

Annabeth Dies at the End

Kylie Bennington watches her dad pull from the driveway. He gives a limp “see you” wave through the half-cracked window as his taillights disappear into the night. Then she’s alone in the dark. As usual.

Instagram glows hot in her palm, lighting the way as she moves to the front porch, sidestepping the yard equipment that Mom has neglected to pick up for going on two months now. Her phone dings as she nears the door.

Erin:

Home yet?

Kylie’s thumb smashes the green FaceTime button before her device can get a ring off, and then she’s looking into Erin’s bedroom, a scrawl of summer clothes strewn across woolly pink carpet.

“Did I lend you my linen skirt?” Erin asks.

“Funny.”

“The one from the beach. Short. Kinda see-through when the sun hits it just right?”

“When do you lend me anything?”

“That’s what’s bothering me.”

“Why don’t you just message the label? Have them send you another?”

"Because I think I actually bought this one."

"Ah, the rare designer that isn't comping your wardrobe."

"Never pay if you can help it."

"Yes, well, some of us plebs have no choice."

"You'll get there," Erin says. "You're my long-term project. Gonna prove the Erin Palmer Method is bulletproof. They'll pay me to speak at conferences and shit."

Kylie finds her way by cell phone light through the darkened house. A note on the kitchen table says there's a bowl of spinach salad in the fridge and is signed, "Love, Mom."

She takes it out, sets it aside.

"Off-white," Erin's saying. "More like cream, I guess?"

But Kylie's distracted, barely listening as she pulls open every cabinet.

"Assume I find it," Erin continues. "It's appropriate to wear. Right?"

"Um, sure?" Kylie's rummaging through the refrigerator for the tuna steak she'd asked Mom to buy.

"Yeah," Erin states. "I think it's appropriate. It says, *'I'm grieving, but not at the expense of comfort.'*"

"You're not grieving because nobody's dead."

Erin flips the phone around and stares. The remnants of a clay mask at her hairline. "Kylie. She's been missing since April."

"*Missing*," Kylie emphasizes. "Annabeth is missing."

"And her parents sold the house and left town."

"She was a friend and—"

"In the fourth grade." Erin brushes a couple of stacks of fall wear off the edge of her bed, done with this conversation. "Another outfit, I suppose. But what, though?" The camera slips down and she's topless.

"God, Erin, put something on. I know your tan lines better than my own."

"Speaking of which, we should totally get back indoors. I'm over the sun. Look at this—see these freckles above my boobs?"

Kylie minimizes the screen instead and toggles to a recipe for mustard-seared tuna. It's a lap around the kitchen to gather the ingredients.

“Yes,” Kylie says, hoping she hasn’t spaced on any traumatizing details.

“Good. I mean, I was gonna do it anyway, but it’s nice for us to be on the same page.”

Kylie carries the plate through the house, to the living room doors that open into the backyard. She places it down on the brick patio there and calls out, “Sporto!”

An excited huff spins up in response, bushes rustling, the floodlight kicking on, catching the graying snout of the neighbor’s collie as he pushes through the shrubs.

“Good boy,” Kylie coos and closes the door. She takes a can of flavored seltzer from the fridge and carries the spinach salad upstairs.

“Hello?” Erin’s extra annoyed by this radio silence.

“I’m listening. I’m here.”

“You sure?”

“Whatever. I don’t want you watching me eat anyway. Text.”

“Ugh, such a prude. I’ve got a shirt on now.”

“Even so.” Kylie ends the call before Erin can respond. She enters her room, kicking the door closed, dropping onto the bed beneath the Katy Perry poster she’s had pinned there since kindergarten. She runs the tuna photo through Lightroom, toggling her preferred filters until one makes the syrup pop just right.

She captions it, **Hungry?** and adds the hashtags: **#Instagood**, **#yum**, **#homemade**, **#eeeeeeats**, and **#foodie** before blasting it off into social space.

Twenty hearts come back in the blink of an eye.

