



**Annie  
LeBlanc**



**Is  
Not  
Dead  
Yet**



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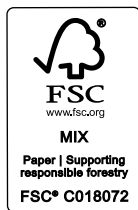
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Also by Molly Morris

*This Is Not The End*

## prologue

**T**he plastic tub lands on the counter with a *thunk*. Ryan Morton towers behind it, hands shoved into the pockets of her jean jacket and eyes fixed over my shoulder as though she can't be bothered to look at my face.

Surprise bubbles up in my throat. For a second, I don't know what to say.

'Where did you get these?' I manage eventually as I pick up the tub and hold it to the fluorescent lighting that beams down from above us.

Inside are what appear to be at least thirty individually wrapped candies, perfect little balls in a bright, glossy red. Atomic Fireballs.

Ryan hops over the counter and sheds her jacket and backpack in one fluid motion before tossing them towards the back office.

'Me and my mom were in Orange County yesterday and we found those at this dinky little candy shop.' She says it with such nonchalance, as though it's nothing. Ryan punches her code into the cash register, whose drawer opens with a *ping*. 'They had like eight thousand tubs because you're still the only person who likes

those disgusting things.’

I twist the tub around in my hands so that each red ball inside has the chance to catch the light. She’s right: I’m the only one out of the three of us – me, Ryan and our best friend, Annie – who could stomach an Atomic Fireball, a candy so radioactively spicy my mouth would still be tingling an hour after eating it. Dudley’s Bakery used to stock them and I’d grab at least four tubs whenever Annie, Ryan and I would stop in on our way to San Diego, but they haven’t had them for a long time. Plus, I haven’t gone to Dudley’s in a million years, not since Annie died. Not that the three of us hung out a lot around then anyway.

When I look at her again, Ryan is bent over the cash register, her lips moving silently as she counts the bills. Even though she’s ignoring me now, she’s still aware of me, watching her. I can tell by the way her back stiffens, unmoving beneath her red T-shirt. I bite the inside of my cheek, trying not to smile. This gift, this conversation – it’s small, but it’s the first time Ryan has spoken to me in a week, since the night her mom threw the Country Kitchen staff a graduation party. It feels like a peace offering. An apology.

Before tucking the tub underneath the counter, I pluck out a candy and unwrap it, pocketing the little plastic wrapper in my khaki shorts. The Atomic Fireball gets to work sizzling my mouth almost instantly, the sweet cinnamon flavour giving way to heat.

‘Thank you,’ I say quickly to Ryan. The Atomic Fireball is a glorified marble in my mouth, garbling up my words. ‘For this.’ I tap the tub’s lid. ‘Thank you for this.’

She doesn’t respond, just drops quarters into their slot one by one.

Around us, the air is thick with the smell of apples and butter.

The bakers in the kitchen behind us have been baking apple pies since midnight, ready for the crowds of tourists that pour into the Country Kitchen pretty much from the second we unlock the doors. I straighten my visor and glance at the clock above the serving hatch. Three more minutes until opening time.

Ryan slams the register drawer shut.

‘The lady there said she’s gonna stop carrying Atomic Fireballs because nobody buys them any more,’ she says. ‘So if you want to prove there actually are weirdos out there that like them, you should probably go soon.’

The candy knocks against my teeth as I bend my mouth into a half-smile. ‘Yet another argument for my mother to buy me a car,’ I say.

Ryan turns around, her eyes not quite reaching me. Instead they land on the counter, where my fingers drum against the glass surface.

‘I have one,’ she says, before glancing away.

I open my mouth to respond, but nothing comes out. Is Ryan trying to shove in my face the fact that *she* could get there if she wanted to, or is she offering to drive me? Coming from Ryan, one option feels cruel, but likely. The other feels . . . impossible.

The front door to the Country Kitchen swings open, unleashing a sound so ear-splittingly loud, I shrink into my shoulders and clamp my hands over my ears. A woman in a lemon yellow suit with shoulder pads at least half an inch thick appears in the doorway holding up a bullhorn, which, at the sight of me cowering, she brings down to her chest and then smiles apologetically.

‘Sorry!’ she calls. ‘Got a little carried away there.’

