

What happens when a childhood friend texts years later and wants to meet up? Does he want a friendship or does he have another twist in mind?

Never Say No

By Jackie Adams

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A close-up photograph of a silver revolver. The cylinder is the central focus, featuring a detailed engraving of a woman's face with dark hair and a slight smile. The revolver has ornate scrollwork engravings on its frame and a wooden grip. The background is a warm, out-of-focus brown. Large, bold, white text is overlaid on the image.

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JACKIE ADAMS

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Chapter One

Annie

The first thing you should know about me is: I'm a long-time fiction writer. I've published thirty books, a few are best sellers. I've been publishing books since I was nineteen. I write anything from crime to romance. I have a new book I'm supposed to turn in by the end of the year. New Year's Eve, to be exact. I mean, who chooses that for a deadline? It's a little over a month away. I've already been paid half up front before my royalties, and I do quite well financially. No complaints in that department, well, unless I don't finish this book. Then I'll be sitting on some debt and a lawsuit.

I'm currently sitting at my laptop working on my latest novel, "Virtues of the Heart." I'm halfway through it. This is where my novel's nitty-gritty climax will be happening, and what happens to me??? Writer's block. Yes, I'm completely stumped at the moment. I'm distracted watching the flame in my fireplace when I hear the cellphone beep. I peer at my cell, wondering why it's not muted, then I remember I turned it up earlier to listen to a video about dogs. I'm the proud family member of two boys myself, a doodle and a bloodhound.

I pick up my phone and see it's a group chat request. For years, I've been a member of Group Chat. It's an application where you can share photos, memories, and fun things with

family and friends. Since I'm mainly on my phone researching or writing on my computer, I spend a lot of time on Group Chat looking for inspiration or evading my deadline.

I look over the request. I see my name, Annie Shoemaker. Beside it, I see the Group Chat request from Tristan Dales. Now there's a name I haven't heard in years. The only reason I still remember him is that his dad was best friends with my dad. He was always a little awkward to be around. Not so much his fault as my own. I was a shy, quiet kid. He was rambunctious and could never sit still. We were totally opposites.

I accept his request, and I go through his profile page to see photographs of him with a bunch of his friends. No surprise there. I don't have a lot of friends, because all my time goes to character building and plots. I guess you could consider me something of a house mouse.

I do, however, love my life. My two dogs are all the company I need, and I love my stone cottage. I have a writing room, but I'm more drawn to be right here at my table that seats six. I have it situated right in front of the wood-burning fireplace. I couldn't ask for more, and I definitely don't.

Minutes after accepting Tristan's friend request, I got a message from him. It reads:

Tristan: I bet you don't remember me. I was hoping you'd accept my friend request, but I would have understood if you didn't. I was reluctant to send it, but I finally found the courage

to do it. So, how's life treating you? Your long-time-ago friend, Tristan.

After reading his message, I thought it odd he signed off with his name, since the chat already informs me of his name with each text he sends. I just sum it up that he's still fairly new with using Group Chat. That must be why he's now adding me. Otherwise, I'd wonder what his sudden interest in me is. The last time I saw him; we were about ten years younger. His dad passed away, which left my father heartbroken. Tristan then went to live with his mother far away from Missouri. He moved to Arizona.

I don't text back because I'm not sure what to say to him. I'm not very sociable, so I've never been good at small talk. I put my phone down, still annoyed that he signed out with his name, instead I try to think of where to go with Josie, my main character, and what she'll do next in my latest novel.

A good twenty minutes pass before I'm tired of staring at Chapter 22 on my screen. I sigh, standing up and stretching my arms. I hear my phone beep again. Glad I wasn't trying too studiously to work on my novel. Distracted by the sounds my phone is making; I pick it up. Another message from Tristan.

Tristan: Come on, Annie. Talk to me. I see you were on. Don't be a stranger. I'm curious about your life. I mean, it's been what? Twenty-something years?

First, twenty-something years? If he was going to calculate, why not get it right? I do the math in my head. It's actually been twenty-three years since I last saw him. Why does that even matter? I should just tell him no, to leave me alone. It would have probably been easier had I not accepted his request. Now he knows when I'm on the app. I'd delete him, but I'd feel guilty for making him feel bad for messaging me. I decide to send a brief message back, and maybe he'll move on in his life.

Annie: Sorry, I've been busy trying to write. Life is beautiful. I couldn't be happier.

I think about asking him how his life is, but that would leave an opening showing an interest that I really don't have toward him or anyone else, for that matter.

