

All I Want



Abstract

In “All I Want,” a teenage girl named Isabella struggles with deep insecurities as she prepares for a Christmas party, desperately seeking the perfect dress and attempting to mask her messy life. Haunted by a breakup with her ex-boyfriend and the pressure to meet others’ expectations, Isa wrestles with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. After a long, sleepless night of failed attempts to find an outfit and make herself “perfect,” she gathers the courage to attend the party. Little did she know the party would change her mindset permanently as the night takes an unexpected turn when Isa is forced to interact with her ex-boyfriend, whose words and actions reignite the pain from their past. Through the pain, Isa eventually realizes that her worth is not defined by her appearance or anyone else’s approval. The story explores self-worth, acceptance, and confidence. The emotional journey highlights how letting go of the past can open new opportunities for growth.

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Caroline Murray is a freshman with an intended nursing major, and is a part of ECU’s Honors College. She enjoys weightlifting, movie nights with her friends, and especially creative writing. Caroline enjoys any form of expressing her creativity, including producing social media content and filming her podcast. Writing has always been a passion of hers, and she previously has been a part of the ASCI Creative Writing Festival. For years, writing has been Caroline’s outlet for expression and provided a way to stay in touch with her emotions.



I sat there frustrated as I threw yet another dress to the ground. The party was tomorrow, and I still had no idea what I was going to wear. With each dress I tried on, nothing was right. I grabbed an emerald green dress with flowing silk from my closet. I thought to myself, “Please let this be the one.” As I slid my legs through the dress and adjusted the neckline around my collarbone, the mirror stared back at me with a cold glance. I pinched at the sleeves and pulled on the hem of the dress, but it still looked awful. I was tired, mascara smeared on my eyes, as I sat down wanting to cry again. Just as I was about to tear the dress off in a rage, my phone buzzed. One new notification:

“So excited for the Christmas party!! Make sure you dress up because we’ll have lots of

pictures and fun! See you all there!”

I crumbled in disappointment, hoping that it would be canceled. I had spent my night staring at my puffy bloodshot eyes as I cycled through outfit after outfit. But nothing looked right—my thighs were too big or that seam didn’t fit my body shape. All I wanted was to fit in, yet I felt like the cold sore that everyone notices but doesn’t mention. I shoved all the wrinkled clothes off my bed and started to get my pajamas on. I didn’t bother taking my makeup off or even brushing my hair before I laid down. I felt numb. The only solution was to get some sleep and hope that tomorrow would be different.

It was 4:00 AM and I couldn’t sleep. I could feel the fuzz of my blanket rubbing against my legs. The air was

cool and dry against my face. My dog was spread across the other half of the bed sound asleep. My legs were weak when I stood up to use the bathroom. I stumbled to my bathroom and grabbed the light switch. The fluorescent light blinded my eyes as I fumbled for the faucet. Cold clear water poured out into my hands as I splashed it all over my burning flushed face. I felt like I was in a trance as I tiptoed back to my room. The second I pulled the covers over my body, my head sunk into the pillow, and I fell asleep.

BRRRRINNNGGGG. The alarm clock blared in my ear as I turned over to see the time. This time, the sun was gleaming through my window reflecting off the succulents on my windowsill. The brisk air was leaking through the window I had cracked open, making my bed feel like an oven. I eventually collected the courage to get up and get myself together. On the floor were the remains of my breakdown last night, and the paralyzing feeling of defeat came flooding back. I had to face my fears and gather my things for the party. I only had a couple of hours to do my makeup, pick an outfit, and do my hair. Tonight was my chance to have fun. It had been weeks since I'd had

a break from school, and all I wanted to do was be carefree.

The doorbell rang. I was still dripping wet from the shower and threw on some sweatpants and a hoodie. I ran down the stairs and saw my best friend, Amelia, smiling through the stained-glass window next to my front door. She didn't know what a rough night I had, but I instantly felt more at ease now that I was with her. She stepped into my living room from the frigid snow.

"Isabella I'm so ready for tonight. You won't believe how happy I am to be out of the house." She pauses as she looks into my eyes and sees them glossing over.

"Isa what's wrong? Has something happened?" I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Then she pulled me in tight for a hug.

Her heart beat as my head sunk into her damp sweater. Amelia pulled away and stared at me saying gently, "We are going to have the best night ever okay? Let's go get ready."

I sat in front of my mirror as I curled the last section of my hair. When I was finally happy with how my hair looked, I unplugged the curler and pulled out my makeup. Amelia was blasting Taylor Swift on her speaker as she danced around the room. I admired her joy as she smiled

and laughed at herself. I pulled out my concealer and brushed it under my eyes to hide the dark eye bags. I covered up every imperfection on my face, I lost the rosiness in my cheeks. My eyeshadow sparked with a deep hazel glow as I brushed it across my eyelid. I grabbed my favorite mascara to pull together the look and coated my lashes in black paint. Once everything was done, I walked to my closet and pulled out the dress from the night before. I slipped it on once again and held my breath as Amelia zipped up the back. The silk fell down my legs and I turned to see myself in the mirror.

"You look gorgeous, Isa!" I didn't believe her, but I pressed my lips together and gave a weak smile.

"Let's go before we're late," I said. We grabbed our jackets and ran through the snow to our cars.

I stepped into the foyer and my eyes lit up with gold reflections. The decorations were shimmering all over the house and Christmas music was filling my ears. I've always loved Christmas as a child, and this was why. I shook the snow off my jacket and then walked into the house with Amelia. I peered into the living room where everyone was pouring hot chocolate. I sat down on

the couch and chatted with some friends from the soccer team. The house echoed with laughter as we all mingled and snacked on cookies. Then the doorbell rang with more people arriving. The host gathered everyone for a gingerbread house competition. My stomach dropped when she said we were randomly paired. I closed my eyes hoping that I would read Amelia on the paper that I was pulling out of the bag. I opened the paper and in big bold letters it read, "**ETHAN**". I looked up and locked eyes with Amelia, and she knew I was disappointed.

