



My Broken Series

MY BROKEN PROMISE

ROSE BUCKLEY

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Cover design: TalkNerdy2me

Editing: Dark Raven Edits

Formatting: Samantha Briggs

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MY BROKEN PROMISE

ROSE BUCKLEY

Chapter 1

Annabelle

Life is a funny thing.

One day you could be living your best life, surrounded by all your friends and indulging in your typical toxic love story—because let’s be honest, we all need at least one of those—and then the next thing you know you’re being shipped off to live your very own version of Cinderella.

Just without the evil step-parent... and the ugly step-sisters... and the assumption that you’ll be cleaning up after everyone.

Okay, so maybe I won’t be a modern day Cinderella, but being forced to move from everything you’ve ever known still sucks major balls.

“Annabelle!”

Dad’s voice booms through the garage, and I look to Valerie, who quickly scrambles off Ezra’s lap.

The door connecting to the house opens and my mom barges in ahead of my dad. I inwardly groan.

“I have been waiting outside for you,” she scolds. “It’s time to go, Annabelle, *now*.”

I don’t miss the apology swimming in dad’s green eyes, a mirror of my own. He’s been fighting to keep me here with him, but when you run in a notorious gang, the chances of gaining full custody aren’t very high.

“Can’t I stay another night?” I beg. “I don’t know when I’ll get to see Val again.”

I’d made my peace with leaving everyone else yesterday, with half-hearted promises to stay in touch. It’s not that I won’t miss my friends from Doverhill high, but we weren’t close enough that I’m dreading their absence like I am Valerie.

On cue, Valerie reaches over and laces her fingers through mine, squeezing my hand. My heart clenches painfully. We’d been inseparable since elementary, more sisters than friends. She had been patient through every one of my heartbreaks from the same douchebag—don’t judge me, I’m convinced he has a magic dick—and I’d been there spying on her first date

with Ezra two years ago.... We used to watch a lot of true crime.

Dad rolls his eyes. "You're moving an hour away, Anna, you're not going to Mars."

Might as well be Mars. Moving so far away is the fun consequence of my mom being engaged to Henry Jacobson, CEO of Jacobson and Danley Marketing. Of course, we have to be the ones to move our entire life over to Lakeside. Mom jumped all too quickly into the opportunity to leave Doverhill.

"An hour away is an hour too long, Ro!" Val pouts.

"I will not miss hearing that stupid nickname." Dad hardens his voice, but his green eyes shine with amusement and adoration as he looks at my best friend. For all the bickering my dad and Valerie do, I know he loves her like a daughter.

When Val's dad got locked up, she was only ten, and since her mom disappeared shortly after she was born, Val had no choice but to move in with her grandparents. That's when Dad put a lot of energy into his relationship with Val. I think a part of him felt responsible since they ran in the same club, and it was her dad that got pulled in by the cops, not him.

Val pouts, resting her head on Ezra's shoulder.

"Daddy, come on." Okay, maybe pulling the daddy card is a bit of a low blow, but I'm desperate. "We can all have a movie night. You can even pick one of your stupid action movies."

"Action movies are not stupid," Ezra argues, wrapping an arm around Val's shoulders. "They're better than that shit you watch. Chick flicks are so predictable, they're downright boring."

"Shut up, it isn't a crime to like happy endings." I lean over Valerie to pinch him in the ribs.

"I'm all for happy endings," Ezra grins, wagging his eyebrows at Val, who turns a bright pink.

"Alright, alright." Dad covers his ears briefly. "We're nipping this conversation in the bud right now."

Mom huffs, drawing my attention back to her. She stands beside Dad, a permanent scowl on her face. "I am not coming back, Annabelle. Say goodbye. It's our last night at the house and we need to start filling up the car. The movers will be here at five in the morning."

"I can drive her over in the morning, Sydney," Dad offers. "Let the kid stay."

Despite my mom having full custody of me—courtesy of my dad being a gangster—she has never had an issue with me spending most of my time with my dad, in fact she would encourage it since her time has always been spent at work.

“I’m sure you have more *important* things to do, Roman,” Mom grinds out, venom lacing her words. It isn’t hard to see why they’d divorced when this starts. “Annabelle, get your things. I won’t say it again.”

“Now hold on, that isn’t fucking fair, Sydney! Anna is the most important thing in my life, and you damn well know that.”

“That’s rich coming from a man who willingly risks his freedom daily,” Mom replies. “If she mattered at all, you’d get a real job.”

Exchanging a look with Val, I cringe at the pity in her pale blue eyes. It’s always embarrassing when they argue like this. My mom can never get over the fact that my dad wouldn’t leave the Rippers for her, even though their divorce had nothing to do with the drug trafficking gang.

“I’m not fucking doing this with you again,” Dad yells in exasperation.

Mom rolls her eyes. “Some things never change, Roman.”

When Dad opens his mouth to no doubt argue some more, I widen my eyes in a silent plea to shut the hell up. He lets out a heavy breath and turns away from Mom. “Say goodbye, and I’ll come by and see you tomorrow before you go.”

Mom mumbles something about waiting at the car before storming out, taking the tension with her. Dad is next to leave after giving me a tight hug.

With Mom and Dad now gone, Val pounces on me, straddling my lap. Squeezing my head against her boobs, I breathe in the sweet scent of her perfume, committing it to memory. Tears prickle in my eyes.

“I’m calling you every damn day,” Val whispers, kissing the top of my head. “And you better answer, or I’ll bury you alive.”

Laughing, I squeeze my arms tight around her waist. “You’re too lazy to dig the hole.”

“You call it lazy. I call it being cautious over breaking a nail. Ezra will dig the hole for me.”

I poke her rib where I know she’s ticklish, causing her to squeal. “Fuck you, I’m so worth breaking a nail over.”

Val is silent for a moment before I feel her bury her face in my

hair. “You’re worth breaking every nail for.”

We sit like that for what feels like hours, yet seconds at the same time, with Val curled around me like an octopus.

When Mom starts to honk, I stand abruptly, the sudden move causing Val to drop to the floor. I help her stand while laughing at the pout she’s sporting professionally.

Ezra throws me into a loose hug. “Make sure you kick ass at that rich kid school.”

When you know Ezra has a huge trust fund and power-hungry CEO parents, it’s quite amusing to hear him verbally bash private schools and rich kids. I could never understand why he left his boarding school to move into his aunt’s two-bedroom apartment.

“Don’t say that,” Val scolds him, slapping him on the arm. “She’ll take it literally and get expelled. No fighting, Anna, ignore him.”

Lifting my shoulder in a shrug, I grin. “No promises.”

Mom honks again, longer this time, and I groan.

“I love you, I love you, I love you.” I kiss Val’s face until she’s giggling and pushing me away.

“Fuck off, you dork,” she laughs. “Come back here soon, though. Like tomorrow.”

“I’ll be back faster than you can say supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.”

Like the smartass she is, she immediately tries to repeat the word.

Throwing one last wave at Ezra and giving one last kiss to Valerie, I walk out to meet my mom, with what feels like five-hundred pounds dragging behind me and a silent promise to the farmhouse behind me that I’ll be back soon.

The bottom of the box breaks open, spilling my clothes onto the grass. I make no effort to hide my frustration with a scream, no matter how childish it makes me look.

“Did you not tape the bottom of the box, Annabelle?” Mom questions with pursed lips. I don’t give a fuck if she’s annoyed with me. This move is a joke, and I won’t pretend to be happy with it when it’s just her here.

I’ve been raised with enough respect that Henry believes I’m

thrilled, and it'll stay that way. He's a nice guy who thinks he's doing the right thing by taking me in with my mom and putting me in Lakeside High. I won't act like a brat in front of him.

Our last night at home, though, I'm not holding anything back. I'd spent the last three months fighting this whole thing with no success. My mom has legal custody and isn't willing to budge because apparently now she gives a shit whether I'm raised around a gang or not. When the ridiculous private school was thrown in and the offer of an Ivy League college—no thanks—Dad joined my mom's side. So now I'm stuck moving to a new town and a new school, all because eighteen years ago, my mom had a bad boy fetish.

"How about I just live right here on the lawn?" I seethe. "It'll be better than that joke of a town."

Mom puts the box labelled *photo albums* in the back of her car, turning to face me with a look of exhaustion. I almost feel bad before I remember moving away isn't my only option. I have a dad. I don't have to leave.

"Why can't I just live with Dad?" I ask again for the millionth time. "All my friends are here, and I really don't want to transfer to a new school for my senior year."

"You've already been transferred, Annabelle," she shakes her head. "And you know why I won't allow you to stay with your father."

"What difference does it make if I live with him now or when I graduate? I've been with him a hell of a lot more than I've ever been with you, so obviously I'm safe there."

The flash of hurt in her brown eyes is enough to make me instantly regret my words.

Sydney isn't a bad mom. She only wants the best life for me, something she missed out on by growing up here. Even though she had loved my dad and enjoyed her job as a paediatrician, I could always see that there was something missing for her. She was never truly happy, no matter how much she tried to prove she was. Moving away is everything she has ever dreamed of. I feel like shit for dragging a dark cloud over what's a happy moment for her.

"You might not want to move back once you start school," she huffs. "Try to go in with an open mind. *Please*, that's all I'm asking for."

There's no chance in hell that I'll want to stay in Lakeside. I'm

already counting the days until I can come back. But I suppose I can humour my mom for a bit. It is nice to see her happy again.

I shrug, "I'll do my best, but I'm not promising anything."

Mom comes up to kiss my cheek. "Throw your clothes back in the box, I'll go grab the tape."

With a groan, I fall to my knees to throw my clothes back in the box.

This year better go really fucking fast.

The sound of my window being pushed open wakes me. After a second of my heart racing, my body catches up with my head. My window has one trick to get it opened from the outside, and only one person knows it. Because she's the one that discovered it.

"Valerie," I hiss through the darkness. "A little heads-up would've been nice. I almost had a heart attack."

Valerie is quiet as she tip-toes across the carpet, but I can make out her tall frame and the messy bun on her head.

You would never think she has the most beautiful long hair; the girl always has it thrown up.

I lift the blanket just as she climbs in and lays her head across my chest. The smell of her cinnamon shampoo hits my nose, the only indication that she'd gone home after I left her earlier.

"Do you think they'd notice if I just climb into one of the boxes?" Val mumbles, wrapping herself around me. "I can't do life without you, Anna."

"It's only a year," I reassure her, pulling her hair out of the bun to run my fingers through the soft locks. "And we're still gonna see each other all the time."

"It's not the same and you know it. How will I go from seeing you every day to a couple of times a month? Where will I go when Ezra is being a jerk?"

I laugh, much to her annoyance, earning a slap on my stomach. "Maybe you'll finally learn how to stay and talk to him instead of storming out when you argue."

"Nah, I live for the drama too much. Where's the fun if he isn't chasing me down?"

Shaking my head, I reply, “I don’t know how he puts up with your dramatic ass.”

“I’m into anal.”

Pushing her off me, I roll onto my side and cover my ears. “I don’t wanna hear that, oh my god. Get out of my house.”

Laughing, Val moves closer to spoon me. The mood shifting back to gloomy when she places a kiss on my shoulder blade. “I’m really gonna fucking miss you.”

“I’ll miss you more.”

“It’s cute you think that.”

Chapter 2

Annabelle

Henry's house is ridiculous.

Seriously. It's a good thing he doesn't throw stones, because the man really does live in a glass house. Does he realise that having floor to ceiling windows covering the front of his house means that anybody can see inside?

Though that's probably why he keeps it so clean. All I'm doing is standing in the driveway, yet I can see that there isn't one mark on the white marble floors or the white walls. I really hope there's some colour inside. I don't feel like living my senior year out in a hospital.

"My girls!"

Henry runs—that's right, *runs*—down to greet us, a huge smile on his face. He doesn't stop as he scoops my mom up in his arms, running in a circle with her giggling.

The sight is surreal. I didn't know my mom was even capable of giggling like a schoolgirl.

He walks her back over, planting her on her feet with a kiss to her forehead. Turning to me, he shuffles on his feet awkwardly.

"Hey, Annabelle." Even while awkward, his smile is still warm. "I brought some fresh bagels, I figured you might be hungry after the drive."

It's really hard to keep the smile off my face at this point. "Thanks. I actually skipped breakfast this morning, so that sounds amazing."

"Breakfast is the most important meal of the day." Henry loses the awkward stance and wraps his arm around my mom's waist. "And if I may, I know you like it with strawberry jam, but I'd suggest trying cream cheese. It'll be the best decision you ever make."

The hopeful look in mom's eyes is enough to form a lump in my throat. I don't want her thinking I'll be sticking around.

Henry is a really good guy, even if I had some doubts when they'd first met. He looked like your typical rich asshole, and my mom was this sweet doctor. Of course, I was sceptical. I've never been so happy to be

proven wrong, though.

