

# AUNT CHLOE

2020 ISSUE YEAR

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## Zest

INT. ZEST - DAY

It's Saturday in the city. The new eatery Zest is basically empty, despite the hordes of people on the streets outside fighting off the rain to do their holiday shopping.

Zest is bright and summery, a contrast with the cold rain outside. The high ceilings and wide signs advertise various flavors and combos of lemon-themed drinks and food. SANTANA (22), an attractive but quirky-looking young woman with her hair swept into a messy up-do, leans against the wall near the kitchen. She's talking in hushed tones on the handset phone.

SANTANA

—Well, complain all you want, Liv,  
but at least you have a real job.  
I'd kill for a little cubicle job at  
this point; my aunt is driving me  
insaaaaane. Four years for a  
journalism degree from CSU and  
this is all I have to show for it. I  
knew I should've taken that damn  
internship.

Santana's eyes follow the cafe's sole customers—a young WOMAN and her toddler SON—as they move to exit the building.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

Have a nice day.

The child is stained with mustard from head to toe, and smears his dripping hands along the white booths and glass door on his way out. Santana sighs despondently before returning to her phone call.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

I'm working on some things to send  
out, but I haven't really found a  
story I've wanted to bite into yet.

(beat)

I'm trying! But...I don't want to  
reach out to anyone officially until  
I'm sure I've written something no  
one's done before. I need to stand  
out and—

Santana's conversation is cut off when her Aunt DEE (40), a pretty woman with youthful looks, puts her finger on the hook, disconnecting the call.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

Excuse me! That was an important  
conversation, I was...ordering  
lemons.

Dee settles into a candid stance and crosses her arms.

DEE

Santana, what did I tell you about making personal calls during work hours? It's unprofessional.

SANTANA

But I just—

DEE

Look, I know how hard it is to find a job after college. I've been there. But, just because I told your parents I'd help you out doesn't mean you can take advantage of me. If you don't want to work here, say the word and I'll find someone who does.

Santana is visibly annoyed.

SANTANA

Aunt Dee, you are so dramatic. The place is literally empty. No one is eating lemon-flavored anything in the middle of frickin' November!

Someone nearby loudly clears their throat. Startled, Dee and Santana jerk their heads in the direction of the counter where a YOUNG MAN stands, perusing the pastries and desserts on display. Santana looks at him with a puzzled expression.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

That's weird, I didn't even see him  
come in.

DEE  
(whispering)

Go over to the register and take his  
order. And DON'T forget the new  
catchphrase.

SANTANA

You can't be serious.

DEE

As serious as I am about replacing you.

SANTANA  
(beat)

Fine.

Dee heads into the kitchen.

Santana stomps over to the cash register and gradually paints a phony smile on her face. The man looking at the desserts is WREN (25), a tall, slender guy. Modestly handsome. His style is understated except for the old-school, smiley face baseball cap he wears on his shoulder length hair. He approaches the register.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

Hello, sir—

Dee pokes her head out from the kitchen, watching the exchange. Santana sees Dee in her periphery and rolls her eyes before looking at the customer again.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

(overly enthusiastic)

How can I make your day EXTRA

zesty?!

Santana gives a pained thumbs up and Wren offers her a sympathetic smirk in return.

WREN

Is that code for, “What do you want

to eat?”

Santana's disposition warms a bit and she chuckles lightly.

SANTANA

Yeah.

WREN

Could you get two of those lemon  
bars down there and...

He peers up at the posted menu board.

WREN (CONT'D)

...A lemon zinger hot tea?

SANTANA

Of course! Will that be for here  
or to go?

WREN

I think I'll stay in here for a  
bit. This place has a nice  
atmosphere.

SANTANA

That'll be ten dollars and  
twenty-three cents. Have a seat  
and I'll bring it right over to you  
when it's ready.

Santana takes his cash and looks up from tearing the receipt to notice him smiling at her too intensely. She smiles back at him dubiously.

TIME CUT.

INT. ZEST - DAY (A FEW MINUTES LATER)

Wren is sitting at a booth in the corner, writing and scribbling rigorously into a little black notebook. Dee is cleaning the mustard stains off a booth across the room. Santana appears beside Wren's table with his order in hand.

SANTANA

Two zesty lemon bars and a lemon  
zinger hot tea?

She smiles with the tray and assumes a flirtatious stance that screams, "Aren't I cute?" Wren is oblivious and doesn't look up from his task. Santana frowns and places his order on the table before starting to walk away.

