

Ann without an 'E'
Freedom Fischer
(2019)

I ran.

Legs scratched on lantana close to the ground and arms batted away low hanging branches. The shouts echoed behind me. I could hear them yelling at me to stop. Growling reached my ears and I knew that they had brought dogs, I was done for.

My heart was threatening to leap out of my chest. I could barely hear anything between the thump-thump of my heart and the thudding of my feet. There was a light up ahead, and I wondered if, somehow, they had looped around and cornered me. My foot caught on a root and I went sprawling. There was a metallic taste in my mouth, but I had no time to stop, I could almost feel the dogs' breath on my neck. Scrambling to my feet I sprinted left, hopefully this would throw them off course. I could hear running water, the creek! I was saved. If only I could make it.

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I've never really been the popular girl. I was always the one at the front of the class with messy hair and an attitude that could scare away even the nicest of people. I don't try to, I'm just not really a sociable person. Often others tell me to open up, or talk to people more, but I can personally say that I would be quite happy just to curl up in a corner somewhere with my earphones on max volume and the entire Harry Potter book series. People just aren't my thing. This seems to get me in trouble a lot.

Click, click, click.

It's a bad habit I know but I can't seem to stop it, there's something just soothing about clicking my nails.

Click, click, click.

'Could you stop that please. It's driving me nuts.'

The girl two seats over scowls at me. I know her from somewhere but can't put my finger on it. I look at her for a moment then go back to staring at the floor, who thought of its pattern? It's just white with light grey flecks in it. So boring. There aren't many people in the room, just me, the admin ladies, and the girl next to me. I wonder how much longer I'm

going to have to wait. I just want to get back to my book; Tris Prior is about to choose which faction she's going into.

'Miss Lewis.'

The principle emerges from his office and stands in the corridor. He should call me Ann by now; I'm in here almost every week. Stepping into his office, I can see that the office ladies have put up some Christmas decorations for him. He'd never do it himself; he's more into practical things like standard desk items and neat files all labelled in alphabetical order. I take a seat in front of his desk in the uncomfortable leather seats. I'm always worried that I'll leave a butt-mark made of sweat.

Mr Andrews looks at me over the top of his laptop. We know why I'm here, but I think he expects me to start the conversation. He's in for a surprise. We sit for another awkward minute before he clears his throat and begins to speak.

'Do you want to explain why you decided to drop a six-foot tree onto your classmates?'

My mouth almost drops open. Is that what Mrs Wells told him? Man, that old bat must really have it in for me. 'Sir, I'm going to tell you exactly what I told Miss. It was an accident.'

Mr Andrews looks at me with disbelief clear as daylight on his face. 'You *accidentally* pushed over a Christmas tree while you knew your classmates were on the other side?'

Sarcasm is dripping from the ceiling at this point. For someone who seems so stuck up and 'mature', he sure doesn't like to show it.

'Sir, I was just playing with the bricks underneath. I didn't know that the captain would decide to go down with the ship.' Looking into Mr Andrews' eyes, I smile. I really didn't know that the entire tree would fall, but almost every time I'm in here, I make some reference to the Titanic. It's weird, but no one ever said I was normal.

'Well Miss Lewis, I'm afraid I can't let this slide. You've shown time and time again that you have no regard for your classmates' safety, so I've had to call in your parents.'

My stomach drops to the floor and my head begins to spin. My parents? No, he wouldn't, would he? There's a knock on the door. Four sharp knock that could only mean one thing.

'Come in.'

The room seems to swell and shrink at the same time. My heart squeezes. It always feels like this around *him*.

‘Mr Andrews, it’s a pleasure to see you again.’ My father walks over to my principle and shakes his hand. I’m surprised anyone can understand him through his thick Scottish accent. ‘My wife expresses her apologies for not being able to make it today, but she has a previous obligation with one of our other children.’

Mr Andrews nods and gestures for my father to sit in the chair beside me. I try and slide my chair away from him, but it’s too heavy.

My father clears his throat. ‘So, what is it this time, sir? I can see that the school is still intact, for now.’ He chuckles at this as though it is a joke, but Mr Andrews doesn’t appear to get it. My father must find himself amusing. No one else ever does.

‘Mr. Lewis.’

‘Please, call me Dan.’ My father leans back in his chair, getting comfortable. This isn’t going to be good.

‘Alright. Dan, it has come to my attention that Ann has a certain knack for finding herself in situations that cause harm to other students. In recent situations, she has caused children to be emotionally traumatised—’

This isn’t happening.

‘Okay, just because Anita’s popular and the ground she walks on is holy—’

A hand clamps down on my shoulder, the grip almost splintering the bone.

‘That’s enough Ann. Please continue Mr Andrews.’

My father’s hand doesn’t leave my shoulder and his grip doesn’t loosen either. I know I’m in mega trouble. I hope this isn’t like the time that Rodney ran over the neighbour’s cat — if so, I’m in so much trouble.

‘Alrighty then, as I was saying, Miss Lewis has shown time and time again that she does not recognise other children’s safety, so in the best interest of the other students, we have decided that Miss Lewis should take the rest of the school term off. Perhaps take some time to think about the choices that she’s made and why they are harmful to others.’ Mr Andrews leans forward in his chair and closes his computer lid. He looks from my father to me and there is another tense moment.

My head still spins, and I notice that my father’s grip has cut off circulation to my arm. I wiggle my fingers hoping to return some feeling to them.

‘I think that’s a good idea, don’t you, Ann? Maybe take some time at home and cool off, then return next term with a fresh perspective?’

I nod and look to my left. There is a bookshelf covered in books with lovely leather spines. There’s a layer of dust on each of them, suggesting that Mr Andrews either doesn’t

like to read and the books are for show, or he's too busy to read anymore. I choose to believe the second because how can anyone not like books?

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The drive home is quiet, apart from the frantic drumming in my chest. I know I'm in trouble. Not even Mum will be able to save me from this one. Pulling into the driveway, Dad cuts the engine. I reach over to open my door, but it's locked. I look over and he's staring at me, a fierce look in his eyes.

'Dad—'

Before I can get another word out, there is a sharp pain in my jaw. I never saw him raise his arm; he's quick for someone of his age. The blow brings tears to my eyes and I choke back a sob. Crying will only show weakness. I don't need to give him another reason to be mad at me.

'You're no daughter of mine.'

A click rings throughout the car, unlocking the doors. My father opens his door and steps out without so much as a backward glance. I open mine and walk towards the house. As I enter, air-conditioning blasts into me. Mum must be home because she always has the thermostat at a temperature that polar bears would find comfortable. Dad walks into the living room and there's a sad sigh, which comes from the lounge, meaning he's decided to take his normal place on the couch.