And boy, wasn't I proven wrong.

I was stuck in bed with the flu one day, mom was on a double shift at the hospital, and even though they'd only been dating a month, Henry brought over my favourite Pad Thai and watched almost an entire season of New Girl until my dad could come and pick me up. That was the day my opinion of Henry changed.

"I am exhausted," Mom sighs, resting her head on Henry's shoulder. "I think all this could wait until tomorrow. What do you say?"

"Of course." Henry kisses the crown of her head, then gestures to the house. "You go lay down and rest, I'll give Anna the tour."

The house is just as beautiful inside as it is outside. And thankfully, it's not all white. I wouldn't say there are wild splashes of colour, but the black leather couch with charcoal cushions is a nice enough balance.

Henry is also a huge fan of art, it seems. Huge canvas's line up practically every wall, following no theme. Some are photographs of castles, some of landscapes.

"These are beautiful," I compliment, coming to stand in front of a canvas showcasing snowy mountains.

"I took them," Henry proclaims proudly. "All the photography pieces are my own. I took a couple years off after high school and travelled the world, building up a portfolio."

Looking up at Henry, standing in his slacks, cashmere sweater with his hair perfectly styled, I can't bring myself to imagine him wandering around Europe carrying a camera and wearing an oversized backpack. Once again, he's surprised me.

"Why marketing then?" I ask. "You're clearly a great photographer."

Henry's eyes darken as his eyes flicker to the stairs. "I didn't have much of a choice in the end. But that's not important, I won't bore you with my family drama."

Not wanting to push him when he is clearly tensed up, I quickly change topics. "Where was this one taken?"

"Ah, this is a favourite of mine. This is the Bernese Highlands in Switzerland. I was eighteen, had met a beautiful Italian girl who had been on this tour group, and we camped out there to catch the sunrise. We almost

froze to death, but it is still one of the best nights of my life.”

A story my mom used to tell me comes to mind and I glance up at Henry to see a smile lighting up his face. “I think my mom went to that place. I remember her mentioning it once.”

“Sydney Turner,” Henry grins. “Who would’ve thought that twenty years later, we’d find each other again.”

My shock must be clear on my face because Henry laughs loud enough that my mom comes downstairs. Looking at the photograph, a warm smile drifts over her face as she comes to attach herself to Henry’s side.

“You told her?”

“Why didn’t you?” My voice comes out sounding a lot more accusing than I’d intended. “I thought you two met at that charity event.”

Mom casts her eyes down for a moment. “I didn’t know how you’d take it. I’m sorry, that’s on me. I should’ve said something a lot sooner.”

Waving her off, I look at the photo again. “It’s okay. It’s actually a pretty cute story. I’m just tired from getting up early. Can I just go to bed?”

After spending most of the night talking with Val, then getting up early to finish packing and cleaning the house, exhausted doesn’t feel like a big enough word for how tired I am.

“Of course! Come, I’ll show you where your room is.”

The upstairs is just as grand as the downstairs, with a huge open space greeting you at the top. The space is practically empty, minus a black grand piano that faces the back wall. A back wall that is mostly made of windows.

Why does this guy want a house made almost entirely of windows? Surely they’d be a bitch to clean? Then again, he probably has someone he pays to do that.

There are two arch doorways on opposite ends that I eye off, unsure which way to go.

“That one leads to the master,” Henry explains, pointing to the doorway at the farthest end of the empty space. “And that one leads down to a hall. There are a total of four bedrooms up here. Your room is the second door on the right. You have an ensuite, but there is a bathroom behind the first door on the left. Carson’s room is just beside yours on the left, and the other two rooms are guest rooms.”

I snap my head to look at Henry. “Who’s Carson?”

Racking my brain to see if I recognise the name, I come up empty.

Nobody has mentioned a Carson to me, who the hell is he? Henry doesn't have any kids.

Henry's brow creases. "Your mom didn't tell you?"

When I shake my head, Henry sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Carson is my nephew. He lives with me full-time. You're both around the same age and you'll be at the same school, so he'll be driving you to school and back until we sort out your own car."

Ignoring the part about getting my own car, because I don't intend on accepting anything of the sort, I strain my ears to hear for any additional movement upstairs.

"Where is he?"

"Oh, he's away for the weekend. His friend is throwing a party tonight, so he'll be too hungover to be back home before Sunday."

At least I have Saturday before meeting my new roommate.

I hope he isn't an ass.

"Also, my brother Seth will be stopping by tomorrow morning," Henry tells me. "If you want to stay upstairs in your bedroom, I won't blame you, I'd even recommend it."

"Is he that bad?"

Henry shrugs, trying to appear casual, but I can see that tension from earlier returning. "He isn't the kindest person to know. If I had the chance to avoid him, I'd take it."

"Well, thanks for the heads up. I might just get that bagel and take a nap or something."

"Sure, sure. And hey, don't forget to try that cream cheese."

My phone ringing is what wakes me. With a quick look to see it's three in the morning, I groan. I spoke with Val before falling asleep, and since she fell asleep on the phone, I don't see it being her.

Seeing my dad's name, I hurriedly answer.

"I'm sorry I didn't come see you," Dad says. "I was on my way when I got a call in."

Getting a call in is usually code for something gang related. I'd assumed that's why he didn't end up coming to say goodbye before we left, and while I didn't blame him for it, my mom sure jumped to the chance.

"It's okay," I tell him, my voice groggy from having just woken up.

There's a sigh on the other end. "It isn't okay, Anna, don't go

saying that. You are my number one priority, you know that, right?”

“Of course I know that, Dad.” I sit up to turn the lamp on. “You have a twenty-four-hour job. I’ve always understood, and I don’t blame you.”

“Sometimes I wish you did.” There’s a moment of silence before he speaks again. “I’d walk away if you wanted me to, you know. I’d do that for you.”

His words drop like a bomb. He isn’t offering to quit some 9-to-5 office job. I know the implications of walking away from a gang like the Rippers, and if he did that, even being as high in the ranks as he is, I may as well sign my dad’s death certificate now. Still, his words leave behind a heavy weight in my heart.

“I’d never ask you to do that,” I whisper.

“I know.” Dad coughs, moving the topic away. “I had Val bugging me all afternoon. She’s already planning for you to come home and stay next weekend.”

“Yeah, I was talking to her before bed,” I laugh. “You’d think I’d already been gone for weeks by the way she was talking.”

“That girl is going to turn me grey, I swear. You don’t have to rush back so soon if you don’t want to, sweetheart. I don’t want you feeling pressured.”

Throwing my legs out of bed, I take a second to stretch my arms above my head and hope that Dad isn’t talking while the phone is away from my ear.

“I want to come back. Will you be able to pick me up Friday afternoon?”

“As if you have to ask. Send me the address on Friday morning, and what time you want me to grab you. Now go back to sleep, I’m sorry for waking you.”

“Night Dad, I love you.”

“Love you more.”

Chapter 3

Annabelle

I hate the uniform. Uniforms in general, actually.

How am I expected to go from jeans to pleated skirts? This is a joke. And to make it worse, I have a tie.

A tie.

Yeah, I don't think so.

Dressed in the grey pleated skirt, white button shirt and my Doc Martins, I throw my hair into a messy ponytail and make my way downstairs. I've gone from being able to wear whatever the hell I want to school to now having a strict dress code. As if this place couldn't get any worse.

I suppose on the small upside, Carson never came home over the weekend, so that awkward meeting hasn't happened yet. Henry is a good guy, so hopefully, his nephew isn't too much of a jackass.

My mom and Henry are already in the kitchen, whispering and smiling over their cups of coffee. It reminds me once again that I'll get through this; my mom deserves to have her happy ending. If that means I need to look like an asshole for a year, I can do it.

"Morning, baby," Mom beams. "There's coffee in the pot."

Making a beeline for the coffeepot with my travel mug, I pour my coffee black and huff out a laugh at the obvious disgust on Henry's face.

"Since Carson decided to stay out all weekend, I'll be dropping you off on the way to work," Henry says, blowing on his own coffee, which looks mostly like milk. "I'm not sure if he'll even be at school, so I'll swing by and pick you up, too. You two can meet tonight over dinner."

I want to argue that I have no interest in meeting his nephew, that I won't be here all that long, but I don't want to be the one to wipe the look of hope in Henry's eyes. He wants this to work. He wants to make my mom happy. So instead, I smile, hoping that it comes across as genuine and not a grimace. "Works for me."

"So anyway, I called the hospital yesterday and they've given me the rest of the week off," Mom announces. "Which is perfect, because I have

to go into Doverhill tomorrow to sign some papers for the house.”

My attention perks up at the mention of home. Mom was planning on selling the house, but when Henry brought up the idea of renting, she changed her mind. I was thrilled, because if she doesn't sell the house, I might be able to rent from her and move back *home* after I graduate. It isn't the place I grew up in; Mom let Dad keep that house in their divorce. She wanted a fresh start, so she brought a small little two-bedroom cottage style house just on the outskirts of town.

“Can I come with you?” I beg. “*Please.*”

Mom ponders her answer for a moment before pity wins out. “I suppose I can change the appointment until you've finished school. Okay. Go let Valerie know, I'll drop you off with her while I go talk to the real estate.”

My mood instantly lifts. It already feels like I've been here for far too long.

“Here's your class schedule.” Henry hands me a piece of paper. “It's all online. I'll email you everything when I get to the office and I'll pick you up back here this afternoon.”

With a tight smile, I step out of the Bentley, desperately trying to ignore all the stares that are suddenly thrown my way.

Geez, way to fit a stereotype everyone. Are new kids really that rare here?

Holding my head high, I clear my head of everyone's possible opinions. I don't care what these assholes think of me. Soon enough, I'll be back home where the only ones judged are these rich kids.

It doesn't take me long to find my first class, which so happens to be Chemistry.

It's my worst subject, mostly because back in Doverhill, I ditched Chemistry with Val and Ezra every week to go hang out at a local café. The owner was sweet on Ezra, so she never ratted us out.

I must be a little late by the time I walk into class, because there are only two seats free. One lone seat right up the front, and one at the back beside a girl who looks about as thrilled to be here as I do. Oh well, might as well try to be social since I'll be stuck here. Besides, I've always hated sitting up front. You're usually always called on for answers. Which doesn't work for me since I'd rather chew off my arm than pay attention to Chem.

“Is it alright if I sit here?” I ask the petite girl, gesturing to the

empty seat beside her.

The stunning blonde faces me with a blinding smile. “Of course, I’m Ivy. I take it you’re the new kid everyone’s obsessing over?”

Feeling my face morph into a smile to match her own, I introduce myself. “Yeah, that’ll be me. Anna. And I wouldn’t exactly say anyone’s obsessing.”

“Oh please, you’ve been the talk of the school since Henry popped the question to your mom. That guy has been a bachelor for as long as I’ve been alive. And taking on a kid? Yeah, you’re the new obsession around here.”

“Where the hell did I move to, a tiny country town? Is the gossip seriously that bad around here?” I wrinkle my nose against the unease swimming around in my stomach.

I don’t want to be talked about. I don’t want any sort of attention. The only thing I want is for this year to fly past so I can get back to my life.

Ivy laughs, sounding genuinely amused. “It feels that way sometimes. Gossip, parties and sex. That’s all that ever goes on around here.”

“What a great way to live,” I mumble, pulling my phone out.

“You get used to it.”

I take a moment to glance around the room. Everyone seems to be stuck in their own conversations, despite the teacher now rattling on at the front. When the hell did class start?

“So what do you think so far?” Ivy waves her hand around. “Without your newfound knowledge that everybody is talking about you.”

I’m not sure how to respond. Ivy seems nice, and it would be good to make at least one friend here. With that thought, I keep my personal opinion on Lakeside to myself; that it’s a hole I want to run far away from. “I’m not sure yet. I spent the weekend unpacking, and I haven’t really seen much of the school.”

“True.” Ivy pulls her phone out of her pocket, sending off a text with a deep scowl as she talks. “If you want a tour guide of Lakeside, let me know. I’ll be happy to show you around.”

“I’d like that,” I smile gratefully.

Maybe this won’t be too bad after all.

“Why is the teacher so cool with nobody paying attention?” I whisper, though I’m not sure why. Almost everyone is talking.

“It’s our Senior year,” Ivy shrugs. “And honestly, the teachers get

paid off for our grades.”

I frown, staring down at the teacher. She looks about forty, dressed a bit too well for a high school chemistry teacher. I guess it isn't too shocking, actually. I could totally believe the teachers here are all paid off. These rich kids don't exactly look like the studying type.

“You should sit with us at lunch,” Ivy says, moving the subject away before I can question who pays the teachers. “I'll introduce you to Gianna. She's cool.”

“You might want to cover up first,” a high-pitched voice speaks from beside me. “Gianna will hump anything with a pair of tits.”

