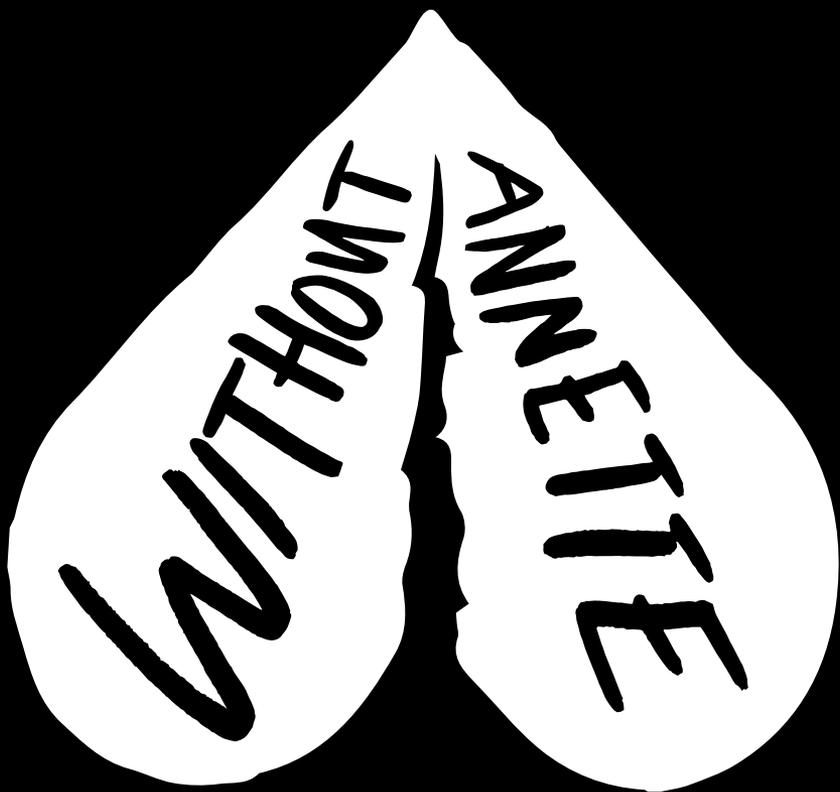


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CHAPTER 1



I stared at the piece of paper posted on the dormitory door as if it were committing perjury, feeling the blood drain from my face. “We’re not roommates?” I blurted.

“Apparently not,” Annette said. She found my hand and gave it a quick squeeze, then dropped it again. My head spun crazily. *We weren’t roommates.* “We’re in the same dorm at least,” she added quietly.

I scanned the list again, double-checking the room numbers. Annette’s name was right where it always was, at the top: Annette Anderson, room 108. I was lost among dozens of other names in the middle: Josie Little, room 316.

Behind us, sunlight glinted off the luxury SUVs and station wagons that lined the curb. Dads in sherbet-colored button-downs and loafers hefted luggage, while moms in printed blouses, skirts, and low heels gathered in conversation nearby.

Our parents were thirteen hundred miles away, in Virginia Falls, Minnesota. Which was probably just as well, since most of the shirts my dad owned were lumberjack plaid, and my family drove a ten-year-old, rusty Dodge Caravan.

Annette and I had both spent our entire lives in Virginia Falls, right up until three o’clock this morning, when we’d piled our luggage and ourselves into said minivan and departed for the

Minneapolis airport. A three-hour drive and a two-and-a-half-hour plane ride later, we'd arrived in Hartford, Connecticut. And just now, at Brookwood Academy, elite coeducational boarding school in picturesque rural Connecticut.

Turning, I looked out at the main circle, at the ivy-covered brick buildings and giant elms—the biggest I'd ever seen. At the people who somehow reminded me of Easter-themed tablecloth and napkin sets.

“It looks just like the catalog, doesn't it?” Annette asked as a silver-whiskered golden retriever lumbered past, sniffing the grass in search of the perfect place to relieve himself.

“Sure does,” I agreed. A pair of girls in sleeveless sweaters embraced not far away, laughing. Their tanned, slender arms linked easily as they crossed the lawn—they could have been starring in the catalog shoot. I tucked a wayward curl into my headband and adjusted my backpack. I'd pored over that catalog a hundred times and imagined our arrival just as many, but somehow I hadn't pictured anything like this.

