

Annabeth



This short story takes place before the events of Under the Stars. This is written from Annabeth's point of view. As always – additional chapters are unedited so expect to find typos and errors!

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I lean against the kitchen counter as I flick through the menu suggestions that arrived in today's post. I skim down the options and wonder again what I would like to have as my first meal as a married woman. What does this meal say about me and Sam as a couple? Are we the type of couple who would serve lobster? Stuffed chicken? Duo of beef?

Nothing feels like it would be right, and I'm a little frustrated with myself because it should be a simple decision. It should have been something we agreed on ages ago, and it irritates me that Sam and I haven't finalised it yet.

I put the menu down and rub at my temples to try to shake some of the stress from me. I need Sam to sit down with me and decide together. He has given me a multitude of excuses all month and it's given me a headache I don't want to deal with any longer. Settling the menu will be one thing we can tick off the list, put behind us, and start

to focus on what a wedding is supposed to be about – the joy of our union, our love. Not getting into little frustrated conversations about what type of flowers he might want for the buttonholes. I don't care about buttonholes, but he needs to decide so we can tick off the list, given he'll be the one wearing them.

I drop the menu onto the countertop and then potter across the kitchen to check the dinner I have in the slow cooker. I lift the lid to give it a stir. My mouth waters as the aromas hit me. God bless the slow cooker, a little effort in the morning and my evening is so much easier.

I put the lid back onto the slow cooker, checking the time. Sam should have been home by now, but it isn't unusual for him to be late recently. He's been working longer shifts at the garage. I switch the cooker on to the keep warm setting rather than cook and I walk through the kitchen, tidying things away to fill the time. Sam was clearly in a rush this morning when he left. There's a dirty rag next to the sink, and more of his items strewn in the living room as I walk through the house, picking things up to put away.

I clear through the downstairs section of the house. I'm fairly sure I'll find more things to put away when I make it upstairs later.

I'm putting some things in the washing machine in the laundry room when I hear the front door opening.

"Hey," I call. I pour in the detergent and walk out of the laundry room, joining him in the hallway.

"Hey," he replies. He's looking at his fingernails, and I try not to frown when I see he's left dirty fingerprints on the door when he closed it.

"Tea is ready. Do you need to wash up? I thought we could finalise the menu for the wedding tonight."

"I'll wash up if you want to dish up," he replies. He follows me through the house as I walk back to the kitchen.

“How was work?” I pull the large dishes out of the cupboard and the ladle from the drawer.

“Same old, same old.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine.”

He shrugs and walks to the kitchen sink, squirting some soap onto his hands and setting the tap to run, leaving smears of soap on the tap handle. He scrubs at his hands, rinses, flicking soapy water which lands onto the kitchen cabinets. I try not to sigh to myself. It isn't like I want to live in a perfect house that never has any mess, but Sam *never* cleans up after himself. Sometimes I'm sure it is because he never lived by himself. He lived at home with his parents until we eventually decided to buy the house together. He's spent his whole life with somebody cleaning up after him. Usually it doesn't irritate me because I'm so used to just picking things up and putting them away. Occasionally, though, it irks me. I'm sure it's normal to be occasionally irritated.

I finish dishing up the tea and carry the bowls through to the dining table which is already set. I take a seat and wait for Sam. He wanders through, wiping his hands dry on his trousers. He takes his seat opposite me and picks up his fork, prodding at one of his chicken thighs.

“Can we talk about the food for the wedding after we finish eating? They're chasing me to finalise the menu. I know you've been busy, but we really ought to....”

“I need to talk to you about something,” he cuts in.

“Okay, what's the matter?”

I can tell he's got something on his mind. I'm sure he's had things on his mind for *months* but every time I ask him or try to find out what the problem is, he shakes his head and tells me nothing is wrong.

Apparently, I'm imagining things. He says he's tired and then tells me I'm making too big a deal of things.

'Will you just drop it, Annabeth?' he snapped at me one night when I asked him if there was a problem.

I'm sure it's the wedding plans that is getting him down, or maybe I'm just imagining it – like he says – because *I've* had some worries about the wedding. It's not surprising given how the proposal happened, but maybe he's right and I now need to let that all go. Maybe I'm the one causing the occasional bit of tension in the house, me and my hesitance rubbing off onto him.

Looking at him now, I'm not sure it'll be something I'm going to let go. He's definitely got something weighing on him, but hopefully, now, he'll admit whatever has been on his mind.

"I think we should put a stop to this," he states. He looks like he's going to be sick.

"The food? Are you sick?"

"Not food, Annabeth."

"The wedding?" I ask. I frown. "I knew you were having cold feet. Why didn't you just tell me? I've asked you a million times."