Ivy tenses beside me as she glares up at the girl speaking. “Wrong. She wouldn't fuck you even if you paid. Bye, Jessica.”

The girl—Jessica—scoffs and makes no move to walk away. She brushes her bleached blonde hair over her shoulder and looks at the girl beside her with a taunting smile.

“You're right,” Jessica sighs. “She does seem to prefer brunettes, doesn't she, Mia?”

Mia shuffles, clearly uncomfortable. “Yeah. I bet she'd jump you if you changed your hair colour.”

Despite her words, I can see something that sure isn't amusement lurking behind Mia's eyes. She doesn't seem to agree with Jessica, yet she's laughing with her anyway. Jesus, the girls here are really trying to fit certain stereotypes. The only thing they're missing are cheerleading uniforms and pom pom's.

Ivy is about to speak again when I straighten my spine. I don't know Gianna, but if she is actually into girls, then that doesn't give anyone the right to pick on her for it. There is nothing wrong with being attracted to the same gender and I'd be damned if I let this shit pass by me without saying anything.

“Why does it bother you who Gianna wants to fuck?” I laugh bitterly. “Are you secretly upset that she *doesn't* want you? I mean, I can't blame her. Personally, I wouldn't want someone who doesn't understand what too much bleach can do. Do you mind if I recommend a hairdresser?”

A few whistles alert me to the sudden silence in the classroom. *Shit*, drawing attention to myself is the last thing I wanted to do here.

“You fucking bitch,” Jessica seethes. “You'll pay for that, trailer trash.”

“Trailer trash?” I grin. “How original, I’m practically shaking in my boots.”

With an overly dramatic frustrated squeal, Jessica walks back to her seat at the front with a glare thrown over her shoulder.

“I think I might be in love with you,” Ivy whispers, sitting wide-eyed. “But just a heads up, Gianna is strictly into chicks. She gets a bit of shit for her sexuality around here... if you hadn’t noticed.”

I knew this school was a joke coming here, but to judge someone based on who they’re attracted to?

Fuck that.

“I’m not one to judge anyone’s sexuality,” I reassure her, watching the relief flood her pretty blue eyes. “I fucking hate prejudice bitches, it’s all kinds of fucked up.”

Ivy’s face lights up, her smile contagious once again. “We’re gonna get along just fine.”

Gianna is just as welcoming as Ivy. Being around the both of them is like standing on the beach, with the sun beating down on your skin and the sound of waves crashing in front of you. It’s peaceful.

We walk into the cafeteria together, and I notice everyone seems to know Ivy and Gianna, stopping them to say hello. They don’t seem all that bothered by it, stuck in a conversation about an assignment due for History.

“You can give me all the tips you want, but I’m still planning on finishing it at the last minute,” Gianna teases.

Ivy groans, throwing her head back as we wait in line to get our lunch. “You are so fucking infuriating. I don’t know how you’re carrying straight A’s, I really don’t.”

“I work better under—hey, no.” Gianna grabs Ivy’s jaw, forcing her to look away from where she’d been staring. “Don’t give him the satisfaction of staring at him. Pretend he isn’t there.”

Ivy scoffs, pulling her face out of Gianna’s hold. Her gaze moves back to a table near the corner of the room. There are three guys sitting there, two are bent over a phone and one is whispering in a girl’s ear as she settles onto his lap.

“He would have to notice me to know I’m staring, and hell hasn’t quite frozen over yet,” Ivy sneers, her lips curling back. “He’d also have to remove Sienna from his dick, and that isn’t happening.”

I watch silently as Ivy continues to glare at the guy who I assume has the girl in his lap. I want to ask what she has against him, but it's the hurt in her eyes that stop me. She may be speaking with hatred, and her face may be scrunched up like she would set their table on fire if she could, but her eyes are telling a completely different story. A story I doubt she's willing to share with someone that is practically a stranger.

As I glance back over at the table, I see Jessica and Mia walking over. The two guys look up as the girls speak. The guy with raven black hair looks disinterested as he brings his attention back to whatever is on his phone. It's the other guy, the blonde, who seems focused on whatever Jessica is saying.

I don't have to wonder what she's talking about for long, because when her hands fall to her hips, blonde guy looks directly over to where we stand and my heart damn near stops.

Stormy grey eyes meet mine, narrowed as they run down the length of me. His jaw is sharp, too sharp for a fucking teenager, and his sandy blonde hair is perfectly styled. It looks like he put more effort into his hair this morning than I did—which is probably true considering I didn't even brush mine. He's crazy attractive, but he definitely knows it. He also needs to go up a size with his uniform unless he's secretly a stripper and the shirt is designed to be stretched over his muscles for when he rips it off.

The disgust on his face keeps my fantasies about him shirtless to a minimum, though.

Sure, my hair isn't how I usually wear it, and I'm not wearing stilettos or flats like the other girls, but that hardly gives him the right to look at me like I'm something stuck under his shoe. Maybe Jess is complaining about how I spoke to her this morning. I guess that kind of makes sense if they're a thing or something.

"Is bitchface causing trouble again?" Gianna questions, coming to stand beside me.

Finally tearing my gaze away, I turn to face Gianna. "By the fabulous nickname, I take it that being a bitch isn't an unusual occurrence for her?"

"It's her only talent," Ivy laughs. "That and spreading her legs."

I scrunch up my nose.

"Oh, but get this." Gianna grips my bicep and lowers her voice. "She has a college boyfriend, that has her convinced that if you get fucked

doggy style, it technically isn't cheating because you can pretend it's your partner fucking you."

Ivy is already laughing while my brow creases. "She isn't exactly the brightest lightbulb out there."

Gianna gasps as she holds back her laughter. "She has fucked so many guys here with that logic that she probably has a punch card at the health clinic."

"What do you think she gets when she fills the card?"

"A STD check and a lollipop."

Ivy takes a deep breath through her laughing fit, clutching her stomach. Her reaction, and what Gianna just told me, is what gets me laughing. All three of us stand in line laughing. I make a mental note to tell Val later. This is something she'll find hilarious.

Just as my laughter dies down, a strong smell hits my nose right before spaghetti is tipped over my head. Sauce dripping from my hair down my face in a dramatically slow fashion.

"Go back to your fucking gangster daddy. You aren't welcome here," Jessica's shrill voice whispers in my ear.

Jessica practically runs back to the grey-eyed asshole before Ivy can recover from her shock, but when she notices the smirk on the jerk's face, one brow arches.

"What the hell did you do to Carson Dorian?"

The strong-smelling spaghetti is quickly forgotten as my brain registers Ivy's words.

Carson Dorian.

Jessica is now sitting on Carson Dorian's lap, my new fucking roommate.

Great.

Not only does Henry's nephew seem to hate me for whatever reason, Jessica knows who my dad is? How the fuck is that possible?

Chapter 4

Carson

Out of all the bitches my uncle could've picked, he had to fucking choose Decker's ex. Now I have to live under the same roof as his spawn.

Aw hell, it might not be too bad. I'm not stupid enough to fuck with a biker, but nothing's stopping me from making his kid's life a living hell while she's here. He fucking deserves it.

"Ow!" Sienna squeaks from Asher's lap. "What the hell?"

I glance over to see Asher tense up, his hold on Sienna's hips tightening. One look across the cafeteria shows me Ivy glaring daggers at Asher.

Asher won't say what the fuck happened between those two, but it must have been bad. They'd been inseparable growing up, had started dating at fourteen, but shortly after they'd turned sixteen, something happened, and they've been enemies ever since. I know enough to know that Ivy carries the torch and Asher would run back to her in a second. He fucking hates it, though. I only know how he feels because he'd gotten drunk a few months back and wouldn't shut up about her.

"Carson, are you even listening?" Jess whines, bringing my attention back to her. "She made me look like an idiot."

Like that's hard.

I look away from the bleached blonde in front of me, pouting like she thinks it's attractive. Instead, I turn to the reason for her temper tantrum.

Annabelle Decker.

Fire fills my blood as I stare at her, my dick ignoring who the fuck she is. I hate she looks like that; it was easier to hate her when I imagined the bitch as some hideous creature. But Annabelle is far from hideous. Her gold spun hair is thrown into a messy ponytail, which she somehow manages to pull off; Jess tried the look once, and I swear at first I thought she'd gotten kicked out and was homeless, but here Annabelle is, looking like she'd just stepped off the runaway, even with her Doc Martins. From here I can make out her wide eyes, confusion sparking in the lush green as the faintest colour

of pink covers her high cheekbones. And *fuck*.

The cause for my hardening dick. I compare Jess, wearing her uniform in almost the same way; short skirt, shirt tucked in, with a few of the top buttons undone. My dick barely twitches, even though I know exactly what's under her uniform. It's nothing to even think twice about. Annabelle's tits are pressed against her shirt, that I'm sure her undone buttons weren't intentional. Her skirt is short with no fault to her own, with an ass like that and a tiny as fuck waist, of course your skirt will keep riding up.

"Don't you have to go blow your calc teacher?" Weston mumbles, keeping his nose buried in his phone. "Heard you got a D again."

Jess ignores Weston, continuing to whine about the new girl. Asher has recovered, despite Ivy still staring at him like she's wishing for the ground below him to open up.

Glancing down at the half-eaten spaghetti in front of me, I smirk. Jess wants to get back at the bitch. Fine by me. I need my dick sucked later, and if Jess is still in a mood, she'll probably fuck off to Mia's.

"Go dump this on her and share a little message for me," I tell her, slightly nodding to the plate. "Then wait at my car."

Jess's eyes light up. She's as nasty as they come, so I'm not surprised. Or complaining. I can fuck with Annabelle without her even realising it. Which will probably work out a lot better.

Licking her lips, she takes the plate and creeps over to where my worst nightmare is still standing. Then before I can even blink, the plate has been dumped.

I don't even bother hiding the cruel smirk from my face when sweet little Annabelle looks my way, her eyes widening in realisation.

That's right, you just found out who I am, did you?

"The fuck she do to you?" Weston questions, lifting one brow.

"That's Decker's kid," I tell him, venom lacing my words.

Weston only grunts in response, withdrawing to his phone once again. Ever since his long-distance girlfriend dumped his ass last month, he's been moping around. I don't know why. All they ever did was fight anyway.

Jess practically runs back, ignoring the scowl on my face. She was told to fucking meet me at my car. My lap isn't my car. Regardless, I let her climb on me, looking back at Annabelle while Jess runs her hand over my chest. Even covered in sauce, she's sex on legs. Only now her eyes are watching me with this sparked fury that ignites something within me.

“Mm, is this for me?” Jess whispers, biting my earlobe and rubbing her thigh along my now hard dick.

“Sure,” I lie. “Now go to my fucking car like I told you.”

With a grunt, I shoot my load down Jess’s throat, tightening my grip on her hair as she gags around my length.

The tension in my stomach doesn’t ease. How could it when I imagined griping onto golden hair, imaging sharp green eyes looking up at me with unshed tears? Jess’s watered blue eyes do nothing for me, so I close my eyes briefly to soak in some of the warmth moving through my veins.

Releasing my hold on Jess, I tuck myself back into my pants as she huffs in annoyance. She clearly thought this was gonna turn into something else, and any other day it might have. I can’t fool her with a soft dick. She knows all too well that I can go multiple rounds. But I won’t today, not when it isn’t her naked body I’m imagining bouncing on my dick.

Fucking Annabelle.

That bitch will be the death of me. I already know it.

“I’ve gotta head home,” I say, hoping she takes the hint to fuck off.

With a flirty smile, she leans back over the gearstick, dragging one sharp nail down my bicep with just enough pressure to make me hiss. “What time do you want me to meet you there?”

It takes a conscious effort to not roll my eyes. “I have shit to do, Jessica. Go home and call Michael if you want a dick to ride.”

Mentioning her boyfriend seems to sour the mood, as it always does. Jess likes to pretend we’re exclusive, that she’s the only girl I want and we’ll grow old together. But it’s a bit fucking hard when she’s got a boyfriend in college and I refuse to play along with her game by fucking her ex bestie.

“I like your dick better,” Jess whispers, trying her luck once again. “Come on, babe. I’m going away this weekend.”

Losing my patience, I grab Jess’s wrist and remove her hand from my arm. “And if I wanna fuck someone, I’ll call Monique.”

That one earns me a slap which I don’t even try to stop. I kind of deserve it. Doesn’t mean I’ll take my words back. Jess knows I’ve been fucking Monique. The fact that they were best friends once upon a time doesn’t bother me. Monique keeps shit interesting.

“Don’t ever fucking call me again, you jerk,” Jess cries, slamming

the car door once she climbs out.

I drop my head back against the headrest, running my hands through my hair. For someone not even in a fucking relationship, I sure do have enough girl problems. I go through this same bullshit almost every week with Jess, usually right before she fucks off to see Michael. I really should cut the cord with her. It's not like I have any trouble getting my dick sucked.