It wasn't as though I expected balloons. Or a bunch of people standing on the curb, holding hot dishes with crocheted hot pads. I knew Brookwood wouldn't be like Virginia Falls. I didn't *want* it to be.

I'd wanted it to be different. I'd wanted to be someplace else. I'd wanted to go to a school that challenged me. But most of all, I'd wanted to get Annette away from her mother, to keep her safe.

I'd wanted Annette to be my roommate.

“I see you've found the list of room assignments,” Dean Austin said, setting our luggage on the curb and mopping his brow with

a handkerchief. “I’ll send someone over to bring your luggage up so you can settle in.”

I watched as the golden retriever finished his business and trotted over to the car, hopping onto the seat I had occupied moments ago, panting and looking pleased with himself.

I swiveled my head to look at my butt. Sure enough, the entire tail end of my dark denim capris was covered in blond, silky dog hair. I swiped at my ass, glancing over at Annette’s, which somehow remained hairless-terrier bald.

“Hey,” a pair of girls dressed in sporty above-the-knee skirts, who had just come out of the dorm, said as they passed. One of them turned back, giving me a skeptical once-over. And why wouldn’t she? I was the only female in sight who didn’t have long, straight, shiny hair, and had dog hair all over her butt.

“Should we go in?” Annette’s voice was crazy quiet, the way it got when her mom had been drinking and she was trying to avoid a blowup.

Half of me wanted to go home, and none of me wanted to go in. But we couldn’t just stand there on the stoop, staring—especially since Dean Austin and the shed machine had already driven away.

“May as well,” I said as lightly as I could. “I am in serious need of a bathroom.”

Annette chuckled and stepped into the foyer. “Peeing all over yourself would not be good,” she agreed.

It took about ten seconds to find Annette’s room. It was right there, a few steps down the hall, as accessible as her name on an alphabetical list. The door was open a crack and I could see a girl

unpacking inside. She was tall and slender, with a blond ponytail running halfway down her back. *Of course.*

“I’ll come find you as soon as I settle in,” Annette told me, giving my hand another quick squeeze.

I gazed at the pale yellow shadow of a bruise under her left eye—a parting gift from her mother—and tried to disguise the fact that I longed to barge through the door and explain to the girl with the ponytail that there’d been a mistake, that there would be two girls moving into this room, that *her* roommate was actually upstairs in room 316. But even in my state of disbelief, I knew that doing such a thing would be ridiculous, as would giving Annette a passionate good-bye kiss in the dormitory hallway. Or any kiss right then, since Annette and I had decided to wait a little while—get our boarding school bearings—before going public as a couple. So I mustered up the best smile I was capable of and turned toward the stairs, unable to avoid overhearing Annette introduce herself to her roommate, picturing her expression based on the cadence of her voice, and then my mind’s eye going blank as I heard her roommate reply, “I’m Rebecca.”

The stairwell was concrete and metal, and my footsteps echoed as I shuffled my way up. Floor three was at the top, 316 at the end of the hall. The door was closed.

“Hello?” I called quietly, opening it a crack and peeking inside. *Speak up, Josephine!* my deceased grandmother said in my head. She was practically deaf by the time she turned seventy, so shouting was required if you wanted her to hear whatever it was you had to say. And in this case she was right.

“Anyone home?” I said a little louder as I pushed the door open wide and saw for the first time the space that would be my home for the next nine months. It was smaller than I expected, and already full of stuff—presumably my roommate’s. She was lying on the bottom bunk, which was covered in a funky duvet, with her eyes closed and buds in her ears. A matched set of partially empty suitcases covered most of the floor, along with a stack of oversize art books, and one of the dressers was piled with everything from toiletries to magazines to jewelry to a mountain of lacy underwear. I was wondering how many pairs of underwear were in that heap when my roommate did a little shimmy and belted out part of the song she was listening to.

I laughed out loud, and she opened an eye.

“Hi, I’m Josie.” I stepped forward so she wouldn’t have to get up.

My roommate stared at me for a long, hard moment, her eyes a mixture of resentment and ambivalence. Then she momentarily looked past me, rolled over, and turned her entire body to the wall.

Face flushing, my hand dropped limply to my side. “Nice to meet you, too,” I mumbled.