I have asked him a million times. Maybe too many times, but I'm sure he can't blame me for that. His proposal didn't exactly set me alight with passion and assurance that he meant it. I gave him so many opportunities to back out of his proposal, and it took me ages to accept he meant it.

Clearly, now is the time he admits he isn't totally on board with the path he threw us on.

It'll be a financial annoyance to cancel things, but we can do it. I'm sure some places will hold the deposits for us for whenever he decides we should go ahead in the future. That's the joy of using various local businesses, though I know some of the places will charge us a cancella-

tion fee. I just wish he'd admitted it when I asked him before we started planning things; before we made all the financial commitments that I initially held back on because I knew he was stressed out about the proposal.

If we cancel things now, maybe things will go back to normal. I've missed his usual affection. We haven't been passionate in weeks. I feel a sense of relief that maybe if we agree to postpone the wedding, things will go back to normal. I never cared about a big, fancy wedding. Yes, I would have been happy to be his wife, and maybe it would have given me a thrill to start signing my name as Annabeth Hanks, but I was happy as things were.

"Not the wedding."

"Then to what, Sam?" I prod. He sits across from me, and I realise he's desperate to look anywhere but at me. He still looks like he's going to be sick, and he is a pale as a sheet.

"To us."

"To us, what?" I ask, sharply.

"I think we could do with a break, I guess."

"People don't take time out on their relationships, Sam," I snap.

"I just think that maybe we need a break. It's too much pressure."

"I don't know what you mean. What pressure do you think is on you?" I scoff, but all my sharpness and indignation are slowly seeping out of me. All I'm left with is a sick feeling in my stomach.

"Don't you think we missed out on things because we were so young when we got together? Don't you feel it too?" he asks. He finally looks at me but for a moment, I'm too dumbfounded to look him in the eye.

Do I feel it? Have I ever contemplated it? I don't think it's ever crossed my mind, other than an acknowledgement of the facts – that he was my first and I expected him to be my only.

“What are you suggesting?”

My voice sounds faint now. I clear my throat twice. I count the seconds of his silence.

“I think we should see other people,” he admits, just as I’ve reached count two hundred.

He’s joking. He must be joking. There’s no way that my boyfriend – no, fiancé – is really sitting across from me, in the house we own, only a handful of weeks before a wedding *he asked me to plan*, telling me that not only does he want to postpone, but he wants to see other people.

I look around, wondering when my friends are going to jump out from behind the cabinets and tell me it’s a joke and hey, isn’t it all so damn funny.

I’m sure they wouldn’t do that to me.

But, five minutes ago, I’d never have said that Sam would suggest he wants to see somebody else.

“How long for?” I murmur.

“What do you mean?” Not it’s his turn to sound shocked.

“Well, you’re saying you think we should see other people. Are you looking for one night? One person? A few casual dates? Or are you suggesting an open relationship?” I fire my questions at him. Still waiting for the punchline that I’m getting less convinced is going to come.

“I don’t know. I just need to be by myself right now.”

“By yourself or with somebody else?” I shoot at him.

“I don’t think we should get too hung up on the details.”

“You have got to be kidding me, right?” I slam my knife and fork onto the table. They land with a clatter, and I swear it’s the first thing that has properly registered with him. He finally looks like he’s present

in the room rather than pretending he was anywhere but sitting in front of me.

“Annabeth,” he starts, but he stops when I glare at him.

“You’re telling me you want time apart from our relationship, but you don’t want to get bogged down in the details? No, Sam. Stop being ridiculous. Is this because people were joking about the hen and stag nights? People were *joking*. Is that what this is about? You’ve been thinking about what it would be like to sleep with a stripper on your stag do and you want my *permission*?”

Now, I’ve lost the control I had on my tone as well as my expressions. I’m sure I’m probably shooting him daggers across the table.

A few weeks ago, some mutual acquaintances joked in the pub about our wedding. Knowing how long we’d been together, one person in the group was teasing Sam, suggesting how mad I would be if he decided to have a fling on his stag-do.

I’d laughed it off at the time, but it clearly resonated with him more than it did me.

“I don’t want to sleep with a stripper.” He shakes his head.

“Well, obviously not given we won’t have any hen or stag parties if you’re calling the wedding off. Look, I’m fine about the wedding. I half expected it, I guess. I always thought you had cold feet. So, let us just take all that out of the equation, shall we? Where does that then leave us?” I ask.

He’s silent again. I count again. One. Two. Three.

“I’m going to move out.”

I blink a couple of times. I’m not sure I’m hearing him right.

“Where are you going to stay?”

“I’m going to stay with a friend,” he explains.

“A friend,” I echo. “Who? Somebody in the village?”

"No. Further out, so you won't have to see me every day. I thought maybe you would want a bit of space from me for a while."