Starting the engine, I pull out of the school parking lot just as I see a black Bentley pull up. I slow down long enough to watch Annabelle jog over to the passenger door, hoping to see a glimpse of her round ass as she bends to get in.

Thankfully, the spaghetti incident forced her to take Ivy's spare uniform, and Ivy has about four inches on little Annabelle, so I don't have to wait long until I'm graced with just enough of her ass to get me completely hard again.

"You're so fucked," I grumble to myself, tearing my eyes away from those golden legs and adjusting my dick.

Deciding that having my dick sucked wasn't nearly enough, I use voice to text to invite Monique over tonight.

Chapter 5

Annabelle

A nap does nothing to help with the pounding headache I have. If anything, it just made it worse. After the spaghetti incident, Ivy and Gianna managed to sneak us into the gym's locker room, where Ivy gave me her spare uniform.

It was too short considering she's four inches taller than me, but it sure as hell beat walking around smelling like tomatoes. I ended up skipping lunch after a quick shower and dress change, so the headache probably comes from being hungry, as well as just pissed off. Yet despite my growling stomach, I can't bring myself to head downstairs for dinner. I know Carson is down there already. I heard his voice pass by my room when I'd woken up.

I suppose there's not a lot I can do to avoid him. Unless by some miracle, my mom suddenly decides I can live with my dad now.

Which isn't happening.

Just as I load Netflix up on the TV, my phone buzzes with a text. I practically jump on it, hoping to see Val's name. We'd just gotten off the phone before I fell asleep; she'd told me about the dramas of Doverhill High and I told her about the shitstorm of a day I had. Unfortunately, the name that comes up isn't one I want to see right now.

Mom: You can't hide in your room forever. Get downstairs now. Dinner is ready.

Mom: I won't make texting you for dinner a habit either, Annabelle.

With a heavy groan, I drag myself out of bed and check my appearance in the mirror. There's really no point in dressing up for this thing. My pyjama shorts and hoodie will just have to be enough. Carson saw me covered in spaghetti sauce today; I really can't look any worse.

It took me almost half an hour to remove the orange tint from my face and cleavage when I got home. My skin is now pink and tender from the scrubbing.

Downstairs, everyone is already at the dining table when I enter. My mom's eyes trail down the length of me with a disappointed crease between her brows. *Like I give a shit.* This isn't some formal thing. Besides, Carson is dressed enough for the both of us. He'd ditched his uniform for dark jeans and a grey hoodie, which he pulls off way too well.

I don't like it. It would be easier to hate him if he didn't look like he had just walked off some modelling shoot for Calvin Klein.

"How nice of you to finally join us," Mom lightly scolds, nodding to the empty chair opposite to Carson.

Gag.

"I was sleeping," I shrug. I reluctantly take the chair. I'm not about to make Carson think he has some kind of effect on me where I can't even sit across from him. "I'm here now, though."

"Better late than never," Henry winks. "Anyway, this here is the elusive Carson. I've already told him he's to drive you and pick you up from school. He's assured me it won't be a problem."

I don't miss the quiet snort from Carson. Neither does Henry, judging from the sharp look he throws at him.

"Carson, this is Annabelle. I'm sure I can trust you to be welcoming."

Carson doesn't even bother to look up from his plate as he speaks, "Almost didn't recognise you without the orange."

"Funny, I almost didn't recognise you without your dick down someone's throat."

There goes my acting cool approach.

Stumbling into the carpark earlier than I'd planned this afternoon gave me the shock of my life when I'd found none other than Carson Dorian, head thrown back with Jessica's fake blonde hair bobbing on his lap. There's no denying that I witnessed that *now*.

Mom's face blanches and Henry's lips purse. Carson, though, he just laughs.

He fucking laughs.

"Is that what took you so long to come down?" Carson taunts, the infuriating smirk remaining in place. "Too busy imagining yourself in Jess's place? Don't worry, baby, I was picturing your lips."

I take a quick second to thank my past in Doverhill; it takes a lot to make me blush. If I hadn't known how to squash down that rising heat,

Carson would know just how much that comment affected me.

Hell no.

Over my dead body will Carson ever find out that I'd been using my rechargeable friend while imagining the look of pure lust on his face, the way his Adam's apple bobbed, how he bit his bottom lip so hard I don't know how he didn't split it and that slight tick in his jaw.

"Carson!" Henry scolds his nephew, dropping his fork to the table. "That's enough."

The mischievous glint in Carson's grey eyes warns me that this is far from over, but he shuts up at least. Probably for the best, since I can't seem to find my words.

What the fuck do you even say to something like that?

I didn't think it was possible to hate someone so soon, without even hearing their voice, actually. But Carson Dorian takes the award. His eyes are filled with so much smugness that I want to grab the closest object and throw it at his head. His insanely beautiful head. *God, why does he have to be so good-looking?* This is Derrick Shepard all over again. That surgeon is one major jackass who sure as hell doesn't deserve Meredith, but I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't ride him into next week. I can hate Carson as much as I want, but he will never find out about the fantasies that my mind now torments me with.

Still at a loss for words, and unwilling to lose, I settle for keeping Carson's eye contact as I raise my drink and make a show of slowly wrapping my lips around the end. His eyes automatically drop to my lips, and I watch with satisfaction when his throat bobs.

The rest of our dinner is spent mostly in silence, with Henry and my mom discussing wedding plans and putting our house up for rent back in Doverhill. The only thing keeping me in a good mood through the whole thing is that I'll be seeing Val tomorrow.

Through the entire thing, I can feel Carson's eyes on me like a burning caress, and it takes every bit of self-control to keep my eyes down on my food. That is, until he opens his mouth again.

"You know, I heard the weirdest sound coming from your room earlier," He smirks. "Didn't know you brought a dying cat with you."

"Carson!" Henry drops his fork and glares at his nephew. "I will not tolerate this."

"It's okay, Henry," I smile sweetly, keeping eye contact with

Carson. “He’s just trying to compensate for his small dick by being a massive dick.”

The only reaction I get from Carson is a smirk as he takes a slow bite of his food. He and I both know that he’s packing a weapon of mass destruction. That much was made obvious from the glimpse I saw this afternoon.

My comment might not get a reaction from Carson, but it at least causes my mom to choke on her wine.

“Annabelle, apologise right now!”

Like hell I will.

“I’d rather swim in a pool of acid,” I smile. “If you’d please excuse me.”

Good thing Uber Eats is a thing, because I stand and leave the kitchen without a word. Carson doesn’t deserve any apology of mine. He should be the one grovelling at my feet. I’m not a fucking idiot, I saw the same pasta dish Jessica tipped over my head in front of Carson. It’s pretty obvious he gave the order for some fucked up reason.

I can hear my mom apologising for me, but I just continue walking until I’m back in the safety of my locked room, pulling up the delivery app to order a burger. I’d barely been able to eat much downstairs. My stomach was in knots from the air of arrogance floating around Carson.

It’s a good thing my dad transfers me money, because I have a feeling I’ll be using this app a lot if Henry has a thing for family dinners.

“I just can’t believe you live with him. That’s rough as fuck.”

“We should stage a break-out, you can live with me.”

Ivy and Gianna have turned this shithole of a school into an okay place. I miss Val like crazy, but it is nice to have friends here. Even though I was prepared to go through this year alone, I’m glad that I don’t have to. That shit would have been lonely as hell.

Being friends with them also means that I’m already up to date with all the school gossip. Well, almost all the gossip. Neither will admit why Ivy hates Carson’s best friend, Asher. All I know is that they all grew up together, and Ivy and Asher dated but had a nasty break-up.

A piece of gossip that has come in handy, however, is Carson and Jessica.

Apparently, Jessica has a boyfriend in college, yet she’s been on-

and-off again with Carson for the past year and a half. Carson is known for fucking Jessica's ex BFF, but as for the asshole thing? Apparently, that lovely side is only reserved for me.

That last part had been a bit surprising, considering how unwelcoming he has been toward me. But yeah, Carson is a decent guy to anybody that isn't me. I am finding it a little hard to believe, though.

"It isn't too bad," I shrug, taking a bite of my burrito that I got from the lunchroom. *A. Fucking. Burrito.* This school is insane. The nicest thing we had in Doverhill were the fries, and sometimes the pizza. "I mean, he wasn't even there over the weekend. It shouldn't be too hard to avoid him if that's a regular thing."

Avoiding him is now easier after finding out Ivy lives a couple of houses down and has told me I have no choice in carpooling with her every day. I'm not complaining, since it gets me out of riding in that death trap again. The ride to school this morning had been the most painfully awkward experience of my entire existence. Add in the speeding, and I'm thrilled to avoid that happening again.

Ivy and Gianna exchange a look.

"Hopefully it's that easy," Ivy says. "He has been a bit of a dick since his parents left."

"Yeah, what's the deal with that, anyway? Henry never said why Carson lives with him."

Gianna moves her food around the plate before answering, "A few months ago, his parents took him to his Uncles—Henry—and they kind of never came back. There's this crazy conspiracy going around that they died in a plane crash and it's all been covered up."

"Or that they're in witness protection," Ivy whispers. "There was a rumour going around before they left that his mom had gang connections."

"That's insane," I laugh weakly, looking between the two. "Surely he at least knows where they are?"

It would explain the asshole persona he has going on. I'm sure I'd go insane if my parents just disappeared, too.

Ivy chews on her bottom lip. "I don't think so. Like, we obviously aren't friends. But from what I've heard, he doesn't know anything. There was something going around that he had a Private Investigator a while ago, but I have no idea how true that is."

I glance over just as Carson is leaving the lunchroom, his shoulders

tense through his white shirt.

Gathering up my rubbish, I say goodbye to Ivy and Gianna just as the bell rings above us. In Doverhill I wouldn't have thought twice about ditching class, but I'm starting to somewhat enjoy this place. Graduating with decent grades could actually be a possibility now.

I'm about half-way to my class when I remember I left my textbook in my locker and will have to show up late. Being late isn't the same in this school. The teachers actually give a shit and will threaten detention.

It's kind of nice to have people that give a shit about your education.

The one thing I will complain about, though, is the line of identical lockers. I need to hurry and do something to make mine stand out more. I'm not ready for a year of looking for the small scratch that is my only sign it's my locker.

Groaning quietly, I slowly make my way down the hall, hoping that one of the grey metal boxes will trigger a memory. Except half-way down the row, I'm overwhelmed by the smell of sandalwood and stale cigarette smoke a split second before I'm pushed against a locker with a hand curled around my throat.

Carson's face is set in a scowl as he drags his eyes down the length of me. If I could move, I'd kick myself for the shiver that creeps up my spine.

"What will it take to get you to fuck off?" he growls, bringing his face so close to mine that his minty breath washes over my face. "Because I'm willing to stop at nothing, trailer trash."

His hand tightens around my throat. Not enough to cut off my air supply, but enough to have my heart racing. Also enough to turn me on, apparently.

That's a new kink.

"Fuck off, pretty boy," I rasp. "Learn some new insults."

"Oh, I have plenty for you," he sneers.

Tearing my mind away from the wetness gathering between my thighs, I smirk up at Carson's dark expression, refusing to let him see how confused I am. *What the fuck did I ever do to him?* "Cool, do you expect me to be fucking scared or something? Because sorry to break it to you, pretty boy, but you don't scare me."

While I'm not that bothered by his harsh attitude, it doesn't mean I want to spend my senior year with this asshole making things difficult. What

happened to flying under the radar?

Carson uses his hold on my throat to tilt my head back, keeping his lips way too close to mine. “Your pulse is racing. You sure you’re not scared?”

Determined to not back down to this walking example of big dick energy—*as he should*—I bite down on my lip and make a show of dragging my eyes down to his chest. “My ex was pretty rough in bed, I’m just having some *amazing* flashbacks.”

Taking advantage of the shock flashing across his face, I shoot my right arm up before he can see what I’m doing and bring my elbow down on his forearm, forcing him to release his hold on me. It sure comes in handy to have a dad running in a gang.

Carson scowls, stepping up to me again. Just as he opens his mouth to speak, I clamp my hand over his mouth, ignoring the shock to my system as I feel how soft his lips are. His brows crease in fury as his grey eyes darken.

Ah well, I was always the best at poking the bear.

“It’s okay. I’m sure to everyone else you’re so scary.” For a little extra, when I pull my hand back, I give him a little pat on the cheek.

His surprise gives me just enough time to sneak off. I don’t need my textbook that badly, my teacher can shove it if he has a problem.

“This isn’t over,” Carson calls out. “You can’t fucking hide when you live in the next room.”

“Who says I’m hiding?” I call back, flipping him off over my shoulder.

Guess this won’t be the quiet year I was hoping for.

Chapter 6

Annabelle

Pissed off is an understatement.

Coming home to find the house empty wasn't a good sign. The text from my mom telling me she had to leave earlier, and to see Val another time, is what really lit that fire.

