

BACKUP GIRL NO MORE: ADIOS TO MY V-CARD AND MY FIRST LOVE

Backup Girl No More

Chapter 16

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Life has a way of creating distance. Months passed without any news of each other, and I made sure to keep it that way. I even asked my parents not to mention the Carters or anything about their

family.

College life at Stanford was exactly the distraction I needed. Between joining the photography club, volunteering at the campus radio station, and juggling a full course load, I barely had time to think about the past. The California sun had a way of burning off old memories.

Looking back, it seemed almost laughable how I'd centered my entire world around one person. Ironically, I found myself agreeing with something Aiden had once said – why tie yourself down so young when there's a whole world to explore?

I was grateful for choosing Stanford. Sure, the earthquakes took some getting used to, and the rent prices were insane, but there was something magical about a place where flowers bloomed year-round. I'd already forgotten what East Coast winters felt like.

During winter break, my old lab partner Emma visited the Bay Area, and Maya and I took her to this amazing brunch spot in San Francisco. Inevitably, Aiden's name came up.

"He and Madison barely lasted a month," Emma said, stirring her mimosa. "Now he's working his way through every sorority at Columbia. Total player. You wouldn't even recognize him – completely different from the intense valedictorian we knew in high school. It's like watching someone have a quarter-life crisis at nineteen."

I stayed quiet, pushing my avocado toast around the plate.

Maya shot Emma a warning look, quickly changing the subject to her latest startup idea.

On New Year's Eve, Maya and I went to a rooftop party overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge. During the countdown, she nudged me to make a wish.

It wasn't until later that I realized something – for the first time, my wish had nothing to do with Aiden. For six years straight, every birthday candle, every shooting star, every 11:11 had been about him. Now, I was finally writing my own story.

The real test came during winter break of freshman year. Homesickness hit hard after finals, and I booked the first flight home I could get.

But walking through arrivals, my heart stopped. There, standing between my parents with that familiar half-smile, was Aiden.

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After six months apart, we'd both changed. Aiden looked different – thinner, with sun-lightened hair, but still unfairly handsome in that effortless way that had made half our high school swoon.

I might have been naive about people, but I always had good taste. It's probably why I'd spent years following him around like a lovesick puppy, convincing myself that the boy next door was my destiny. Looking at him now, I could still see why – but the view was different when you weren't looking through rose-colored glasses anymore.

After a moment's pause, I walked over with an easy smile, the kind you give distant acquaintances. "Hey, Aiden! Didn't expect to see you here."

His hand froze mid-reach for my suitcase, staring at me like I'd started speaking in tongues. The casual tone seemed to throw him more than anything else – no trace of our history, no hint of the girl

who used to hang on his every word.

It took him a solid minute to recover, hands slightly shaking as he grabbed my luggage. The confident golden boy suddenly looked unsure of his role in this new script.

Mom leaned in, whispering an explanation: "We ran into him outside. He insisted on coming to help. Wouldn't take no for an answer – you know how he gets."

I just smiled, letting her know it was fine. And surprisingly, it was.

In the car, I filled the silence with stories about college life, making my parents laugh with tales of midnight pizza runs and failed attempts at doing laundry. While we all carefully ignored Aiden's presence, I caught him fighting back smiles in the rearview mirror, like he couldn't help himself.

He lingered when we got home, clearly angling for an invitation inside, but we all politely deflected with that practiced suburban courtesy that says “not today” without actually saying it.

Throughout break, I kept busy with driving lessons (finally getting my license) and meeting up with old friends. I heard through the grapevine that he tried to catch me several times, but I was always conveniently out. Mom mentioned he’d stop by, looking like a lost puppy, only to leave disappointed.

I was genuinely puzzled why he’d even try – what could we possibly have left to say to each other?

Some stories are better left unfinished.

New Year’s Eve brought the usual chaos. Our house was packed with family – my grandmother and aunt had flown in from Chicago, bringing their usual mix of love and drama. After our traditional family dinner (complete with my dad’s infamous attempts at grilling in winter), the older generation

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settled in with their shows while us younger ones attempted to learn poker, mostly failing but having fun anyway.

That’s when the Carters showed up unexpectedly, loaded down with gifts like they used to every year before everything changed – as if nothing had changed at all.

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“Our house is too quiet – mind if we join your game?” Mrs. Carter asked with her usual warmth.

We’d always spent New Year’s Eve together before everything happened. This year, Mom had politely declined their dinner invitation, but you can’t exactly turn away guests at your door.

Aiden naturally gravitated to the seat next to mine, watching me play poker. My cousins, oblivious to our history, kept making those classic “when’s the wedding?” jokes. I laughed them off smoothly

while Aiden's jaw tightened more with each comment.

At midnight, when everyone headed outside for fireworks, he caught my arm, clearly wanting to talk. That's when my phone rang.

Blushing slightly, I pulled away from him to answer. It was Jake from my photography club back at Stanford – a local California guy with an infectious laugh. He wasn't the brooding type like Aiden;

instead, he was the kind of guy who could make anyone smile, always ready with a terrible pun or a

ridiculous story.

He claimed he called just to count down the New Year together, not wanting to celebrate alone. I kept

him on speaker, letting him join our family's celebrations from across the country.

Before hanging up, he laughed sheepishly. "Truth is, I just wanted to be the first person to wish you

happy New Year. So... happy New Year, Brooklyn!"

I couldn't help grinning as I wished him the same, chatting for a few more minutes. When I finally

hung up and turned around, Aiden was standing there, his expression glacial.

He'd clearly heard everything.

"Boyfriend?" His voice was rough.

"Not officially," I answered honestly, after considering it.