Being alone at thirty-three isn't so bad. I was in a relationship for a few years with Juan. It's sad to realize I was relieved when we ended things. It seemed like more work trying to juggling his moods than I juggle my plot scenes. Sure, I have my moments where I regret not having a husband and children. I always had a wonderful family life, so it's something I was used to. I guess after watching the divorce of my parents at an adult age, I pretty much said I'd never marry. And so... I didn't. Juan wasn't happy about that when he stormed out of my life, let's see, four years ago. Wow, it's already been four years! Anyway, he proposed to me. I said no. End of story. He should've known. I told him right away I'd never marry. I guess he thought he could change my mind. I'm wrapped up in thought when my

phone's beep once again gets me out of my own head. Again, I pick up my cellphone.

Tristan: As for me, I've been keeping pretty busy. I mean, working at the garage took all my time. I haven't been there much lately, but I had plenty to keep up with here at home. Glad you're happy.

I'm left figuring he must work at a car garage. Where else would it be? At least he didn't end it on a question. I go in the kitchen and make myself one last cup of coffee before the noon hour hits. I try not to drink any caffeine after morning hours. Otherwise, kind of like how Tristan used to be, I can't sit still. Having a deadline with only half the book finished is no fun, but I have to say it keeps me busy.

I slip the phone into my pocket and bring my coffee into the living room. I look at the television that hasn't been turned on in weeks. I'd love to be watching something and curl up on the couch, but I know I'd just feel guilty for not doing what I'm supposed to be doing, writing.

Now not only can I hear my phone beep, but I can also feel it vibrate. I'm starting to feel annoyed all over again. I grab the phone out of my pocket and see it's another text from Tristan. What could he possibly have left to say?

Tristan: You sure don't talk much, do you?

For one thing, this isn't talking. It's typing. For another, I have no interest in this man. Zero. Zilch. So, for the life of me, I

can't figure out why he keeps bothering me. I decide to end this once and for all.

Annie: Look, I don't just sit around playing on my phone all day. I'm trying to write a novel that's due soon. So please stop texting me. If it would make you feel better, you could just remove me from your friend list.

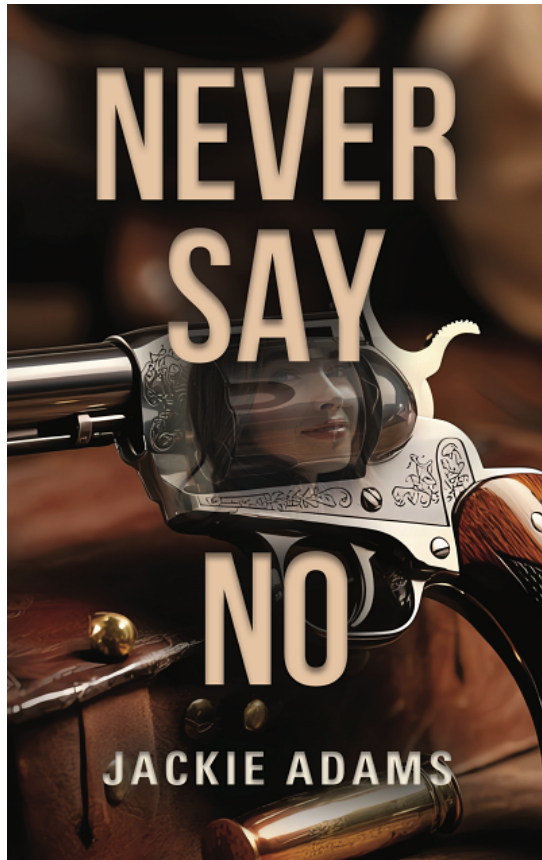
Yes, maybe it was harsh, but it made the point of how I am feeling. I mean, sure, it's been a bad day. I have writer's block in the middle of my book that is due very soon, too soon.

I'm not sure what happened between the time I sat down the first time and this time that I sat down, but I sat there writing for three hours straight. Not only did my character Josie make it way past the halfway point of my story, but she ended up the hero with a glass of wine drinking up the tragedy that had taken place. Feeling pleased with myself, I go to the kitchen to celebrate.

I look down and see Bruno, the golden doodle, and Kibble, the bloodhound, staring up at me. "What's the matter, boys?" I grab them both a treat, realizing they probably feel a little cooped in with me. They have doggy doors to let themselves in and out, but they're probably feeling neglected by me. Before I pour myself a wine, I step outside with them. I yell, "Fetch," as I throw their ball.

Both go running full paced toward the back property. It's all fenced in. It's not a lot of land, but it is three acres. More than

enough for my boys and me. They're just as happy as I am. I toss the ball a few more times before my eldest, Bruno, goes back inside. "Come on, Kibble. Let's join him. It's freezing out here." Kibble grabs his ball and follows me inside.



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