The only thing that got me through this nightmare of a day, filled with leering stares from every guy I passed and not-so-subtle whispered names from Jessica and her little group, was planning to order too much food with Val and binge on Grey's Anatomy.

Maybe I should get a car. My dad's been offering to buy me one for years. Right now, I can't understand why I kept turning him down.

Choosing to order a large pizza and get stuck into the pit of heartbreak that is Grey's Anatomy alone, I have an early shower and get into my least attractive pyjamas, which just so happens to be my baggy sweatpants and a McSteamy sweater Val got for me last Christmas. A messy bun is the obvious choice to fit the rest of my attire.

Anna: Not the same without you.

Val: Call me. I can still laugh at your crying ass over the phone.

Well, she isn't wrong. It is downright laughable just how much I cry over this show. Snorting, I press the green phone icon next to her name, and within seconds, her voice is drifting through my speaker.

"What season are we doing?"

I bring up the episode on the screen. "Season nine. I'm only up to the first episode. Haven't pressed play yet."

"Alright, hold up."

We count to three before pressing play at the same time, laughing as we do. It's something we did a lot growing up, when one of us was grounded, or it was just too late to watch a movie or show together. We'd get on the phone and hit play at the same time, so that we were technically watching it at the exact same time.

My heart gives an uncomfortable squeeze at the memory. I'd give just about anything to have my old life back. Things were so much simpler.

"How's your nightmare of a roommate, or cousin?" Val questions. I can almost hear the frown she's sporting right now. "Would it be cousins? Or maybe second cousins? It isn't step-brother. Although imagine the amount you'd make if you two made a sex tape. There's a whole market for step-siblings, ya know."

"Val," I laugh. "Firstly, that's gross. Secondly, he's king of the assholes, and with any luck, his parents will show up in the morning and whisk him away. So I'd prefer to label us as enemies until we can become strangers again."

"Wait, wait, back the fuck up." I hear some shuffling in the background. "Rewind that. What do you mean, his parents will show up? Did you end up finding out why he's living there?"

I had a major drama fit after my first informal meeting with Carson, and at that time I had no idea why he wasn't with his parents. All I had to offer for information was that he was an asshole. An asshole with a huge dick. A dick he doesn't seem to deserve.

"I have no idea if this is even true," I say. "But apparently, his parents brought him here, then they just disappeared. Nobody has heard anything, not even Carson. There's a rumour he has a Private Investigator, though."

There's a sharp intake of breath. "Fuck. That's intense. Have you asked Henry about it?"

"Not yet. I don't even know how to ask about something like that. What if something horrible happened to them?"

"Maybe. It might explain why he's such a jerk."

"I get the feeling he's always been a jerk."

The TV suddenly turns blank as a shadow falls over me.

"Oh, I don't know, you seem to bring it out in me." I look up to meet stormy grey eyes, hard and intense. Does this guy ever smile? Like a genuine, happy smile?

"Anna? Anna, is that him?" Val's voice sounds like it's coming through a tunnel. "Kick him in the balls!"

Carson raises a brow, clearly having heard my loud best friend. He doesn't move from in front of me, though. Pretty stupid, really. One quick lift to my leg, and he's out. Maybe I should, since he seems to think he's in

control. Nothing screams powerless like clutching your balls and rolling on the ground. I know a few guys that would agree.

“Sorry, Val, I’ve gotta go. It looks like an alligator has crawled in from the lake.”

Hopefully, she doesn’t think I’m serious. The house does back up onto the lake, with a full deck and everything.

Fuck. Why am I only now wondering if there are alligators in there? I’ll have to check google, or maybe I’ll ask Henry. Nobody would be able to stop me from moving away if I find out there are, in fact, dinosaurs living right behind me.

“Hilarious,” Carson remarks dryly. “Now fuck off, we’re playing the PlayStation.”

The ‘we’ walks in at the moment, like they were waiting outside to be summoned. I recognise Asher and Weston from the cafeteria. Asher is the one with raven black waves hanging loosely to his shoulders and Weston has a buzzcut that he manages to pull off surprisingly well. Neither looks like high school kids. Then again, I suppose they are eighteen. At least, that’s what Gianna has told me.

Asher moves to the beanbag in the corner, while Weston takes a seat on the other end of the couch I’m currently on. I notice Asher staring at me as he opens a bottle of beer. They don’t seem all that bothered about me being in here, just slightly amused.

“There’s another tv, go use that one,” I sneer, settling deeper in the fluffy cushions.

“Exactly,” Carson retorts. “This is where the PlayStation is. Netflix is out in the living room for your shitty show. So you can either walk yourself, or I’ll carry you out there.”

If I weren’t so stubborn, I could have easily moved into the living room for my night of binge watching. I could even go into my bedroom. The movie room is huge, with a large L-shaped sofa and a few beanbags scattered around. It makes logical sense to let the guys use it while I use the smaller room. But I am stubborn.

Crossing my arms, I stare straight forward, avoiding Carson’s stare. And the heat moving over my skin.

“If you touch me, I’ll torch your fucking car after I cut your dick off.”

I refuse to be talked down to in the house I now live in. Carson

isn't my damn dad, he's just the nephew of the guy my mom is marrying, he is nothing to me. I may not cut his dick off, because that would just be a tragedy and I wouldn't torch his car because I don't want arson on my criminal record. He doesn't know any of this, though.

Carson is silent as he stares down at me, his jaw twitching and lips pursed. Thank God for peripheral vision, because he sure is a sight, even when I'm not looking directly at him.

"I don't mind playing with a chick," Weston shrugs, firing up the console. "You like Need for Speed, Anna?"

"Wait, we're racing?" Asher groans. "I wanted to blow shit up."

"I'm over that game. You always fucking cheat," Weston says.

"No," is all Carson says.

We continue staring each other down in a silent stand-off. Heat flows through my body at the fire in his stare. Hate sex with this guy might just kill me. I wonder if he puts all that anger into sex.

Probably not. The angriest guys are usually the gentlest. It's such a shame.

Finally muttering a curse under his breath, Carson gives in, moving to another bean bag and flopping down, gesturing for Asher to throw him a beer.

Anna—1

Carson—0

"I'm good for racing," I finally answer Weston, catching the controller he tosses my way. "I just hope you aren't a sore loser when I toast your ass."

Years of living with a dad that never got a son prepared me for this moment. I may not willingly go and play video games, doesn't mean I can't smash through them, though.

Carson snorts. "You don't even fucking drive, I doubt you're that good."

Gritting my teeth, I glare at the back of his head, contemplating tossing the controller at him. "You don't even know me. How the fuck would you know if I don't drive?"

"The lack of an extra car in the driveway." He downs the entire beer, letting out a rough growl at the end that has a surprising effect between my thighs.

Okay, not that surprising. Carson's whole asshole thing seems to

get me hot. It's a bit concerning, actually. The harsher he is, the wetter I get. Maybe I should seek therapy.

"Just because I don't have a car, doesn't mean I can't drive," I snap, flipping him off.

"Prove it," Weston smirks, loading up the scene. "What are you willing to bet?"

"A hundred," I answer, looking for the fastest car to choose. These idiots have underestimated the wrong girl. I'm almost giddy at the chance to prove them wrong. And make some easy cash.

Asher laughs, "Alright, I'm in. Throw me a controller."

Carson wordlessly throws him a controller before taking one for himself. "You sure you have the money to pay up when you lose?"

I don't bother biting back. The sooner this race is over, the sooner I can get out. I feel like I've proven my point enough. They can have the room, I'll take the living room. I just hope Val hasn't gotten too far ahead of me. We were on my favourite episode.

Five minutes later, I'm leaving with three hundred bucks and a look from Carson that could melt ice. I file that look away for later, where I can imagine it in the privacy of my locked room.

I'm no stranger to angry sex—it was my favourite kind with my ex-boyfriend—and I get the impression that Carson would make Jordan feel like a pond next to an ocean. Unfortunately, the only place I'll allow myself to have Carson is in my head. Where he can say and do whatever I want.

Moving into the living room, I curl into the corner of the couch with a throw blanket and a bottle of water.

Got to stay hydrated when you're watching this tearfest.

Instead of calling Valerie again, I settle for texting her. Thankfully, she had paused the episode when I hung up. But the show is the last thing she wants to talk about now.

Val: Are you sure that guy is 18??? He could voice Audiobooks and make a KILLING.

Anna: I'll pass along the job recommendation *eye roll emoji* at least then he could hide his charming personality.

Val: Speaking of ugly personalities, Jordan was asking about you today. He was practically begging for your new number.

Anna: Please tell me you didn't give it to him.

Val: Do I look like an idiot?

Val: Don't answer that... and no, I didn't. I told him to walk down to hell and ask you for it himself ;)

I quickly move the subject away from my ex, which Val is quick to follow as she mentions almost burning her house down when she made eggs that morning.

Jordan isn't that bad of a guy, but we were toxic together. We were on and off for a year because he couldn't keep his dick in his pants, and I couldn't let him go. It's been two months since I walked in on him with his latest conquest. That was the day I changed my number and left him for real.

This is the longest we'd been separated, so I'm not that surprised he's wanting to chase me down. That guy always did hate being alone.

Valerie barely gives me a second to reply as she begins a rant of Owen Hunt and why he is her least favourite character.

"You should really lock the door."

I jump as an unknown man rounds the corner from the front foyer, placing my hand over my chest as my heart beats rapidly. If he didn't look like a slightly older version of Henry, I'd be screaming right now.

Maybe I still should.

"You must be Sydney's little girl," the man leers, stepping further into the room. My body tenses automatically. "I'm Seth, I'm sure Henry's mentioned me."

This guy looks slimy and every alarm in my head is having a raging party, warming me to fucking *run*. He looks nice enough with a smile plastered across his face and a gleam in his eyes. But, I grew up with a protective father, determined to teach me about all the evils in the world. That included predatory men. So, while everyone else would see a harmless smile, I see a predator staring at its prey. The gleam in his eyes is anything but friendly. It's downright creepy, like he's sizing up a meal that he knows he shouldn't be having.

Chapter 7

Carson

That girl has gotten under my skin, and I fucking hate it. She looks hot in her little uniform, there's no doubt there, but in baggy clothes with her hair thrown up? Seeing her like that made my chest ache in a way I didn't like. I wanted to drown myself in her soft hair, curl myself around her until the scent of her caramel lotion was marked into my own skin, but I also wanted to rip her clothes off and fuck her so hard that she'd be feeling me all week.

"It's only one year," Asher argues. "It can't be that hard to put your shit aside, she's crazy hot."

I throw a glare at Asher. He and Weston know what my fucking problem is with Annabelle. They know who her father is. They also know why I will stop at nothing to destroy Roman Decker in the best way I know how. I've been barely holding myself back since the day Roman fucked everything up, letting the rage and betrayal form a bitter ball of acid in my stomach.

"She is," Weston agrees, not looking away from the game currently playing. "If you don't plan on hitting that ass, do you mind if I try?"

"Shut the fuck up," I growl, pointing to Weston, then Asher. "Nobody touches her."

The jealousy that hits me is surprising. I try to tell myself that it has nothing to do with who Annabelle fucks, but rather my friends wanting to go there and getting hurt. The Decker's aren't good for anything except fucking people over.

Asher throws his hands up. "All I said was that she's hot, not that I want to fuck her. I'm already in a grave with Ivy. I don't want to throw the dirt over myself."

"Too late for that, my friend," Weston laughs, causing Asher to throw a beer cap at his head with perfect aim. "How's Sienna doing, anyway?"

"Shut up, man," he grumbles.

"Never. But come on, Carson," Weston pauses the game to turn to

me. “That girl is way too hot to be left alone for a whole year. You won’t be the only one banging on those walls.”

He’s right, and the thought is a fucking bitter one. Annabelle is hot. Anyone with a pair of working eyes can see that. No amount of shit I throw her way this year will keep the guys off her. Maybe I should fake a Herpes rumour; nobody wants to fuck the walking STD.

A buzz interrupts my train of thought.

Jess: My parents are out. Come over?

Monique: I’m high as fuck. Come pick me up.

There are a few more messages from Jess as she grows more desperate with every unanswered minute. I’m not in the mood for desperate tonight.

I shoot a quick text off to Monique to ask where she is, then I silence my texts from Jess. She doesn’t need an answer; if she wants to suck a dick, she can run off to her boyfriend. Monique is uncomplicated and cool to hang with on top of the sex.

We hang around for another hour, playing mostly in silence. Asher is the first to leave, saying something about meeting up with Sienna. Weston is next. He leaves with a warning to play nice.

As I’m shutting down the PlayStation, I hear the slimy fucking voice of my Uncle Seth, followed by the softness of Annabelle’s. I’d kill to hear her talk dirty to me in that angelic voice. It would be downright fucking sacrilegious.

“I’m sure Henry’s mentioned me.”