"I'm with Ethan," I said nervously. Ethan used to be my best friend. We dated for two years but broke up last summer. Since then, I just kept my distance from him because I didn't think my heart could handle it. But this forced me to talk and even work together with him. I grabbed our gingerbread house and sat quietly at our station waiting for him. He walked up and gave me a half smile.

He said, "You ready?" I nodded and I peeled the tape off the packaging. We just spread out the icing, gingerbread, and decorations in silence. This was one of the most complicated gingerbread houses I had seen, and now we had to figure it out together. He opened the directions, and we both knew that

they would be no use. He held the gingerbread together as I spread the sticky icing across the edges.

"Do you want to make the sprinkles look like snow?" he asked.

"Sure," I mumbled. We decorated the house and I asked him how hockey had been. I used to go to his tournaments every weekend. He told me that they scored first place last weekend in Michigan, and I felt a sense of pride. I always knew he would be good. But then anger filled my mind as I remembered how much he hurt me. I could barely speak to him after he left me when I needed him most.

Two weeks before we broke up, he went on a mission trip to Jamaica and we barely talked. I was ecstatic when he returned, but something had changed. He was distant, acting like I was infected with a deadly disease. We started to fight over the tiny things, like how long it took him to respond or why I didn't tell him where I was, and it tore me apart to be so upset with the love of my life. I was so confused about what was happening to us, and my world came crashing down when he broke up with me. He said he needed to develop his own character and work on who he was going to become. When

he explained that hockey and school were important to him, I didn't understand why I wasn't important as well. I had the gut feeling that there was something else going on, but I didn't have the nerve to even think about it. How could someone who meant everything to me hide something? I didn't know so I just bottled up my thoughts. Overthinking was pulsing in my head, but I decided to press my lips and stay silent.

I glanced at his hands crafting the candy decorations for the windows of our house. The rest of the time we both were silent, and I could feel the tension in the air. After sweating over our unstable and lopsided gingerbread house we were finally done. It looked like a house straight out of a Dr. Seuss book, but it was our best. I sat next to Amelia at the kitchen table and took a sigh of relief. It was done and I could relax.

As the hours floated into the night, my eyes could barely stay open. The snow was starting to get heavier, and I knew I needed to get home. I stood up from the couch and started to slip on my shoes. My jacket wrapped around my cold arms preparing me for the icy wind. I said my goodbyes and started out the door when I heard someone behind me.

Ethan interrupts me saying, “Can we walk together?” I felt the butterflies forming in my stomach.

I smiled and replied, “Sure.”

We stepped into the dark cold night as the world went quiet. Snow crunched under our feet as we headed to our cars. I stopped at my beat-up Honda Pilot and turned my attention to Ethan. I knew that I shouldn’t feel happy about talking to him again, but I felt as happy as a kid in a candy store.

He looked down into my eyes and said, “Isa it’s been great talking to you. But I’ve realized that our breakup is exactly what I needed. I needed to focus on myself and see what else is out there. You’re great, but I just kinda lost that attraction to you. I’m sorry for the way things ended, and I’m sorry you’re going through so much right now. I just don’t want any tension between us but you’re just never what I really wanted. But I’m happy to be friends again.”

I held my breath in disbelief. How could he say that to me? I faked a smile and said, “Sounds good. Have a merry Christmas.”

I cracked the ice on my door as he walked away. Sitting in the driver’s seat, I sobbed. I

closed my eyes and cried out to the vast sky. My tears left streams on my hot cheeks as I drove away. The entire drive home I blocked out everything—noise, lights, memories, and even my emotions. As I pulled into my driveway, it hit me again. The boy I loved for so long walked away like I was nobody. As hard as I tried to be that beautiful girl he called his own, he never saw me like that. I spent night after night picking apart my self-esteem for some immature teenage boy. I was so heartbroken. I was so hurt. But most of all I was so angry. Angry that he lied to me all this time. Angry that I lowered my worth for someone who didn’t even deserve my time. Angry that I was miserable all because of what he thought of me. I wanted to be the girl that everyone can’t stop talking about. But here I am in my driveway sobbing over a boy. I was so obsessed with what everyone else thought about me, that I forgot how to be happy. The world had my heart on puppet strings, and it caused me to crumble from pressure.

I opened my car door and looked down at the sparkling snow. And then I lifted my head to look at the sky and I saw twinkling stars around the moon. I could see the green reflection of my dress in the window. My pale arms inter-

twined with the soft silk fabric when I twisted and turned to see myself in the window. I realized how gorgeous this dress was and how beautiful I was. I needed so much more credit than I was giving myself. That’s when I realized that I needed to let go. I let go of Ethan’s claim on my heart and the world’s claim on my life. I wiped the tears from my face and walked to my front door and saw my dog lying next to the Christmas tree.

The garland sparkled and ornaments from my childhood hung gracefully from each branch. I stared at my reflection in the glistening silver sphere. I saw the deep green dress lace my body and the sparkles from my makeup shimmer. I saw how my dimples were pushing both sides of my cheeks. My eyes glowed with colors of blue and green. Looking at my reflection made me realize that I was exactly who I needed to be. I was a hard-working and determined girl who fell into a black hole of insecurities. I was beautiful, and I didn’t need anyone else to tell me that. With the experiences and pain that I went through with Ethan and with my own self-doubt, I never realized that I had so much to offer. I never saw myself as pretty, but this night made me realize that I am so much more than that. ♡