WREN

Toilet seat covers. Santana pauses  
and turns around.

SANTANA

I'm sorry?

Wren finishes scribbling and closes the notebook, finally looking up at Santana with the familiar smirk from earlier.

WREN

I think you could write an excellent story on disposable toilet seat covers. They're such a key part of daily life for the average spoiled, White American but no one talks about them. Who invented them? When? Where? I have so many questions.

SANTANA

Ummm...

(beat)

I don't think I know what you're getting at.

WREN

I overheard you talking on the phone over there about needing a story. You're a writer aren't you?

I thought I'd offer some ideas.

Have a seat.

Wren smiles warmly, but Santana is hesitant. She slowly sits down across from him.

SANTANA

Oh...gosh, I didn't realize I was



talking that loudly.

WREN

You weren't. I'm just a good listener.

He stares at her, again too intensely. Santana is visibly unnerved and chuckles awkwardly. She notices his chewed pen top next to the black book on the table.

SANTANA

Thanks for the idea, but somehow I  
don't think I'm the right girl to  
orchestrate a groundbreaking piece  
of journalism on...

(beat)

toilet seat covers.

WREN

Well, you never know. Sometimes  
the best stories are ones you never  
imagined writing.

SANTANA

That might be true, but I've found  
my best work comes from a personal  
connection to the story.

WREN

I have to say I'd agree. I'm a  
writer, too.

SANTANA

Oh, really? What do you write?

WREN

Fiction. Well, for the most part.

Santana leans in with interested eyes.

SANTANA

Wow! Ever had anything published?

WREN

Several novels actually. According  
to some lost souls, I'm kind of a  
"genius" in the crime genre.

SANTANA

That's amazing! I'd love to look up  
some of your books. I'm kind of a  
crime junkie. What's your name?

WREN

I'm Wren. Wren Reynolds.

SANTANA

Oh my gosh, you've gotta be kidding  
me, I love your books! Now that I  
think about it, I have seen you before  
on...like, a YouTube interview or  
something? I didn't recognize you with  
longer hair. And you look even younger  
in person!

WREN

It's a new look I'm trying out.

SANTANA

My name is—

WREN

Santana. I overheard your Aunt  
earlier.

SANTANA

Oh, yeah! Well, I don't want to keep you from your food, but do you have a card or anything? I'd love to stay in contact with you!

WREN

Unfortunately, I don't have any on me right now, but...

Santana gestures toward his notebook.

SANTANA

That's ok! You can just take my card!

Santana feels around her pockets and takes out a bent business card, which she hands to Wren.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

Sorry, it's a little beat up, but it has my cell number and email on it. Oh! And my website. I have a little blog where I write all kinds of stuff. I'd love for you to check it out. Maybe you can tell me if I'm any good at this.

Wren takes the card and chuckles before tucking it into his notebook.

WREN

Thanks. I look forward to reading  
some of your work.

SANTANA

Maybe we can get together one day  
and—

Suddenly, Dee appears beside Santana with a peeved expression.

DEE

Santana! The kitchen shelves need  
organizing and the trash has to be  
taken out back.

SANTANA

(beat)

Right now?

DEE

Yes. Now.

Beat.

SANTANA

(to Wren)

I'll be right back!

Santana storms off and Dee turns her attention to Wren.

DEE (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry for the disturbance,  
sir, you can enjoy your food in  
peace now. I hope you won't let  
this incident deter you from  
coming back.

WREN

Oh, don't worry at all! I had  
actually asked your niece to sit  
with me. I hope she won't get  
in trouble on my account.

Dee smiles somberly and nods her head before following Santana into the kitchen.

INT. ZEST - LATER

With the rain still pouring heavily outside, Wren checks his phone for the time. It's almost four PM. He gets up from the table and pops open a canary yellow umbrella. He smiles at Dee (who smiles back) and heads out the door onto the crowded sidewalks. Dee walks over to Wren's empty table and starts cleaning it.

DEE

Shoot!

Santana scrambles out from the kitchen.

SANTANA

What is it?

DEE

Look. He left his notebook on the  
table.

SANTANA

How long ago did he leave?

DEE

It's only been a minute or two.

He'll be back for it.

Santana peers at the book with her business card still sticking out of its pages. She runs over and grabs the book from her Aunt's hand.

SANTANA

I'm going to give it to him. He

can't be too far away.

She flips her hood on.

DEE

What do you think you're doing?!

You don't even know what  
direction he went in!

