

PLAN BEA

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THANK YOU FOR READING AN ADVANCED COPY OF CHAPTER ONE

At that moment, a sound no softer than a full-blown car crash shattered the coffee shop's peaceful hum. Heads whipped around, a ripple of confusion and mild horror spreading through the room as the door burst open. In stormed a woman with fiery red hair, her arms overflowing with boutique shopping bags that swung wildly, clattering against each other like some kind of chaotic symphony. She had the air of a Hallmark Christmas movie sister—the one who crashes into scenes with zero regard for subtlety or decorum.

"BEA!" she bellowed, her voice cutting through the café like a siren, her fiery entrance somehow still managing to escalate in volume.

The entire coffee shop stared, their collective gaze burning into me. With a small, apologetic smile and a series of quick, mortified nods in their direction, I tried to wordlessly assure them this wasn't *my* fault. Meanwhile, the woman barreled forward, oblivious to the scene she'd caused, her eyes locked on me as if she hadn't just thrown a grenade into everyone's morning.

"There you are!" she shouted again, planting herself in front of my table as though she owned the place.

I considered, briefly, the merits of crawling under the table.

Shuffling the array of bags around and underneath our small table she whips off her scarf, narrowly missing my face with it, and finally settles into the seat across from me. I suppose it's worth mentioning that it is the weekend after Thanksgiving that I have been abruptly introduced to the news that Ryan is leaving me.

"I know the timing is terrible," he said.

With no words of my own I spin the documents to Gabby for her inspection.

"DICKHEAD!" she shouts again no consideration for the patrons of the small coffee shop who've only just returned to their muted murmurs. "Are you kidding me?"

"Yes, Gabby, I am joking," I deadpan.

"Wow, Bea, this is seriously shitty." Gabby returns, and this time it's sincere and at a reasonable volume. "What—I mean, what are you going to do?"

I sigh and push my arms out straight against the table, making me lean back into the chair. "I don't know. So far, I've only made it here."

"You know, I fully expected this from him in high school," she says, exasperation dripping from every word. "But after year five, the engagement, and Connor... I guess I thought he'd actually stick around." She pauses, her voice edged with a bitterness that feels almost more personal than the betrayal itself, like it's somehow worse that he waited a full twelve years to become exactly the person she always knew he was.

Truth be told, I expected it back then too.

"And right before Christmas," I add, because if one of us doesn't say it now, get it out into the open, I'm afraid I'll end up screaming it at some poor, unsuspecting stranger. I can already picture it: grabbing someone by the lapels of their puffy winter jacket, shaking them slightly, and yelling, "*My husband is leaving me three weeks before Christmas!*"

The thought makes me laugh, but it's the kind of laugh that teeters precariously on the edge of a sob.

Gabby's face softens, and like only mothers and best friends can, she draws out the full range of emotions I've been desperately trying to suppress. She moves her chair to my side of the table and embraces me, letting me cry in one of my top five favorite spots in Charity that I may never return to.

After minutes of uninterrupted crying, I pull away, wipe my tears, and straighten back up. "He offered

to take the guest room while we sort things out, but I'm thinking about asking Jack if I can crash with him for now. It's closer to the hospital, and maybe the separation will help."

"Does Jack know?" asks Gabby, returning across the table.

"Not yet. He's my next call."

"He's going to want to kick his ass." Gabby laughs.

Jack, my younger brother who transitioned from being a constant pain to being my protector, loves me and then Conner even more. This will devastate him. He never really liked Ryan—as my husband—as a guy he goofed around with in high school? Sure.

"You want me to stick around while you call?" Gabby asks.

"I was thinking I'd just go by and see him. He's supposed to get Conner tomorrow, and I want him to know beforehand."

"Does Conner know?"

I shake my head, feeling the tears well up again. No, I didn't tell Connor. Ryan didn't tell Connor, either. Apparently, Ryan's grand plan was to drop this bombshell on me and leave *me* to handle the fallout—to tell everyone, including our son.

I mean, he's the one blowing up our lives. Shouldn't *he* be the one to sit Connor down and explain? Shouldn't *he* have to call our family and friends and tell them? Why does he get to avoid the crushing weight of saying it out loud, over and over, while I'm left to pick up the pieces?

"I'll go with you," she offers again, already poised to move, heft all the bags she brought in here and carry them to my brother's apartment with its ocean views, many female visitors, unless he has Conner, and hold my hand while I tell him the news.

"No, it's all right," I say, and for once, I actually mean it. I gesture to the small mountain of bags surrounding us, each one threatening to spill its contents at any moment. "It looks like you've got enough on your plate."

She huffs out a small laugh, but her eyes soften. "Let me walk you out, at least. And promise me you'll call after—let me know where you're going to stay, okay?"

I nod, already feeling the weight of her concern like a warm blanket I didn't know I needed.

"I'll bring a bottle of wine," she continues, her voice brightening, "and we can watch *How to Be Single* while the boys play Mine-whatever."

That earns a genuine laugh from me. "Minecraft," I correct, though the thought of wine and a ridiculous rom-com is the first comforting thing I've heard all day.

We both layer back into our coats and scarves, and I grab a few of her bags without hesitation. Together, we weave our way through the coffee shop, muttering a couple of polite "excuse me's" as we go. Outside, I wait with her while an Uber pulls closer to whisk her and her mountain of Christmas shopping away.

Gabby and Keith share one car, an arrangement they've somehow perfected between school drop-offs, sports practices, and doctor's appointments. On the rare occasions they need a second car, Gabby insists she loves Ubering around town, claiming it makes her feel famous. She always turns it into an event, treating the day like her own personal parade route.

When her Uber finally arrives, I help her and the driver load all the bags into the trunk, the icy wind whipping her fiery red hair into her face as snowflakes dance in the air around us.

Gabby pulls me into a hug—tight and warm, the kind of hug that could undo me completely if it lasted a moment too long. Just as I feel myself teetering on the edge of another breakdown, she pulls back and kisses my cheek, her hands squeezing my arms in silent reassurance.