

I sink down in my seat, hands wrapped around the steaming mug of coffee sitting on the table in front of me. My cheeks turn a brighter shade of red as Kezia elbows me playfully in the side.

“Nina, how could you say no?!” she says, a huge grin spreading across her face. She’s sipping on a raspberry iced tea despite the freezing weather outside the cozy coffee shop.

“Yeah,” Eden agrees. She takes a long sip of her peppermint cappuccino before setting it down on the table with a small plink! and giving me a pointed look. “You could have given Gage your number and bought him a new coffee.”

I tear my gaze away from Eden’s accusing green eyes and stare into my half empty cup for the hundredth time, folding my hands in my lap. Maybe she was right, but I’d frozen up. Like a deer in headlights, one might say. Because, there he had been, tousled brown hair, bright hazel eyes, standing right in front of me, saying the one thing I’d wanted to hear for months, and I’d said no.

“Come on, you guys have been giving each other looks in class all semester,” Kezia points out. “He totally thinks you’re cute.”

I reach for my coffee, but draw my hands back after a small pause. Suddenly my stomach is turning like a roller coaster and the thought of putting anything in it sickens me. I’ve already embarrassed myself once, I don’t plan on doing it again.

I can still see the casual look on his face that had turned to surprise when I’d bumped into him in passing, causing him to spill his—fortunately—iced drink all over his shirt. I can still feel the heat rising up the back of my neck and creeping up my cheeks, the embarrassed panic flooding my mind.

He’d forgiven me, of course, while dabbing at his shirt with ten napkins and laughing the way I’d heard so many times passing him in the hallway or in class. I hadn’t been able to not notice the way his hands moved as he spoke, as he said my name, and assured me that it was fine.

“Is there anything I can do to make it up to you? I’m so, so sorry,” I’d stammered, holding the sopping wet napkins I’d used to mop up the floor awkwardly in my hands.

After a pause, a smile crept onto his face and he replied, “Give me your number and we’re even.”

I still can’t believe I said no. That I gave him some lame excuse that “that certainly wouldn’t be enough” and insisted on buying him a new coffee instead.

I’m such an idiot. Is it really that hard to give a guy my number?

Obviously yes.

“Nina,” Eden hisses, leaning forward across from me and very nearly swiping her blonde hair through her drink. “Don’t look now, but a certain someone is looking at you from across the room.” She wiggles her eyebrows hintingly at me and I can only sink into my seat more.

Before I can even think, I slowly turn my head to the left and lock eyes with Gage from across the room.

Every ounce of breath escapes my lungs and I have the overwhelming urge to climb under the table and never come out again. He holds my gaze for one, two, three seconds before smiling—a real smile, one that goes up to his eyes and way beyond—and turning back to his laptop.

“Nina,” Kezia says, reaching over to take my hand in hers. “You asked us to help you get over this, right? Your social phobia?”

“Anxiety,” I correct her.

“Same difference,” she shrugs.

Eden nods in Gage’s direction. “So. Go ahead or I’ll go over and give your number to him myself.”

Butterflies attack my stomach in waves, my heart skipping several beats at the thought of either situation. I can’t. I can’t do it.

Eden gives me a prodding look.

But I have to.

I count ten agonizing seconds before I reach for a napkin, dig a pen out of my bag, and scribble down my phone number. Then I stand on shaking legs, tossing Kezia and Eden nervous glances, and make my way to the table Gage sits at.

All the while my mind races. Am I walking too fast? Too slow? Do I seem nervous? Can he see my hands shaking, hear my heart pounding against my ribcage?

When I stop in front of him, Gage looks up at me and there’s that heart-stopping smile again.

“Hey,” I croak, then clear my throat and slide the napkin across the table to him. Gage pushes his laptop to the side and picks up the thin piece of paper. I drop into the seat across from him, sure that soon I’ll overheat and pass out.

“I thought you didn’t think your number was enough to make it up to me,” Gage teases, eyes twinkling.

Some of the anxiety leaves my body in that moment, leaving the want to burst into nervous giggles, and I smile. All I can say as he pulls out his phone is, “I guess I just had a change of heart.”