In her other hand are at least ten balloons, all of which are pink except the shiny one in the middle, ‘Congratulations!’ written

across it in rainbow bubble letters. The woman, I would recognize anywhere. It's Ruth Fish, president of the Lennon Historical Society and organizer of pretty much anything that goes on in this town. Beside her is a small bald man with a practically ancient camera hanging from a strap around his neck. I've seen him at festivals before, the Mr and Mrs Apple Pie pageant and the Fourth of July parade. He's a reporter for the *Lennon News*.

'We're not open yet,' Ryan says to them, frowning. 'That door was locked.'

'Sometimes good news just can't wait,' Ruth says as she approaches the counter. 'Because you, Wilson Moss, have won this year's Welcome Back!'

She presses down on the bullhorn again, slightly quieter this time, and thrusts the bouquet of balloons at me.

I stare at them with wide eyes, my mouth dropping open. As it does, the Atomic Fireball falls on to the floor and skitters across the tiles. A camera flashes.

The voice that comes out of me is quiet and incredulous. 'Me?' I say. 'I won?'

I'm not even sure I'm speaking at all until Ruth nods enthusiastically.

'You did it, sweetheart!'

I won. Me, who got last place in the fifth-grade spelling bee after getting 'brain' wrong. Who could never even win the cake-walk at the Halloween carnival, which consisted only of walking around in a circle and sitting in a chair with a picture of a cupcake taped to the back when the music stopped. But if I won Welcome Back, that means—

'Who?' Ryan is suddenly at my side, angling her body so that she blocks Ruth and the reporter from my vision. It's jarring, going from having almost none of her attention to suddenly

having all of it. ‘Who did you pick?’

‘I—I—’ I stammer, eyes darting helplessly between Ryan and Ruth, as though the latter can somehow help me.

Everything about Ryan is electric. ‘Wilson,’ she says slowly, carefully. ‘Who are you bringing back from the dead?’

I brave a glance at her. Her brown eyes are alight with something I’m almost afraid to identify.

‘I’m sorry,’ I whisper back.

She takes a tiny step away from me, her gaze leaving mine and dropping to the floor. ‘No,’ she says, almost breathless.

‘I’m really sorry.’ I can’t stop looking at Ruth, whose brow is furrowed in confusion. ‘I—’ I start to say. ‘I picked—’

‘No.’ Ryan jabs her finger in my direction. ‘Don’t say it. Don’t you dare say—’

But she knows what I’m going to say. Because of course it’s her. It could only be her.

I swallow hard, the taste of cinnamon sour in my mouth. ‘I’m sorry,’ I say again. ‘I picked Annie.’



# one

DAYS UNTIL ANNIE LEBLANC DIES: 30

**T**here are a few things nobody tells you about bringing your best friend back from the dead:

1. The dead don't always arrive on time because, apparently, they need bathroom breaks or something on the way back from the afterlife.
2. Not everybody is going to be happy you've chosen said person to come back. They're not like POWs, where their return is universally celebrated. It's more like the Rolling Stones going back on tour, or the arrival of another *Twilight* movie.
3. The ceremony isn't necessarily cult-y or weird. There aren't any black robes or virgin sacrifices, which is probably a good thing. As the Resident Virgin Dork of Lennon, California, I would definitely be at the centre of that pentagram.

These are the things that are running through my head as I sweat my face off on the small stage rigged up at the head of the

football field, the last remnants of an Atomic Fireball disintegrating in my mouth. Not the fact that my best friend, who I hadn't talked to for over a year before she died, is on her way back to the land of the living. That, in most cases, this is not the hallmark of a best friend, and that by even calling Annie this, I'm basically confirming that I'm the loser everyone already suspects I am. No, I'm preoccupied with the fact that nobody ever seems to want to touch me in a way that is neither accidental nor platonic.

'What is wrong with me?' I mutter under my breath.

'What's that, sweetheart?'

Ruth Fish smiles down at me. Her baby pink lipstick matches her pale pantsuit.

I blink up at her and feel a blush spreading across my neck. 'Nothing.'

She reaches out a hand and squeezes my shoulder. 'It's OK to be nervous,' she says.

'I'm not nervous,' I say quickly.