SANTANA

It doesn't matter. He can't be that  
hard to find. If it's a lost cause, I'll  
come back.

Santana throws open the door and her Aunt yells after her.

DEE

HE HAS A BRIGHT, YELLOW  
UMBRELLA!

EXT. ZEST - AFTERNOON

Dark clouds loom and rain continues to pelt the sidewalk. Santana scans her surroundings while getting jostled by people weaving around her. She finally spots a man under a bright, yellow umbrella crossing the street. It's Wren. Santana takes off after him, zig-zagging between pedestrians and clutching her hoodie tight around her face. She ignores the traffic lights and almost gets hit by a car. The driver honks forcefully and she dashes across the rest of the crosswalk. Distracted and unnerved by the near-accident, Santana stops to catch her breath, losing track of Wren. She spins in different directions and her eyes dart around, but there's no sign of him. She starts to return to Zest.



WREN (O.S.)

I think you have something that  
belongs to me.

Wren is standing behind Santana.

SANTANA

Oh shi-Crap!

WREN

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle  
you.

SANTANA

No, no. You're fine. You just came  
out of nowhere, that's all. Umm...  
here's your book.

Santana takes her business card out of the book's pages and hands the book to Wren.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

And here is my card!

She wiggles her business card in the air and makes a show of tucking it into his jacket pocket.

Wren moves in closer to Santana, holding his umbrella over the two of them.

WREN

I can't believe you ran out here in  
the pouring rain just to give this  
to me.

SANTANA

Well...I wanted to make sure you  
wouldn't forget me.

Santana gives a sultry smirk. She takes off her hoodie and wrings it out while her wet t-shirt clings to her figure. Wren notices.

WREN

You didn't read anything in here,  
did you?

SANTANA

Of course not. I know how private  
writers are, and I wouldn't want  
anyone going through my stuff  
either.

WREN

Listen, this may be presumptuous so I totally understand if you say no, but would you like to spend the rest of the afternoon with me? Maybe we can go somewhere and read through your blog or... What am I saying? I sound like a creep. Sorry I'm not very good at talking to women and—

SANTANA

I'd love to.

WREN

Really? Wow, ok great! We can just take the shuttle back to my car and I'll drive us. We can get food or something.

SANTANA

Sounds good. Let me just text my aunt an excuse so she won't come hounding after me. I was supposed to lock up tonight.

WREN

Oh, I don't want to get you in

trouble with your Aunt again. We  
can do this some other time if that  
works better for you...

A shuttle bus pulls up to a nearby stop.

SANTANA

No! Believe me it's fine. Let's just  
go.

Santana grabs Wren's hand and the two of them race to catch the shuttle before it leaves.

INT. WREN'S CAR - NIGHT

The two sit in relaxed silence with Wren at the wheel of his Nissan. Santana glances over and warmly admires his profile.

WREN

What are you smiling about? Feeling  
full from all that pho?

SANTANA

Astounding alliteration.

WREN

Merci, mademoiselle.

The two chuckle over their shared wittiness.

SANTANA

Actually, I was just thinking about  
how lucky I am to have met you.  
These days, I'm shocked to come  
across guys who are successful, good  
natured, AND attractive. You're like  
a unicorn.

WREN

(amused)

A unicorn?

SANTANA

Definitely. Then again, maybe I'm  
just flattered that you said my  
writing was actually good. Maybe  
now I'll stop feeling like such a  
failure.

WREN

You were never a failure, and you  
were a good writer before I met  
you. Everyone finds success in

their own time. You shouldn't be  
so hard on yourself.

SANTANA

Thanks, Wren. I'll try to remember  
that tomorrow when I'm drowning  
in lemon juice and Dee is breathing  
down my neck.

Santana chuckles lightheartedly.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

I guess if all else fails with  
journalism, I'll just get into  
fiction like you.

WREN

"Just get into fiction?" I'm not  
sure I know what you mean.

SANTANA

You know, like what you do. Crime  
stories and stuff. I mean, don't get  
me wrong, they're well-written and  
entertaining, but everyone knows  
genre fiction isn't the hardest

market to crack.

Wren's face hardens.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

You're not offended, are you? Gosh,  
I'm sorry, that really wasn't my  
intention. I should've been more  
sensitive.

WREN

I'm fine.

SANTANA

It's just that I personally look at  
journalism as being more hard-hitting  
than fiction, you know? I mean you've  
gotta admit, nowadays, it's a little more  
pertinent to know about politics than  
James Patterson's latest cash grab. It's  
just not the same.