“Only when he talks about what color your coffin will be,” I retort, joining the two in the living room.

It bothers me to see Annabelle curled up on the couch, clearly distressed by my uncle’s close presence. Her unease shouldn’t create a tight knot in my stomach. This should be good. Breaking her down is my goal, after all.

Seth curls his lips, unamused by my sudden appearance.

“You aren’t supposed to be here when Henry isn’t,” I growl, unconsciously taking a protective step toward Annabelle. Maybe I should have stopped with one beer. Although, I’m not exactly a lightweight.

“I was just warning dear Anna here that you should really keep the doors locked,” Seth grins, turning his attention to the nervous blonde. “You never know what kind of monsters can wander in while you’re home alone.”

Fucking prick. He’s the worst monster of them all.

“Did you feel like demonstrating that tonight?” Annabelle scoffs. “Although you give more of a lurking creeper vibe. I think I’d take the monster.”

Fuck. A laugh almost bursts free. If she knew what Seth was capable of, she wouldn’t be talking to him like this. I’ve seen this piece of shit threaten a little kid down the road a few years back, all because the kid laughed at him when he stumbled on the sidewalk.

“You’ve got a smart mouth, Anna,” Seth smirks, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. “I’m sure your boyfriend enjoys shutting you up.”

Red dots begin to fill my vision as I stare at Seth. How he isn’t in jail, I really don’t understand. A few years back, there were a few rumors that he’d been grooming kids. Of course, everything was swept under the rug because there had been no evidence. I haven’t forgotten shit, though. I wouldn’t trust the dick as far as I could throw him.

“I save all my backchat for creepy old men, and it must be your lucky day, because you fit the criteria.”

“You little—” Just as Seth raises his hand, my fist is connecting with his face before I can even register what I’ve done. My body moved without any command the second I saw Annabelle being threatened.

I may be a piece of shit that wants to break her down, but I’d rather be hit by a truck than lay my hand on a woman, any woman. What I have planned for little Annabelle fortunately doesn’t include my direct involvement.

Seth wails, falling on his ass and clutching at his eye. Seeing him like that does little to soothe the anger still simmering beneath the surface. He’s lucky I’m not doing worse after he tried to lay a hand on her.

“No wonder your parents walked out on you, you worthless piece of shit,” Seth snarls from his position on the ground.

“What the hell is going on here?” Henry’s voice echoes through the space, drawing everyone’s attention to him. The vein in his neck is throbbing as he takes in his brother. “You know not to just show up here, Seth.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’m your goddamn brother,” Seth rolls his eyes, finally standing up. “I don’t know why you continue to care for this

brat. He's good for nothing."

Yeah, yeah, I've heard it all before. All from him, actually. It's no secret that we've always had a strained relationship.

Henry looks behind Seth, noticing Annabelle, and it's like that vein explodes. "Anna, can you please go upstairs, sweetie? Think about what you'd like for dinner and I'll order in."

I see a flicker of hesitation before she gets up and scurries upstairs. She probably realized that this is a fight she doesn't want to try and win.

Smart.

"What do you want, Seth?" Henry asks, surprisingly calm. "You knew I was at the office till late today."

Seth narrows his eyes, wincing from the rapidly growing bruise covering his eye. The pink flesh gives me a sick sense of satisfaction. "I came by to see my nephew, see if there's any update on our dear brother and sister."

"Sister? Bit fucked up to call her that when you've been trying to fuck her for years," Henry laughs sarcastically. "And any news on them will come from me, not from Carson."

He doesn't know that I've hired a Private Investigator to look into my parent's disappearance. Avery warned me not to trust anyone, including Henry. I'm desperate enough to listen right now. I just want answers. Why the hell did they disappear?

"Well?" Seth folds his arms across his chest. "Is there any news?"

Henry looks between Seth and me before answering through clenched teeth, "No. We haven't heard anything. You can leave now."

"What? Not up for a beer with your big brother?"

"How about you go home and put some ice on that eye, *brother?*"

As if remembering what I'd done, Seth shoots me a glare. It does nothing to me. I'd beat the living shit out of him if I didn't think he'd run crying to a fucking lawyer.

"Call me if there's anything," Seth says, his jaw clenched tight. "And learn how to fucking handle the kid before he ends up behind bars."

Hilarious coming from the man who should actually be behind bars.

When the front door slams shut, Henry turns to me with an awfully concealed smile. "Violence is never the answer, Carson."

"He was making Annabelle uncomfortable." I shrug nonchalantly.

I'm not ready to understand why that made me so furious. I want her gone. I should have let Seth work his creepy magic. It would've ended with him six feet under and Annabelle under the clutches of her father. That's a double win in my books.

"Well, in that case." Henry pulls out his phone. "I'll be gone for the weekend for work and Sydney is coming; feel free to throw a party. Anna will be at her dad's and you already know my rules."

It isn't often Henry will allow me to host a party, since he knows how messy they get. Lock his bedroom up and make sure everything of value to him is put away before it's smashed. Pretty simple rules. Oh, and no drugs. That's kind of a given, though.

I shoot a quick text off to the guys to let them know, then I let Monique know I'm on the way.

Henry disappears upstairs, not bothering to question where I'm off to as I grab my keys. It sure beats the housekeeper I would have had to answer to at my parents.

Chapter 8

Annabelle

Gianna pulls up an extra chair to our table, joining in on our plans for Carson's party. This has become a normal thing for us, forcing three chairs at a table designed for just one person. So far, we haven't been called out on it.

"Is this that guy you met at Starbucks? The one that wrote his number on your coffee?" Gianna asks Ivy once she's done gushing about the guy she's bringing along.

Ivy shrugs. "You talk as if he's one big, bad stranger. He's Mary's brother, and he is only one year older than us."

"He totally wants in your pants." Gianna feigns disappointment with a head shake, but her lips twitch as she holds back a smile.

Ivy winks. "Like I'd be complaining with a face like that. But if I'm not feeling it, I'll just crash with Anna. That's cool, right?"

"Of course," I smile. "And if he tries being pushy, I know some great self-defence moves."

"I'm keeping you close by," she laughs. "What about you, anyway? Are you bringing anyone?"

"No, I'm cool to just hang out and have a few drinks."

Ivy pulls out her phone to shoot out a text before speaking. "Is your friend still coming? Valerie, right?"

Valerie had jumped at the chance to stay at mine tonight, and not only for the party. From what my dad told me, she's been struggling with our distance more than she's let on to me, so we'll be together for the whole weekend. If her grandparents weren't so strict about her staying with them, we'd have found some way to get her living with me in Lakeside.

"She is," I beam at the mention of my childhood best friend. "I can't wait to see her, we aren't used to being apart for this long."

"I bet that sucks," Ivy sighs, sending another text. "I'm with Gianna practically every day. I couldn't imagine moving so far apart."

"It is not fun," I smile sadly, turning to my textbook for the first time all lesson as Gianna and Ivy move back onto the topic of tonight's party.

I'm practically bouncing in the doorway as I see Valerie's Mini Cooper pull up the driveway. It's only been a week since I've seen her, yet it feels like years.

When she gets out, I'm already running at her at full speed. There isn't a spare second I give her before I'm jumping on her, wrapping my legs around her slender waist as she catches me effortlessly.

"You psycho," Val laughs, squeezing my waist painfully. "A little warning next time would be great."

"My scream should have been warning enough."

Val chuckles, agreeing with me. "Alright, climb to my back, you fucking monkey. You can carry my shit for me."

We've done this enough times that I can climb around Valerie without either of us breaking a sweat. It's one of the many perks of her being 5'8 while I'm 5'2; my dad always referred to me as a backpack whenever the three of us went out, because Val was always the one to carry me on her back when I got tired.

"Your boy home?"

I gave her hair a light tug. "*Not* my boy. And no, I haven't had the displeasure of seeing him since earlier today when he thought it would be *hilarious* to spread a rumour that I fucked my math teacher."

Val swings her duffle bag around for me to loop around my shoulder.

"I knew you were into some weird shit, but teachers? Damn girl," she laughs, walking us up to the house. "Was he at least hot?"

"Not even a little. I mean, if Carson wanted to spread rumors like a fucking fourth grader, he could have at least picked one of the gym teachers, they're always hot."

Val stops short when we enter the house, her hands dropping from my thighs.

"Fuck me," she gasps. "And you wanna come back to crapville?"

I shrug. Henry's house is insanely beautiful, but my house back in Doverhill was just as nice. As much as Jess and Carson are trying to spread the rumour that I lived in a run-down trailer park, it isn't true. I lived in a small cottage style home with my mom, a house that she designed with my dad because she grew up obsessed with fairytales. And my dad lives on a fucking ranch—I won't get into why he needs so much land when all he owns is a German Shepherd.

The only reason Doverhill has a bad reputation is because everyone knows that it's run by the Reapers. All the rich assholes around here love to judge anyone from my hometown, when instead of judging us, they should be looking at each other, since the Reaper's make most of their income from this snobby little town.

"At least I didn't have to constantly hear my name through the halls there," I sulk.

Valerie drops me behind her, turning to offer me a sympathetic smile. "I know I joke about it, but if it gets too much, I'm sure your mom would let you come back home."

She probably would, but I'm not about to let that walking ass run me out of town. Even if I don't actually want to be here.

"I can handle the douchebag." I smile reassuringly, bouncing back on my heels. "It'll be a walk in the park."

"Just promise me that no matter what, you won't fall for the guy." She holds up her pinky finger. "You do tend to go for the red flags."

Laughing, I hook her pinky with my own. "I promise."

I'll give it to Carson. He knows how to throw a damn good party.

There are so many people here that I'm sure they're also from other schools. There is no way we have this many seniors at Lakeside High.

It took Valerie some convincing to get me to switch out my jeans and crop for a mini denim skirt and a fucking bralette. I was content to hang out in the background and observe my new classmates, but Val was having none of that amazing plan.

Val stays by my side as we grab a bottle of beer each, neither of us choosing to trust the questionable looking punch.

"Anna!" Ivy pushes through the makeshift dancefloor, Gianna close behind. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here earlier. I was kind of pre-occupied."

She pulls me into a tight hug when Gianna snorts from behind her. "By pre-occupied, she means she spent her afternoon with two minute Brad balls deep inside her."

Ivy gives Gianna a light shove, earning a scowl in return.

"Stop calling him that!"

"He's the one that wanted to fuck half the student body from his year. It's not his fault he gained a certain reputation."

Ivy glances at me sheepishly, "Anyway, enough of my love life."

“Sex life,” Gianna interjects. “But yes. You’re Valerie?”

Val smiles and dramatically curtseys toward the two girls, “The one and only.”

“Hopefully, we get to see you around more. Anna hasn’t shut up about you.”

“I would expect nothing less.” Val throws me a wink.

Gianna grabs the beer from my hands and takes a quick swig before handing it back. “Don’t trust the punch?”

“I’d trust a convicted murderer before I’d trust anything Carson made,” I snort.

Valerie laughs, subtly nudging my ribs. We share an amused side-eye. It wouldn’t take much to trust criminals, since we’ve grown up around some of the worst.

“Ya’ll should come to Crapville one weekend,” Val says. “This party has nothing on the ones we throw back home. I can’t even see lines on the kitchen bench, talk about boring.”

She’s only half-joking, unfortunately. The parties in Doverhill make this one look like a kids’ birthday party. They would get so wild that you wouldn’t even bat an eye at someone getting fucked by the front door. Drugs were thrown around like candy spilling from a piñata and the cops steered clear.

We stay together huddled in our own little corner, drinking and chatting about memories we have growing up. Ivy and Gianna grew up on the same street like I had with Val, so there are plenty of embarrassing stories to share around.

The whole time I have this warmth settling in my stomach. I hadn’t realized until tonight how worried I’d been that Valerie wouldn’t get along with Ivy and Gianna; those girls had become such a big part of my life since moving here, I’d have been lost if my best friend didn’t get along with them, too.

After a while in our bubble, things started to get a bit messy. Asher showed up with Sienna, which seemed to snap something inside Ivy. With the amount of alcohol she’d consumed, she had no trouble approaching the two. Only her confrontation didn’t stop at arguing. Sienna had said something that made Ivy try to swing a punch.

I say try, because Ivy wasn’t the only one losing it. Asher had grabbed her fist and threw her over his shoulder caveman style, walking her

upstairs to continue their screaming match in privacy.

Valerie wandered off to talk to Ezra.

And Gianna had gone home early once Jessica and Mia had shown up. Not that I can blame her. I was tempted to go with her when I saw Jessica's bleached hair.

That leaves me alone on the back deck, watching the lake for any alligators. I'm still not convinced there aren't any here, even if Google had reassured me that there aren't any.

"If you're planning on skinny dipping, you're a bit overdressed."

A soft voice interrupts my hunt for dinosaurs.