This is a lie. I am very nervous. In fact, I don't think I've ever been this nervous in my entire life. Over the sounds of Bruce Springsteen playing from the stadium speakers, I can feel the eyes of everyone in the audience on me, their gazes somehow burning even stronger than the sun. I sink lower into my plastic chair and bring my comic book up so it covers my face, like that'll make any difference. Besides a squat podium and Ruth Fish, I am literally the only thing on this outrageously small stage, baking like roadkill on the artificial turf of Lennon Union High School's football field. They could've at least held this event somewhere with shade, but because I'm the youngest Welcome Back winner in Lennon's history, hosting the ceremony at my school was the most obvious choice. Forget the fact that I graduated over a week ago and therefore am no longer an attendee of Lennon Union,

that I'm nearly eighteen and technically almost an adult.

'It won't be long now, honey,' Ruth says as she grabs her phone from underneath the stage's central podium.

Ruth Fish is the kind of person who adds 'honey' or 'doll' or 'dear' to the end of every sentence. She has the sugary sweetness of a little old grandma from Minnesota, even though Lennon is so far south, I can practically see Mexico from my house. Even though by being the president of the Lennon Historical Society, she's got to be into some seriously dark shit.

I swallow hard and focus on the football field, on the balloon arch sagging down from the goalpost fifty or so yards away. THIS IS EAGLE COUNTRY is spray-painted on the grass in burgundy and white, leading up to a banner with the words WELCOME BACK, ANNIE scrawled across it in uneven writing. One of the *N*s in Annie is smaller than the other, as though it were crammed in at the last second after the sign-maker spelt Annie's name wrong. Other than this and the streamers draped across the bleachers, the football field basically looks exactly as it did during the entire last season, when our team lost so many games even the players' parents stopped showing up.

'Hi, Wilson,' a voice says from a few feet away. The reporter from the *Lennon News*, who put the picture of a bewildered-looking me on the next day's front page, my mouth dropped open so wide you could practically see my tonsils. He's somehow wearing a khaki jacket in spite of the heat. 'I'm Tom Bradford from the *Lennon News*. Could I get an interview with this year's exciting winner?'

He makes it sound like I beat the Russians in a chess tournament, not that my stupid name was drawn out of a stupid bowl. I didn't even plan to put myself in the running for Welcome Back; one second I was cramming my visor into my backpack

after a shift at work, and the next I was scribbling my and Annie's names on the back of a receipt for a bag of Doritos. It was like my subconscious and fine motor skills were actively plotting against me, conspiring to bring about what could either be the best or worst thing to ever happen in my life. But once our names were in the bowl, I couldn't take them back.

Before I can answer, Tom runs a hand across his bald head and peels a tiny notebook out of his pocket. 'Why'd you pick Annie' – his eyes search the notebook pages – 'LeBlanc?'

'I, uh . . .' I start to say, but look down at my shoes instead. It's a fair question, but one not even I'm sure how to answer. How does one say without sounding pathetic: *Annie was the best friend I've ever had and even though she didn't talk to me for a year before she died, I still think about her all the time and I'm pretty/sort of/mostly sure that if she were to come back right now, things would be different because she won't be around that school or those people, although I'm not totally sure, so now that I think about it, maybe—*

'Wilson?' Tom prompts.

I blink. 'She is – uh, she *was* my best friend,' I stammer eventually. 'I mean, with Ryan. That's – she's our other best friend. Was. We were best friends. We were the three best friends.' I swallow. 'There were three of us.'

'Ryan Morton?' Tom says. 'She was with you when you found out you won.'

Standing next to me in the newspaper picture, a scowl so deeply cut into her face, it looked almost painful. Of course Tom the reporter knows Ryan Morton, daughter of Terri Morton, owner of the most famous restaurant in Lennon.

And then, without warning, Tom turns and waves to someone in the crowd. 'Ryan!' he shouts. 'Come on up here.'

A figure rises from the crowd from somewhere within the first few rows. Ryan Morton walks slowly up the centre aisle, looking annoyed at having been acknowledged.

As she climbs on to the stage, Tom points his pen at her. ‘Ryan, Wilson says you were best friends with Annie too.’

Ryan’s face morphs from a look of vague disinterest to one only someone who knows her favourite nail polish colour as a kid was called Macaroni Sunshine could recognize as sarcastic glee.

‘Oh yeah, totally,’ she says.

The only thing more surprising than Ryan Morton admitting she was ever friends with Annie LeBlanc – sarcastic or not – is the fact that she’s even at this thing. Ever since finding out I won Welcome Back, she’s been ignoring me again, the Atomic Fireball peace offering firmly off the table.