The two fall back into silence, but this time it's uncomfortable, tense. Wren grips the steering wheel, his knuckles turn white. He glares at the road and begins breathing quickly, but quietly. Santana places her hand over his.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

Are you alright? Your face looks a  
little red. You're not angry, are  
you?

The darkness in Wren's eyes lifts, like someone flipped a switch on his face. He's suddenly back to being upbeat and easy-going. He smiles at Santana.

WREN

Of course not! You were just  
expressing your opinion. Sometimes  
I take things a little too seriously...  
I guess you want to go home now,  
right?

SANTANA

Actually, I was hoping I could maybe  
see your place, if that's alright with  
you...

INT. WREN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The two are buried in a yellow couch, deep in the stirrings of a passionate kiss. When Wren starts to pull at Santana's shirt, she pulls away abruptly.

SANTANA

I think we should slow down.

WREN



Slow down?

SANTANA

Yeah, I don't usually do anything  
like this. I don't want you to get  
the wrong impression of me.

WREN

My only impression would be that  
we're two adults enjoying ourselves.

But, I'm obviously not here to  
pressure you. I'm happy to take  
things slow if that's what you'd like.

SANTANA

I thought you said you weren't good  
with women.

WREN

(smug)

I said I wasn't good at talking to  
women. I'm pretty good at...  
everything else.

SANTANA

Yeah, I can see that.

Wren plants one more kiss on Santana and drags his finger softly over her chin. He stands up and stretches his long arms.

WREN

Want something to drink?

SANTANA

Sure.

He heads into the kitchen. Santana gets up and starts to browse around the room absentmindedly. Wren's home is nicely decorated and modern, but not overly ostentatious. Santana glances at the bevy of yellow objects surrounding her. A picture of a sunflower in a yellow frame, yellow house slippers by the door, yellow pens and pencils scattered on the coffee table next to a bright, yellow mug with a smiley face on it. She calls out to the kitchen.

SANTANA (CONT'D)

So, what's with all the yellow? I  
know people have favorite  
colors, but this is next level!

Wren calls back from the kitchen where he's making noise, fixing up refreshments out of vision.

WREN

It's only temporary! Research  
for my next story.

Santana hones in on his black notebook that fell off the coffee table and onto the floor. She picks it up and moves to put it back on the table, hesitating. Instead of putting it down, she flips the book open. Inside are elaborate drawings, scrawled notes and plot points for grisly murders stories. She continues flipping through the pages, intrigued. She reaches the pages with the most recent notes. The words "Smiley Faced Slaying" are scrawled out and underlined. The words "yellow," and "lemon rinds in victims' mouths," stand out next to disturbing diagrams. She turns the page once more to see character notes and sketches of a young man with shoulder-length hair and a smiley-faced ball cap. She freezes with dread and recognition. Before she can react, Wren is behind her.

WREN (CONT'D)

Do you like it? I think it's  
shaping up to be one of my best  
stories yet, thanks to you.

Santana drops the book on the floor but doesn't turn around.

WREN (CONT'D)

Sorry I have to do this but... I  
told you not to look in the book.

Wren, standing behind Santana, swings his yellow umbrella at the back of her head and she blacks out.

INT. BOOKSTORE - DAY

One year later.

It's Christmastime again. Wren Reynolds sits in a crowded book store signing copies of his newest novel, "The Smiley Faced Slaying." His hair is now short and a different color. His clothes are well-tailored and stylish. A pretty but sheepish young woman named EMMA (23) is next in line to have her book signed.

WREN

Who should I sign it to?

EMMA

Emma, your BIGGEST Fan. You're a genius. Wren, I'm obsessed with your work.

WREN

Thanks so much for your support Emma. It means a lot to me.

Wren gives Emma a flirtatious grin.

EMMA

I have to ask, how do you get such unique ideas and make your stories so...so realistic? It's like I'm experiencing the horrors right with the characters!

WREN

Honestly...

Wren pauses to think about his response.

WREN (CONT'D)

I'd have to say my best work  
comes from personal connections  
to a story.

FADE OUT.

THE END

Growing up on the colorful and expressive island of Bermuda, Nalani Dowling was inspired from a young age to develop her imagination. She drew portraits of classmates, wrote stories, and directed music videos with her cousins, and continued artistic engagement from childhood through her graduation from Spelman College, where she majored in studio art with a minor in creative writing. She is currently a student in the inaugural M.F.A. program in Film, Television and Digital Media at the University of Georgia.