I squint up at the intruder. Standing at six feet tall, with his ink black hair curling out of his beanie and the tattoos snaking up his neck, there is no doubt that Alex Rizzoli is hot as hell. It's a damn shame we bat for the same team.

"Hey Alex," I smile warmly. "I was beginning to think you and Ryan were actual conjoined twins."

I'd met Alex on my second day. I was hiding out in the back of Gym. He found me and suggested we ditch. We're both on the opinion that chasing a ball and running laps is not crucial to our graduation, so we've taken it upon ourselves to swap Gym for Starbucks. Our Gym slash Starbucks dates are all we really have together, though. Alex is either with his boyfriend, Ryan, or his best friend, Mason. It is a rare thing to see him wandering around alone.

"Oh, ha ha," Alex laughs dryly, plonking down beside me. "If you had a boyfriend with a great dick, you'd be together all the time, too."

He bumps his shoulder into me.

"I had one, but he preferred to dine at the whole fucking buffet."

Alex cringes at that and allows the topic to die out. *Thank God.* Jordan isn't a topic I want to continue on with.

"What are you doing out here alone, anyway?"

"I don't exactly know many people inside," I answer, lifting one shoulder in a half shrug. "And I've been lucky enough to not see Carson so far. I don't wanna ruin my luck."

"Well, he just went upstairs with Jess if you want to head back in. There's also some hot guy asking for you. I thought I'd come let you know."

This party is full of everyone Carson invited. I don't know anyone except Alex and the girls. Hopefully, this won't be one of those 'curiosity

killed the cat' things.

"I'll go suss it out." I pat his cheek as I stand, earning a swat on my ass.

Fortunately, Carson is still nowhere to be seen when I re-enter the party. And after a quick check on my phone, I see a text from Val that she's heading to bed, which would explain why I can't see her around, either. I'll have to check on her in the morning. She seemed upset when on the phone to Ezra.

Despite it being one in the morning, the party is still in full swing. I move from room to room downstairs, looking for any familiar face and coming up empty.

This better not be some fucking prank from Carson. I don't think that Alex would be involved in that, but some random guy could be. He's been doing little things to fuck with me all week, like hiding the sugar before I'm awake, or getting Jessica to spread rumors.

It's all petty stuff, really. I've actually been expecting worse, so I'm not complaining.

"You changed your number." Jordan's breath tickles my exposed neck, and I curse myself for going with a high pony. "I've been going mad trying to reach you."

"How did you find me here?"

His hands come to rest on my hips, pulling me flush against his back when I make no move to turn around. "Your mom told me. I've missed you so much."

The urge to roll my eyes at the desperation in his voice is too strong to resist. His hands tighten, and I can't help but notice that his touch no longer lights me on fire. That's an improvement in my books.

"You miss fucking me, Jordan," I snap, stepping forward so that he's forced to drop his hands. "You don't miss *me*."

I finally turn, taking a quick moment to appreciate that even though he is a cheating asshole, he's really fucking hot. His raven hair falls over his forehead as he leans forward slightly. His dark eyes stare into my fucking soul like they'd always been able to and his muscles are tense underneath his black band shirt. And the rip in his jeans? Icing on the cake. This is exactly why Jordan is so toxic to me. I can never seem to resist him. He has a talent of making every red flag appear white.

The best and worst part about him, though? He's the lead singer in

his band and happens to play the guitar, so the guy is *amazing* with his fingers.

Jordan sees the way my eyes run down the length of him, a smirk playing on his lips. “We’re so good together, baby. Come on, stop being stubborn.”

“We aren’t good together, Jordan,” I sigh heavily, trying to ignore the heat pooling in my stomach.

He may be unfaithful as hell, but damn, I’m only human.

Jordan brings one big hand up to my face, cupping my jaw with just enough pressure to hold my gaze. His tongue darts out across his lip, the light from above catching onto the piercing on his tongue.

The things he can do with that piercing.

“I’m sorry, Anna,” he rasps. “You know you’re my number one. Those other girls don’t mean shit, it’ll always be you.”

“I’ve heard that bullshit too many times,” I snort, trying to pull away, only to have him tighten his grip. “We’ve over, Jordan, you can go now.”

Jordan pauses for a moment before his face breaks out into a fucking breathtaking smile. “I just want to talk.”

Right, *talk*.

We both know where that leads to.

And yet, I find myself rolling my eyes and taking Jordan’s hand as he releases his hold on my jaw, walking him upstairs to one of the guest bedrooms.

I have enough class to not fuck my ex with my best friend asleep in the same bed. She’ll also kick my ass for doing this, but that doesn’t seem to be enough to stop me. A girl has needs, and after an annoying as fuck week, I have frustrations that Jordan has always been good at taking care of.

Just one more time isn’t going to kill me.

Chapter 9

Carson

She wasn't supposed to have a boyfriend. I fucking asked Gianna.

I hated doing it, and she didn't make it easy. But Annabelle left her bullshit ex back in Doverhill. That's what Gianna told me.

So who the fuck did she just drag into the guest bedroom? Why isn't she using her own bedroom? Not that I can talk, I never use my own room. Even for Jess and Monique, I don't take any girl in my own bed.

With a scowl, I leave the room, ignoring Jess as she calls out for me. I didn't even end up fucking her. I was coming out to get a condom from my room when I saw Annabelle disappear with some guy. It's safe to say that killed my boner.

The floor downstairs is littered with empty cups and bottles that I kick out of my way. That mess is a problem I can complain about tomorrow.

The keg is ignored as I make a beeline for the locked liquor cabinet. I need something stronger than beer if I'm going to resist the urge to kick down that fucking door upstairs.

The bitch can get laid if she wants to. It means nothing to me.

Asher storms into the kitchen, snatching the bottle from my hand and drinking almost half the bottle before I could even take one swig.

Considering I saw him drag Ivy upstairs earlier, I say nothing to stop him. If he only just got away from her, something tells me he needs the drink more than I do.

"Sometimes I really fucking hate her," Asher growls, handing me the half empty bottle. "Why does she make this shit so hard?"

"I don't know, man," I tell him, enjoying the smooth burn as I take a drink. "You won't tell me what the fuck happened between you two, so I can't answer that."

Even though we were friends when shit went down with their relationship, he never told me what actually happened. In fact, I was also friends with Ivy and Gianna. The five of us were all close. Asher grew up with Ivy and Gianna, while I grew up with Weston next door. At the end of

Elementary School, we kind of just joined together. Until Asher and Ivy broke up, then we all parted ways.

Asher winces. "I can't, man, it ain't that simple."

"I know." I pat him on the shoulder. "If you ever want to tell me, you know I'm here. I'll never judge you for shit."

"Except for Sienna?"

A laugh escapes me. "I'm still betting she'll poke a hole in a condom, so fuck yeah, I'll judge you for that crazy bitch."

He grunts in response, glancing around the kitchen for an unopened bottle of beer. "Why are you down here, anyway? Weston said you fucked off with Jess."

I'm not in the mood to get into that mess, or to have Asher over-analyze why I'm so pissed off that Annabelle is currently getting fucked by some asshole. I don't even want to figure that out myself, hence the expensive bottle of Scotch.

"Got bored," I lie, taking a long drink. "Might find Monique. She's better in bed."

That isn't a lie, at least. Monique is unpredictable and fun, and she brings that to bed. Fucking her has never felt like a chore.

"You aren't wrong there, my friend." Asher holds up his beer and we tap our drinks.

Along with being a freak in bed, Monique also never turns down a threesome. Before Sienna, I used to tag team her with Asher; usually at parties like this one. Weston has joined us once, but threesomes aren't really his thing. I couldn't care less about sharing Mon.

"Don't get too hammered," I warn him. "I need your help picking some of my shit up from my house."

Guilt slithers in through my drunken haze. There's been no reason to suspect my parents are dead, even my Private Investigator doesn't believe they are. Yet slowly I've been moving all my stuff into Henry's, hoping that if my parents show back up before I leave for college, he'll let me stay. I can't go back to that big house. I can't go back to being alone.

I leave Asher to drink his frustrations away, trusting that he'll know when to call it quits. He hasn't lost it yet. I doubt one fight will be the cause of him losing his shit.

Monique isn't hard to find. Swaying her hips in the living room turned dancefloor. I move up behind her, dragging my hands over her slim

waist and skimming my lips over the top of her shoulder. There's no point in playing coy.

She either knows that it's me, or she's fucked up enough to not care what dick she rides tonight, because she arches her back into me, pushing her ass into my growing erection.

"I'm not in the mood for games tonight," I whisper into her ear, nipping her earlobe. "Come upstairs."

"Always the smooth talker." She turns in my arms, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Nah, I just know being blunt gets me in your pants quicker," I wink. "Let's go."

As I knew she would, she takes my hand and follows me, pulling her clothes off before I've even closed the door to the second guest bedroom.

Groaning, I throw my arm over my face. I must have forgotten to close my blinds before passing out last night. The sun is too fucking bright on my face, my only indication that it's way too early to be awake.

I never tend to wake up on my own, though, so this is new. Usually I'll only wake to someone making noise.

"Fucking shit," I groan, kicking my legs free from the tangled sheets as my head pounds in protest of my poor choices.

After Monique rode my dick last night, I went back downstairs and found Weston and Asher and managed to convince them to play beer pong with me. That's where I really fucked up. That game has always destroyed me and I'm paying the price for it now.

Just as I go to roll over, I find out the cause for my early wake up call. Two bangs against my wall are followed by a loud, drawn-out moan. I swear I stop breathing at that moment.

The noise comes from the same room that Annabelle disappeared into last night. At some point, I just assumed that her fuck buddy for the night had left and she'd gone back to her own room.

I guess I was wrong.

Annabelle lets out a string of breathless curses and I just about lost my shit when I hear a deep voice chuckling through the wall. Jesus, this is messed up. I should really throw some headphones on or go downstairs or something. Nothing good will come from listening like some creep.

Instead of doing the right thing, I find myself gripping my dick,

hissing through my teeth like I hadn't ever been touched before now. Fucking Monique last night did little to swallow down my unwanted desire for the fucking blonde in the next room.

Their headboard smashes against the wall, like this asshole has a personal vendetta against the piece of furniture. Annabelle's moans come through, sounding muffled through the thick wall. My breath hitches as I drag my hand over my throbbing dick, listening to her soft voice cry out.

I imagine her under me as I listen to her screams, her green eyes wide, pupils blown out, her perfect lips red and swollen from sucking my cock. Annabelle's cries become desperate, and I can picture her cheeks a soft pink as she comes, her nails digging into the mattress.

With a groan, I come all over my hand and stomach at the same time that Annabelle lets out a muffled scream.

Not how I planned to start my day.

Surprisingly, I'd managed to fall back asleep after my eventful morning of being a perve, so when I woke up and found that Annabelle and her friend Valerie had already left for Roman's, I felt relieved. I'm not in the mood to face her after what happened this morning. I'm taking that shit to the grave.

I also didn't want to see the guy that had her screaming like that.

"Morning, sunshine," Asher sings from the kitchen. "Come have something to eat."

Dragging my ass into the kitchen, I'm surprised to see Weston awake and at the island, already stuffing his face with bacon. He's usually the one to sleep till three after a night of drinking.

"Why are you wearing an apron?" I sneak behind Asher and slap his ass hard enough to probably leave a mark. "Pink isn't really your color, I'd go with purple next time."

Asher attempts to kick me, but I'm already moving away, rubbing my stinging palm over my stomach.

"You're just jealous I called dibs on this bad boy first," Asher winks, tossing a dish towel at my head.

"Oh yes, so jealous," I say dryly.

"Neither of you could pull off pink," Weston retorts without looking up from his place.

Flipping them both off, I take the empty spot next to Weston and pile a plate full of bacon and eggs in front of me. Asher has always been the

designated cook when there's nobody else around and we can't be fucked to wait around for food to be delivered. Perks of having a five star chef as your mama.

"What are you doing up?" I question Weston. "The sun's still out."

Weston throws a punch at my arm, but I flex right before he makes contact. "Jackass. I was helping Anna and Valerie take their crap out to the car."

"You were helping that bitch?" I raise my eyebrows at him.

"Well yeah. I've always got your back, man, but it's her fucking dad you hate. She's done nothing wrong. I'm also not a dick like you."

Gritting my teeth, I fight down the urge to fight him on this. Weston and Asher have stayed out of my feud with Annabelle Decker so far, and I've respected that. That doesn't mean I want them to go and make fucking friends with the witch.

"Besides," Weston continues. "It was hard to sleep when she was arguing with that dude from last night right near me."

That gets my attention.

"What were they fighting about?" I hope I don't sound too curious. I'm not. I don't even care. "I might be able to use it against her."

Weston gives me a look that I choose to ignore. "From what I could pick up, he was her ex, and she caught him cheating."

Asher turns from the stove. His eyes widened in horror. "He cheated on her at the party?"