"What about work?" I ask. Although I'm not in the garage often, I'm there once or twice a week.

Again, he clears his throat and lowers his gaze. I know, automatically, that this isn't going to be good news.

"I'm going to take a break from work."

I huff out a laugh. I stand up, the chair tipping back in my rush. I grab my plate, knife, and fork, storming through to the kitchen. I slam my plate onto the countertop.

A break from work? How exactly does he expect the garage to continue to thrive if he isn't going to work? He's the main mechanic, and Tony can only work a few days a week. How does Sam think he's going to support himself if he takes a break from work? He can't expect me to pay him as if he were still working, surely? How long does he want a break for? A week? Two? A month? Longer?

A break from work and a break from me? I don't understand.

I knew there was something on his mind, but this is beyond anything I ever imagined.

I can understand the cold feet and the fears about the wedding. He proposed on a whim after being pushed by friends and nagged at by family. But, to walk away from everything; to leave our home, to need a break from me and to be looking to spend time with somebody else... it's too much.

I scrape my food into a container, to put away for tomorrow's lunch because there is no way I can eat anything tonight. My stomach is in knots.

The shuffle of Sam's feet as he comes into the kitchen makes me stiffen. I turn in his direction, half expecting that he's done the same

as me and given up with his tea. Instead of his plate in his hand, he's holding a bag.

"You've already packed a bag?" I gasp. He looks sheepish. "You already had a bag packed and stashed away somewhere, so you could have a quick get-away?"

I wonder where he hid his bag. Mostly because Sam's stuff is usually *everywhere*. If he packed a bag to run away, I'd have expected to trip over it in the hallway.

"I packed this morning after you left for work. I was going to just go from work, but I thought I owed it to you to tell you face to face," he explains.

He owed it to me.

We have been together since we were fifteen, and he was going to sneak out? Would he have just left me a note?

For a second, I imagine what that note might have read like. Would it have been a long pouring of his emotions – much more than he's given me verbally tonight – or would it have been short and sweet, even if designed to break my heart.

"I guess I should feel grateful you had enough about you to tell me to my face," I spit, annoyed at his audacity, his flippant remarks, his blasé attitude.

"I'm going to go."

"You're seriously just going to walk out right now? I don't even know what's going on!"

"We can talk in a few weeks, see where we are and what we want to do," he suggests. He clutches tightly onto the handle of his bag. "I'll see you, Annabeth."

"But not at the garage," I point out. I'm still waiting for him to tell me his plan for the garage, how I'm supposed to keep the commitments he made to customers.

“No, like I said. Career break, I guess. Don’t worry about paying me. I’ll be okay.”

“Fine,” I snap.

“Take care, Annabeth.”

He says nothing further, nor does he wait for me to say anything else. He turns and walks out of the kitchen. A little later, I hear the sound of his car door slamming and then his engine roaring to life.

The only sound in the room is my sharp breathing. I can’t grasp everything that has just happened. I’ve gone through an entire roller-coaster, the tentative relief to realise he was finally going to open up to me, to the fearful heights and the swooping loops. See other people. A break from our relationship. A break from work.

A break from me.

I walk back into the dining room, feeling aimless and stunned. I half expect that he’s going to come back through the door, laughing at the joke he played.

His plate sits abandoned on the table. I don’t know why I’m even shocked given he’s often forgotten his plate, expecting me to clean up after dinner, just like his mother would have.

I grab it from the table and take it back to the kitchen. I try not to look at the paperwork I got through the post today, the encouragement to finalise our menu for the wedding. It feels like a lifetime ago that I was looking at it. It’s probably been less than half an hour, but it feels like a decade has passed and my life has changed.

I put Sam’s plate onto the countertop. I know I should clean up but for the first time ever, I know I’m not going to be tidying the kitchen tonight. I leave everything, ignoring the mess, ignoring the menu paperwork, the splotches of water on the cabinet from Sam washing his hands, and the bitter taste of my shock. I lock the doors,

grab my bag as I pass it. I head up the stairs. Each step I take, I think another thought.

I should tell Lucy.

No, she's busy with the kids. Tell her tomorrow.

You need to tell Mum and Dad.

They can wait until tomorrow.

Did he tell anybody he was going to drop this bombshell on me?

Are they waiting for me to tell them what they already know?

I feel sick.

I want to go to bed.

I want to wake up tomorrow and find that this was all a dream.

I manage to keep the tears at bay until I've got myself ready for bed and slide myself into the covers. I wrap the covers around me, over my head, blocking out the light, trying to stop my racing thoughts.

As I fall into a restless sleep, the last thought I have on my mind is:

He'll come back.

He'll come back.

He'll come back.