Aiden stayed quiet for what felt like forever.

Just as I was about to head back inside to rejoin the poker game, he spoke again: "Long-distance relationships rarely work out. You should find someone closer to home."

I nodded, noting the irony. "You're right – you never really know someone until you do. I'll take my time deciding. Thanks for the advice, Aiden. Hope you settle down soon too."

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Something in my casual response seemed to hit a nerve. Without another word, he disappeared into

the night.

I shrugged it off – his mood swings weren't my problem anymore. Amazing how rose-colored glasses could make even red flags look like normal flags.

The rest of break flew by in a blur of family visits and road trips with my parents. I barely spent any time at home, successfully avoiding any more Aiden encounters.

Break ended too quickly, and I was back at Stanford before I knew it.

Then, impossibly, I saw Aiden standing at the university entrance the very next day.

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He looked exhausted, with dark circles under his eyes and his usually perfect hair a mess – like he

hadn't slept in days.

“Aiden? What are you doing in California?” Standing there in his East Coast winter coat, he looked completely out of place among the palm trees and students in t-shirts.

“Wanted to see your school. See how you're doing out here.” His voice was rough, like he'd been

practicing this moment but still wasn't ready.

I kept my tone deliberately light, casual. “It's amazing here! The food scene is incredible – they have these amazing fusion restaurants downtown. You should definitely check them out while you're in

town.”

He shifted uncomfortably, running a hand through his disheveled hair. “Can't you... show me around? Just once? For old times' sake?”

Before I could figure out how to let him down gently, another voice cut in.

“Sorry, man, but she's already got plans. You'll have to get in line.” Jake appeared beside me, positioning himself protectively between us, his easy California confidence a stark contrast to

Aiden's intense energy.

The tension crackled as they sized each other up – Jake with his sun-bleached hair and laid-back vibe, Aiden with his expensive wool coat and prep school posture. East Coast old money meeting

West Coast new world.

“You came back to campus early for him?” Aiden's voice had an edge I couldn't quite place. Jealousy? Hurt? After all these years of him taking me for granted, it was almost funny.

I saw no reason to explain myself anymore. That part of our story was over. “Sorry, Aiden, but we've got reservations. Let's go, Jake.”

I nudged Jake, who seemed reluctant to move, still locked in some unspoken guy-code standoff. “Come on, you promised to take me to that amazing farm-to-table place in wine country, remember? It's a long drive, and I heard their sunset view is incredible.”

Jake finally let me pull him away, but not before shooting one last challenging look at Aiden – the kind that clearly said “she's moved on.”

At the crosswalk, I couldn't help glancing back. Aiden stood alone at the gates, a shadow under the

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palm trees, looking more lost than I'd ever seen him. The golden boy who'd always had everything suddenly realizing some things couldn't be won back with a charming smile.

For a moment, my heart twisted with an old, familiar ache. Then the light changed, and I stepped forward into my new life, leaving the past where it belonged.

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There's this saying about breakups – women grieve immediately but heal in a month, while men might take ages to realize what they've lost. Then comes the desperate backpedaling.

Aiden's backpedaling came late – after six months of playing the field and a quiet winter break, he suddenly became a constant presence in my life.

I never figured out what excuse he gave Columbia for missing classes, but he kept showing up in California. Designer gifts appeared at my door – I returned them all. He'd wait outside my dorm for

hours, refusing to leave. When he caught me, he'd trail me to class, to the dining hall, everywhere.

Jake was beside himself, torn between amusement and irritation. "You know, most girls don't have

their exes fly across the country to stalk them," he'd joke, but I could hear the worry beneath.

Mrs. Carter called constantly, frantic that Aiden was risking academic probation, begging me to talk

sense into him. The irony wasn't lost on me – the perfect son throwing everything away for the girl he'd once taken for granted.

Finally, I confronted him by the bay.

Aiden immediately lost it. "Why can Jake pursue you but I can't? He's known you for what, five minutes? I've known you my whole life. Nobody knows you like I do, nobody's better for you than

me."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Really, Aiden? Have you forgotten everything you did? Did you ever take

my feelings seriously? You just loved having someone worship you, knowing I'd always be there no

matter how badly you treated me."

Hit with the truth, he cracked. "Yes, I messed up. I was young and stupid, thought the whole world

was waiting for me. I didn't want to be tied down. I owe you a real apology – I'm sorry, Brooklyn."

His voice softened. "But even if you see me as a stranger now, don't I deserve a chance to win you

back? Since you've been gone, I can't adjust to life without you. I can't imagine not sharing everything with you anymore."

The evening wind off the bay whipped around us as I considered my words carefully.

"You know what I learned after leaving? Real love shouldn't feel like walking on eggshells. I can be myself now, my happiness doesn't depend on someone else's mood. Maybe what I felt for you wasn't love – maybe it was just teenage naivety."

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He looked like I'd struck him. When he finally spoke, his voice was small. "But we had plans – college together, grad school, traveling the world. Are you breaking all those promises too?"

"You broke them first," I said gently. "And I've found someone I actually want to do those things with

now."

His composure finally broke, eyes reddening. "Stop, please just stop."

Seeing his pain, I offered one last piece of advice: "Maybe you don't really love me. Maybe you just can't stand losing. Aiden, it's time for you to move on too."

I didn't wait for his response. Jake was waiting across the street, and I ran to him.

He immediately laced his fingers through mine. "Finally got rid of your ex? Did you tell him I'm your official spider-killer now?"

I laughed through threatening tears.

Looking back one last time, I saw Aiden still frozen by the water.

Some people stay in your life forever. Others are just chapters in your story.

Ours had finally reached its end.

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