suspiciously.

“No,” George replied. “Just a meeting. But you never know what it could grow into.”

Freddie considered for a moment, then nodded. “All right. Let’s set something up.” Then he turned to notice Will’s dubious expression. “What?”

“Nothing,” Will said, bringing his attention to his phone

again. “I just thought you weren’t interested in becoming a cog in corporate America.”

It was a line Freddie had used when he first met Will, when they were working out the details of selling his company and the possibility of Freddie staying on as CEO. Freddie had dismissed it—he had always hated the idea of working for someone else. Even worse if that work required him to wear a suit and go into an office every day. But just a few months later, Freddie found himself doing just that, attending all the sales pitches and board meetings required for the sale. It had been tedious, yes, but he could handle it. And if this new company was investing in sustainable farming initiatives, the very thing he had once wanted to start a nonprofit to do, would it be so bad to talk?

“It’s just a meeting, Will,” he replied.

His friend didn’t look convinced.

“Okay, enough work talk.” George lined up another shot, then sent his driver slicing through the air. “Now, what about the housewarming party? Is that still on, or has it been canceled due to the current situation at home?”

Shit. The housewarming party. Freddie had almost forgotten about that. He had sent out a text inviting all his friends in the city before his run-in with Anne. Now the impending party felt more like an obligation. “It’s still on.”

“Good. I was worried I’d have to break the news to Emma that you canceled it. She would have never forgiven you,” George said, the corner of his mouth ticking up like it always did when he mentioned his girlfriend.

Will hummed behind them. “But if you *need* to cancel, we understand.”

Freddie’s brows creased together. “What?”

George laughed, sliding his club back in the stand. “What Will’s

trying to say is please cancel the party, because Emma and Lizzy are using it as an excuse to take us to karaoke afterward.”

“No, you’re going to karaoke,” Will said, glaring at George from under his brow. “I’m going to observe.”

Freddie almost wanted to laugh. When he first met Will and George, the three of them had decidedly been bachelors. It was a fact he had almost taken for granted, until George finally admitted to being in love with his neighbor and best friend Emma. As if that wasn’t bad enough, Will went and fell in love with a Hamptons local the following summer. Freddie was the last man standing and, thanks to past experience, happy to stay that way.

“The party is happening.” Freddie said it like he was issuing an edict. “I’m back in New York and I want to celebrate. One ex-girlfriend isn’t going to derail that.”

He forced the words out, but they still felt sour on his tongue.

“Fine,” Will said with a disappointed sigh. He took his phone back out of his jacket and began typing, only to pause and shoot them both an expectant look. “Are you two playing golf or what?”