With her social life fed, Kylie starts in on Mom’s spinach salad as a stream of notifications fills her phone. Not bad for a modest four thousand followers. Nothing compared to Erin’s sixty thou, but not bad.

Someone called @JordanGentleman comments in all caps: **SHE EVEN COOKS! PERFECT WOMAN**. Kylie taps his name to get a better look. His

face is hidden and his shirtless dad bod might be okay if not for the disgusting Brillo curls covering it.

He looks like the type of guy who sends dick pics for a living, but Kylie doesn't block him.

Erin:

watcha eating?

Kylie:

spinach

knew it . . . lying bitch lol

Erin understands that performance is all that matters. Her audience is composed entirely of men like @JordanGentleman who follow a thousand girls just like her, and whose comments are always on the edge of inappropriateness.

Sometimes Kylie wonders why she and Erin cater to cretins, and Erin's always quick to remind her that it doesn't matter. Let them be perverts, so long as they're perverts who follow and like.

Erin's enough of an influencer to get an annual VidCon invitation. She's paid to attend club openings all over New England, despite being two years under the drinking age, and comes home to daily packages of product and clothing. Most recently, it was a pair of Amina Muaddi Belgian satin slingback pumps, pointed toes with crystal embellishments, that forced Kylie to suffer an existential crisis. Genuine fears of, *It's never going to happen for me*.

Kylie works hard to catch Erin without ever coming close, always five steps behind, like she's come in at the tail end of a good thing, like when there's no more room at the table.

She wedges AirPods into her ears as she eats the salad, streaming Katy Perry's *Witness*—an underrated album the critics simply did not get. *Spin* wrote that it was “a spectacular failure,” *Rolling Stone* dismissed it as “art pop soup,” and everyone failed to recognize its purpose: depicting

a world where the barriers between celebrities and normies has come all the way down, leaving everyone to grapple with the same problems, relationships, self-censorship, and relevancy in a distracted world.

Kylie scrolls the 'gram, giving out hearts like Halloween candy.

Until Erin's post stops her cold.

A topless photo that's cut off right above Erin's breasts so that only the rounds of her Cs—and those sun freckles—are visible. Her hair's soaking wet and draped over her forehead. The smile on her face, suggestive and naughty. The caption: **Ready for bed.** 😊

Nine. Thousand. Hearts.

"You couldn't let me win, could you?" Kylie's voice cracks, nostrils flaring. It's how it is when a friendship is fundamentally made up of a bundle of raw nerves.

Kylie's dinner post is performing fine—fifty-two hearts and counting. But the victory's tainted.

Her stomach rumbles and she wishes she'd eaten the goddamn tuna as she refreshes her post, about to cross one hundred. Waiting for a certain someone to be among the hearts.

Shit. She promised herself she wasn't going to do this but can't help it. Brady's off at Williamson University, sure, but he has notifications for Kylie's content. So why hasn't he liked it yet?

She goes to his feed and checks to see if she'd somehow missed any of his posts. Impossible, given her own settings. The two of them are so entwined that the algorithm would never be able to untangle them.

He hasn't posted anything since noon. **Late lunch with the new roomie.** The two of them slumped into the same side of some restaurant booth, clanging pizza slices together like beer bottles.

Lame, but cute.

Erin's back in her texts, asking if she should lock Cameron down for the year. With their freshman orientation coming up tomorrow, she can't risk him meeting someone else.

Kylie loves Erin. Sometimes, though, she hates her. It just can't be helped. The way she talks, talks, talks and how it's always her, her, her

until that brief moment of self-awareness kicks in and reminds her to be a human being. To ask about someone else's life for a change.

"Come on, Brady," Kylie whines. She rolls over onto her stomach, face buried in her pillow while Katy is breathing on her brain. Empowering words that usually help. The song is "Roulette," a real bop about running into an ex-lover and having a spontaneous evening with them, and it would've made this album a massive hit had it been released as a single, but it's making everything worse tonight, because maybe Brady has spun that wheel and is currently going round and round with another girl.