‘So, how do you feel about Annie coming back?’ Tom says. Nobody waits for me to answer.

‘Oh my god,’ Ryan says, ‘like, unbelievably psyched. Ever since she died, life has been basically unbearable. Like, who cares that she transferred to some elite private school for rich kids with con artist parents the year before and never talked to us again? We *are* disgusting.’

Tom is dutifully taking notes while I curl my fingers around my comic book and pray for death. My nails dig into the front cover of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Wolves at the Gate*, the one where Dracula comes back. It’s my favourite issue in the series, mostly because Dracula is the best character ever. It’s one that used to make me feel calm when I was a kid, but now all I feel like doing is shredding the pages and disappearing into the rubble.

‘Do you have any plans for the summer?’ Tom asks.

I open my mouth, but all that comes out is air. Since finding

out I won Welcome Back a couple of days ago, I've been agonizing over what Annie and I would do for her one month on Earth. The notebook in my nightstand is crammed with lists of activities I scratched out one by one, none of them feeling right. Because even though I technically put Annie's and my names in the bowl, I never, for a single second, thought I'd actually win.

'Of course we do.' Ryan flicks her long brown ponytail over her shoulder. 'First, we're gonna go to the beach, then we're gonna go shopping and then we're gonna have a sleepover and a slo-mo hot-girl pillow fight!'

Ruth Fish, her phone call finished, apparently having heard all this, clears her throat and nudges me and Ryan backwards.

'That's enough questions for now,' she says. 'Pictures? Anyone? Tom, do you want another picture of the girls?'

Ryan and I stand about a foot apart while Tom snaps pictures with his camera. In my green-and-blue flannel shirt and thrift store denim shorts, I can't help but feel a little underdressed standing next to Ryan, who's wearing a long off-white bohemian-style top with lacy sleeves that hang past her wrists. Peeking out of her shirt is a gold necklace with a tiny *R* charm on it, one she's been wearing every day since we were kids, when Friday night sleepovers at her house were as reliable as the sun.

'Tom, let's get pictures with Annie's parents, too,' Ruth says when he's finished.

She leads Tom back to the crowd, where a couple in clothes even I can tell from this far away are expensive sits in the front row. Mr LeBlanc is in a white summer suit like something out of a movie about the South, while Mrs LeBlanc wears a long army green dress and a straw hat whose brim is as wide as a hula hoop. Mrs LeBlanc's smile opens wide as Tom introduces himself, Mr LeBlanc shuffling forward in his chair to shake his hand. They

start to talk, Mrs LeBlanc tipping her head back to laugh in a way that rich women do on TV, as though they expect everyone in their immediate vicinity to join in.

And then, without warning, the crowd falls silent as a pickup truck appears between the far goalposts on the field. Ruth Fish quickly pulls Annie's parents onstage so they're standing right next to me. She begins talking into the microphone, but all I can hear is the blood rushing in my ears. My comic falls to the floor, sliding somewhere underneath my chair.

This is the first time I realize I don't actually know how this is supposed to go; does Annie skateboard down the aisle? Fly out of the back of the pickup truck with makeshift angel wings? I file through memories of the other Welcome Back ceremony I went to, but they happen only every ten years, so it's fuzzy. All I remember is seven-year-old me sitting at the back of the crowd, drawing on my hands with permanent marker.

For a second, as I stand here, my heart thudding and skin overheating, I think I might be sick. I think I might actually projectile vomit on to Mrs LeBlanc's dress, which probably costs as much as I make in an entire month. Somewhere in the commotion, Ryan has left the stage, disappearing back into the crowd.

Part of me wants to run away, just dip the fuck out of here, but then I remember that I'm the one who did this. I picked Annie. Even if I did put our names in the bowl on a whim, even though I never thought in a million years that I'd actually be standing here, there was still a part of me that wanted this. That still wants this, more than anything.

A man in a San Diego Padres jersey emerges from the truck and jogs around to the passenger side. He swings the door open, revealing a figure sitting motionless in their seat. I have to blink

into the sunlight to make sure I'm not hallucinating, but there she is. Annie LeBlanc lowers herself on to the artificial grass, wearing a short dress covered in bright, sparkly pink sequins, her long blonde hair draped over her shoulders. Everyone in the crowd turns towards her, phones up, waiting.