Kylie feels sick. Every word Erin sends enrages her, because of course there's no room for Kylie's troubles in them. Somehow, she's been made to feel like a bit player in her own life.

Brady's update appears, as if on cue. As if Kylie has willed it into existence through sheer desperation.

Ding, ding, ding. Erin keeps on texting. Kylie doesn't read them. She's too busy wiping her eyes, staring at Brady's post. At her fucking life going to pieces.

The photo is of @BradyStyle with some new friends.

Ding, ding, ding. Notifications vying for Kylie's attention. But she just can't. Because every girl on campus seems to be in this picture. Brady and his roommate, front and center, surrounded by an avalanche of Williamson U Greek Life, hands reaching out, touching their shoulders and arms. Smiles on their faces because look at this new hotness . . .

Ding, ding, ding. Erin, determined to be heard. Now FaceTime's a-calling and Kylie's breath is short. Her heart pounds and her soul burns and the fire spreads through her body, eating her oxygen and squeezing from her the will to live.

She doesn't answer the call and then her phone goes back to *ding, ding, dinging*. It won't stop, never stops.

Kylie wonders how much lorazepam she needs to swallow right now in order to die.

Only she's too cowardly for that and so she finally opens Erin's

messages, knowing that all she needs is to feed the thread some kind of response in order for it to slow down. Make it stop for thirty seconds so she can think this all through.

Erin:

this is so fucked but you gotta see it

it's not real right?

This burst of panic catches Kylie off guard. Draws her focus. She opens the text thread in full, where, three messages up, Erin had sent a video.

Kylie recognizes the face in that thumbnail right off. Annabeth Wilson?! Fourth-grade recess buddy. The girl who sat behind her in two classes last year. The girl who has been missing since April.

Kylie taps the play arrow.

On-screen, Annabeth comes into a darkened room and flips a switch on the wall, revealing the kitchen. She yelps into the camera that she very clearly hasn't expected to find there.

Now Annabeth is staring straight into the lens, eyes seeming to lock with Kylie's for a moment as her mind slots in an unspoken puzzle piece.

"Nothing else works, Little Lamb," a voice hisses from off camera.

Annabeth spins around to face the speaker.

What she sees, what Kylie is seeing, is a yellow emoji mask bleeding out of the shadows there. An oversized and circular head that's two blushing dots beneath thin, angled eye sockets, a lopsided grin that finds humor in Annabeth's startled shrieks. The mask sits atop a petite frame, a T-shirt that ends at bronzed and smooth thighs.

Then the emoji hoists something overhead.

A flash of steel. A barbecue slicer knife swinging down, seeming to carve through Annabeth. She goes spinning toward the camera, spurting blood like a sprinkler.

The emoji winds its arm back and the slicer blade falls again, smash-

ing through Annabeth's head with a thunderstorm crack. She drops onto the gray tile like a slab of beef and the video cuts off, cuts to black, leaving Kylie to process what she just watched.

Erin's still feeding messages into the thread as questions race through Kylie's mind. Who recorded this? Why?

And yet, Kylie's so dazed that she's incapable of feeling anything in this moment. On video, the murder feels far removed from reality. A scene from a movie. Easily dismissed as a trick. Special effects.

Except in her heart, Kylie knows it isn't fake. Annabeth is missing. That was her in the vid. Occam's razor. Or in this case, Occam's barbecue slicer.

It isn't something she's supposed to see. Which makes it exciting.

So she does the first thing that comes naturally.

She clicks play and watches it again.

Like Mourning

Erin's BMW is idling in Kylie's driveway just before seven. Erin's *thing* is that she doesn't honk. Doesn't get out of the car. She just sits.

Sometimes Kylie lets Erin wait. Like today, standing in the foyer with the Annabeth video on repeat, unsure of how many times she's watched it now, kind of numb to it, but still utterly fascinated.

How many people see somebody they know die this way? Kylie pauses right after the emoji makes its first cut, Annabeth whirling back around, her eyes popped wide with shock, crimson splatter pocking her face. The way she crashes against the floor, dropping out of sight.

These images engrave themselves on Kylie's mind and suddenly she's had enough, stepping out into the morning light, rushing toward Erin's ride, spinning up her enthusiasm as she slides into shotgun. "You found the linen."

"But do I pull it off?" Erin asks, knowing full well that she does, adjusting the skirt to cover more of her thigh.

"Not sure how grief-stricken you look."

"Oh, well, it's not like we had a mass shooting."

"Thank God," Kylie says, wondering how that would go over for her. It worked out pretty well for those Parkland kids.

"It, uh, was Melissa on that video, right?" Erin asks. "Doing the deed?"

"It can't be," Kylie says, then wonders why she thinks that, given that both Annabeth Wilson and Melissa Crigan have been missing for five months. Now one of them is dead and the other—

"I'd recognize those legs anywhere," Erin says, backing onto Kylie's street, stomping the gas. "She's got that stupid-ass mask on, and it's just like, why bother? It's way easier to identify Melissa from her body. Swimmer's thighs. Used to be so jealous of that sculpt."

"Are you sure?"

"One way to brand yourself," Erin says, almost admiringly. "Psychos aren't usually hot, so there's a market there." She glances over, notices Kylie is struggling this morning, makes a face like she really hates to change the subject. "All right, talk to me."

"You already know."

"Hate to say it, but—"

"Not helping."

"Well, what am I supposed to say, Ky? If you took my advice, you'd be so much happier."

"Your advice is to have fun. What does that even mean?"

"It means . . . forget Brady."

"So I can make out with two guys at once? Like you did after the prom?"

"Oh, that was just a few kisses . . . no biggie. It was in the moment."

"So, you're not talking about that kind of fun? Just so I'm clear?"

"More like . . . find a Cameron of your own."

"He's not even *your* Cameron yet."

Erin grins. Without taking her eyes off the road, she unlocks her phone and swipes through the screens in an impressive display of muscle memory, then drops her device into Kylie's lap.

It's the source photo from Erin's late-night Insta selfie, unedited, her boobs in frame.

"Maybe Cameron got that in a DM. And if you scroll over one, you'll see"—she clears her throat—"his hardened response."

Like most women on the internet, Kylie lives in constant fear of unwanted dick pics, though maybe there is some morbid curiosity this time because she knows Cameron. But the topic of boys has her feeling lemon-sour today and she doesn't want to look.

She locks the phone and places it on the seat between them. “I’m good.”

“But no fun.”

Summerfield Community College’s parking lot is nearly full, one open spot. A dented Volkswagen comes puttering in from the other end, a bit closer. Erin blasts her horn, rattling the other car into braking. She takes that opportunity to gun it, stealing the space and flipping the driver off through the rearview.

“Eat me, you total geek!”

Behind the wheel of the Volkswagen, Ben Austin looks like he’s about to cry.

“Be *ni*-ice,” Kylie says, her voice filled with singsongy insincerity.

“Oh God. You know him?”

“Um, he was our Bio partner. Maybe you just weren’t paying attention.”

Erin shakes that thought away, refusing to waste another on Ben Austin.

On the quad, everyone’s taking selfies, showing off their best mourning faces. Nobody’s grieving, exactly. Annabeth wasn’t popular enough for that. This is mutually beneficial acknowledgment.

A sign hangs over the school’s entrance. WELCOME FRESHMEN TO scc! Then, in smaller letters, *You Can Still Find Your Future Here!* A flyer taped to the door reads, WE REMEMBER ANNABETH. It’s hastily made, which is understandable, given that she hadn’t been “confirmed” dead until about twelve hours ago. But the video is really making the rounds. There’re already two subreddits dedicated to solving the mystery, and some news stations have begun reporting on it, adding fuel to the “Did Missy do it?” speculation.

“Chessie King followed me last night,” Erin announces as she spins around and lifts her phone in one fluid motion, snapping a selfie—the Annabeth pamphlet visible in full just over her shoulder.

“Um. I don’t know who that is.”

“Only one of the best travel-and-fitness influencers out there.” Erin’s

response isn't quite disgust, but disappointment. Her star pupil has much to learn.

They walk the rest of the way in silence, Erin's thumbs tap-tapping her screen while uploading her pic, slapping it behind her own filter and adding a few hashtags. All before they're in the building, a social virtuoso.

Cameron Sullivan is waiting for them in the hall. He slides his wavy brown bangs behind his ears and drapes a familiar arm around Erin. "Looking good, ladies," he says. "Yo, is that dress see-through?"

Erin bites her lip to stifle her smile, but keeps walking.

"Does she . . . know about the pic?" Cameron asks, eye-checking Kylie with a grin out the side of his mouth.

"If you're wondering if my best friend has seen your dick," Erin says, deadpan, "she declined to look."

Cameron seems deflated by this, and Kylie feels a twinge of satisfaction over having burst his balloon.

They follow the flow of freshman students through nondescript halls, community college feeling like high school on steroids. Sporadic signs marked ORIENTATION point the way.

"Think they'll mention any of this?" Cameron wonders. "Melissa?"

"Who cares? We know what happened." Erin gives an empty shrug because that's just life in the Current Year.

"Makes you think," Cameron says.

"And what are you thinking about?" Erin asks.

"That you never know who might want to kill you. Melissa and Annabeth were best friends."

"And are we sure that Melissa killed Annabeth?" Kylie asks. "I feel like nobody knows what the hell they're talking about."

"Poor Kylie," Erin says. "So naïve."

Cameron pulls them into a huddle, words becoming whispers. "It's true, guys . . . my dad says—"

"You dad's a patrolman," Erin groans.

"Yeah, well, he knows things," Cameron snaps, eyes narrowing as

he watches a few stragglers pass by. “Supposedly, Melissa livestreamed the killing.”

“Oh, come on. Melissa’s been radio silent since April,” Kylie says.

“Not everyone understands the game,” Erin adds, as if the necessity of daily content was Kylie’s point.

“Radio silent on TikTok,” Cameron clarifies. “The video we’re talking about came from somewhere else.”

“From where?” Kylie asks. “Reels?”

“No. It started getting shared around, though. Nobody wants to take credit but—” He looks as though he knows he shouldn’t continue.

“Oh my God!” Erin exclaims, loud enough to draw eyes. “Chessie King just liked my post!”

Kylie snaps her fingers in Cameron’s face to keep him on task. “Hello? But . . . what?”

“I think it came from Duc.”

“Makes sense,” Kylie says. “If there’s something awful on the internet, Duc would know about it.”

They had a Chemistry Slack channel last year. A place for the lab groups to compare notes. Duc’s only contributions were to spam it with links to disgusting videos disguised as “study guides.”

Two girls, one *something* . . .

“I showed him this morning,” Cameron says. “You know, in case he hadn’t seen it, and he got super hostile. ‘*Get that shit out of my face!*’”

“Do you think Chessie wants to collab?” Erin’s asking no one in particular.

“This isn’t just some anonymous internet vid, though,” Kylie says. “We know Annabeth. *Knew* her.”

“Let’s go, peoples.” Mr. Davies comes around the corner, fanning his arms, corralling them through the open auditorium doors.

“Peoples?” Cameron asks.

“I don’t assume gender, Cameron. Now let’s get a move on.” Mr. Davies, with his thinning hair and sparse goatee, wearing an off-white button-down, had given the Summerfield High seniors a campus tour

last year, and he remained their faculty contact for all academic questions throughout the spring and summer. Kylie's stunned that he seems to remember their names. And was that a little smile just for her?

"God, he needs to log off," Erin whispers and Kylie giggles.

They break formation and head inside as questions about Annabeth and Melissa swirl. Best friends. One victim. One killer. Why?

Kylie's unable to think about anything else.