"Nah, a while ago. Val ended up telling me they were on and off heaps, but that Anna finally called it off before moving here. He showed up last night and claimed that he wanted her and shit, but then he had some girl calling him this morning." Weston shrugs, his tone casual, like we're discussing the fucking weather.

"I saw Anna talking to some band shirt guy," Asher says, ignoring the stove. "Was that him?"

"Probably. Anyway, he left and I guess Anna was pretty pissed, because she wasn't watching where she was walking and tripped. Split her lip open pretty bad. That's why I was helping them."

What the fuck? That's too damn much for my hungover brain. I can barely wrap my head around what I had done this morning, let alone Anna being with her ex under my roof. How long were they together? Did she love him?

Why the fuck do I even want to know that?

“I’m going to the gym to sweat out this fucking hangover,” I mutter, pushing the plate of untouched food away from me. “I’ll see you two gossips in a few hours to move my shit.”

“Dude, what the fuck?” Asher calls out. “I made waffles, you dick.”

Ignoring him, I block out everything around me as I make a beeline for the punching bag in the gym, taking my frustrations out on the swinging bag and pushing away the information I’ve learnt about Annabelle.

Chapter 10

Annabelle

Sitting on the sink with Valerie between my thighs, she dabs the wet cloth to my lip, frowning every time I flinch away.

Last night shouldn't have happened. I know I should have told Jordan to leave. I also shouldn't have fucked him again this morning. After a week of constant whispers and snickering behind my back, I just needed a damn distraction, and Jordan has always been so good at them.

I met Jordan when he was doing community service for assault at the same place I'd been working at the time. The whole bad boy thing was hot. What can I say? When he'd told me he was also in a band, it was embarrassing how quick I got into his bed.

The six missed calls on my phone and the twenty or so messages prove as a reminder why we're no good together. And why giving him my new number last night had been a mistake.

We'd had a good night, and an even better morning, but after seeing his phone light up with the same girl he cheated on me with? I was so done.

"I can't believe you didn't tell him to fuck off," Val sighs. "You *know* how toxic he is, babe."

"I'm no better," I tell her firmly.

She snorts, adding a bit more pressure to my lip. Probably on purpose, too, the bitch. "You aren't toxic, babe, but he sure as hell doesn't bring out the best in you."

"Last night was a mistake," I admit, moving on from a conversation I've had about a million times.

"Understatement of the century. This is totally your karma, though."

There's no disagreeing there. I started that fight with Jordan, allowing all those past insecurities to fill me back up. Then I was so pissed off at him and at myself that I forgot about the bag at my feet until I was already falling face down on the ground.

“Weston was pretty hot, though. The way he ran over and helped you,” she smiles slyly. “If you don’t want to put that energy with Carson into some decent hate sex, I’d recommend jumping on that fine machine.”

“I don’t wanna fuck any of them.” I roll my eyes, pushing her away so she’d leave my lip alone. It fucking stings like a bitch. “That’s enemy territory.”

“Weston seemed really nice, though.” She shrugs. “If I wasn’t tied down, I’d totally try my luck.”

The night comes back to me when I notice the slight crease between her brows.

“Is everything okay with Ezra?” I ask while tidying up the mess we’d made before my dad comes home. “You didn’t seem too happy last night when you were talking to him, and you don’t usually jump onto fantasies about other guys.”

Valerie looks away, tension lining her face. “It’s nothing. You know how annoying I am when I’m drunk. He was just busy last night and didn’t have the patience for it. As for Weston... well fuck, I’m only human.”

“It seemed like there was more to it than you being drunk.”

“Nope. We’re peachy.” Her tone is giving a completely different story to her words.

Before I can try to push more information out of her, I hear my dad walk in the front door. The tension eases from Val’s shoulders when she thinks this conversation is over, which adds to my confusion. Valerie becomes very needy when she’s drunk, and Ezra has never had a problem with it before. There have been times he’d ditched his friends just to come pick her drunk ass up, so I don’t believe her shit for a second.

After making sure everything is clean in my bathroom, we head downstairs to meet my dad. He pulls me into his arms, nearly cutting off my lungs.

“How was your first week, baby?” He pulls back to kiss my forehead, pausing when he notices my lip. Instantly, his green eyes darken. “What happened?”

Val announces she’s getting a drink, clearly sensing the mood shift. Traitor.

Logically, I know my dad’s anger isn’t aimed at me, but having a 6’6 guy who could probably lift a car standing over me with murderous intent in his eyes isn’t a comforting sight.

“Annabelle Decker, you answer me right now.” His voice is hard, but when I audibly swallow, he softens his face the smallest amount. “Baby, who hurt you?”

“Nobody,” I whisper.

There’s no doubt that my dad would quite literally murder anyone who ever lays a hand on me. It’s why I was untouched all through school. Well, except that one time Mark from the football team tried slipping a hand under my skirt. That day really sent the message that my dad’s threats were serious.

“When I was leaving this morning, I tripped over my bag. I wasn’t paying attention.” I leave out the fight with Jordan. Dad had never been his biggest fan.

“You tell me if anyone touches you,” Dad says sternly. “I’m not kidding, Annabelle.”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear ya, old man.”

Snickering, I bury my face into his chest, breathing in the familiar scent of their warehouse; gunpowder, weed, and cigarette smoke. My mom would have a coronary if she ever found out Dad used to take me there with him; it’s always been our little secret.

“How is the new school?” Dad questions lightly, pressing the crown of my head. “Have you made any more friends?”

I’m not about to tell him about the shit Carson’s been pulling. “Not really, I’ve always preferred keeping my circle small, you know that.”

“I do.” He places a kiss on the top of my head before releasing me and taking a step back. “I’ve missed having you here, though. The house is too quiet.”

“I can change that,” Val interjects, walking in and handing me a can of soda. “I know you miss my movie commentaries.”

“I’d rather burn my ears off,” Dad teases dryly. “Are you staying for dinner, Val?”

“Nah, Nana wants me home to help paint the kitchen today.” She gives me a one arm hug and a quick kiss. “I might sneak in later, though.”

Dad gives her a kiss on the forehead before she leaves, telling me to leave my window unlocked.

I’m hit with a moment of sadness at the familiar feeling. Before the move, I’d basically lived with my dad, and it feels like fucking years since I’d been back here.

How has it only been one week?

As if he can sense my sudden sullen mood, Franklin bounds through the house, slipping only once before coming to a stop in front of me. I crouch down to scratch behind his ears, moving my head back with a giggle when his sloppy tongue comes out to lick my face.

“Hey boy,” I coo. “Have you been a good boy? I bet you have. You are the best boy ever, yes you are.”

“He’s due to go on his walk if you wanna take him,” Dad tells me. “I have a bit of a full day, so you can bug Slater. He’ll probably take you into town for lunch if you ask him. I’ve gotta get groceries before dinner.”

“Slater will be thrilled.”

Dad shoots me a wink when I laugh.

I lay on the couch with my feet in dad’s lap as he massages the soles of my feet. There’s some parody of a horror movie playing, but I stopped paying attention half-way through.

A few of the guys from the Reapers came around for a drink, so we’ve all been sitting around with the fireplace going. Surprisingly it’s cold enough that we can justify the fire.

“You’ll never get in a girl’s pants with the way you look now,” I joke. After receiving an awful haircut from a new barber, we’ve all been giving Mike shit about it. He puts more effort into his appearance than I do.

I catch a cushion that Mike throws at my head. “My dead grandma can throw better than you.”

Dad gives my leg a gentle slap in warning that I, of course, ignore.

Out of all the guys, Mike is my favorite. He’s only a couple of years older than me and a complete flirt. A few years ago, my dad had to go out of town and my mom was at a convention, so Dad asked Mike to stay back and watch me.

What do you get when you throw two hormonal teenagers together for a weekend with no parents around? They fuck like rabbits.

Mike taking my virginity is something we both agreed to take to the grave. Even Val has no idea. One weekend isn’t worth Mike losing his life over.

“*I had no problem getting in your panties,*” Mike replies in Spanish with a sly grin.

He’s fucking lucky nobody else in this room can speak Spanish.

“What?” Dad frowns, looking between the both of us.

“Nothing, nothing. I only mentioned how I got close to Valerie once, so my looks can’t be that bad.”

“Watch it,” Dad warns, pointing his finger at Mike, who only grins and puts his hands up in mock surrender. “Ezra will knock you the fuck out if he ever finds that out, and I’d let him.”

“I think Mikey would win,” I say. “Ezra’s gotten too soft.”

Ezra also isn’t stupid enough to pick a fight with someone in a gang.

Mike puts his hand to his chest but is distracted by Johnny before he can reply.

I watch them as they start up a game of poker with the other guys, feeling a familiar warmth settle in my chest. Henry’s house is nice, but being surrounded by a gang, with a shitty movie playing while everyone drinks, gives me a sense of peace I haven’t felt all week.

I hate that I have to leave tomorrow.

“I’m gonna head off to bed, you losers are boring me.” I sit up and give my dad a kiss on the cheek. “Night, Dad.”

“If we’re being too loud, just shoot me a text,” he tells me without taking his eyes off his cards.

I take my time saying goodbye to everyone, receiving fist bumps and kisses on the head. When I get to Mike, I pause and peer over his shoulder.

“You’re toast, big boy.” I dodge him as he moves to shove me away, laughing my way down the hall to my bedroom.

My dad hasn’t touched anything in my room, which makes coming here much easier when I don’t really need to bring a bag. Half my clothes are obviously gone, since I won’t be here as much as I used to, otherwise everything is still the same.

Taking a quick shower, I settle for sleeping in a tank and panties, since it’s so damn warm in the house now that the fire has been on almost all night.

There’s a light tap on my window before it’s being pushed open. I don’t bother turning around from where I’m brushing the knots from my hair. I already know it’s Valerie. She’s the only one brave enough to sneak into my bedroom with a house full of gangsters.

My suspicion is confirmed when I feel a sharp slap on my ass,

jolting me forward.

“Hey, you sexy bitch.”

“That hurt, you know,” I complain.

She comes up behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist and propping her chin on my shoulder. Her smiling face meets mine in the mirror, except her smile doesn't reach her eyes.

“Hey, you all good?” I don't try to mask the concern on my face.

“I just had a fight with Ezra,” she sighs. “Can we just cuddle? I don't want to talk tonight.”

“Of course, just don't try and cop a feel.”

“There you go ruining my damn plans.” Her dry laugh holds no amusement.

We get under the covers once my hair is knot free, Valerie burying her face into the crook of my neck and throwing her arm over my waist. I can feel the tension radiating off her, but I say nothing. If she says she doesn't want to talk, then I'm not about to push her.

“It sounds like a fucking frat house out there,” Valerie mumbles. “Who's here?”

“The usual; Mike, Johnny, Daniel and Slater,” I answer. “Do you want me to go and shut them up?”

“Nah,” she sighs, digging her face deeper into my neck. “I've missed this, my home is too quiet.”

“It's only been a week, babe,” I laugh.

“Feels more like a year.”

“Tell me about it,” I sigh, tightening my arms around her.

Valerie doesn't say anything else, and after a few minutes, I start to hear her soft snores.

Good fucking timing, too, because I'm starting to get a numb arm.

Just as I turn to my side to get some sleep, there's a knock on my window and my heart makes a fast attempt to jump out of my chest.

Whoever it is must have a damn death wish. Unless they're here to murder me. In that case, they *really* have a death wish.

Quickly throwing on a pair of shorts that are laying on the floor, I walk over to the window to find Ezra standing outside with his hands buried in his choppy brown hair.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper after I've opened the window, throwing a look over my shoulder to make sure Val is still asleep.

“Do you wanna get shot? You can’t just sneak on back here.”

There’s still enough chatter coming down the hall to tell me that the house is still full. Combine that with my room being at the back of the house, Ezra is lucky he wasn’t caught walking back here. Franklin must still be in the living room with everyone.

He sighs heavily, looking behind me. “I fucked up, Anna.”

Something in his voice has the hair on the back of my neck standing up. “What happened, Ez? I thought you two just had a fight.”

“We did, we... I.” He scrunches his face up and throws his head back. “Can you wake her? I just need her tonight, please.”

“Are you okay?”

“No,” he answers honestly. “I’m not fucking okay. I just need Val, I need... I need her.”

They have fights like every other couple, and it isn’t uncommon for Val to come here when they do. This is different, though. Ezra has never chased her down before.

“Maybe you should just let things cool down a bit more,” I tell him. “I’ll kick her out early to see you.”

“Anna, please.” His croaked voice and bloodshot eyes have me feeling reluctant. “I have to fix this now.”

“Ezra? What are you doing here?” Valerie’s sleepy voice speaks from behind me, and I move aside so she can face her boyfriend. “Are you okay?”

Seeing the way Ezra’s eyes fill with so much pain both confuses and shocks me. He’s always been so put together that an alarm starts going off in my body. Something has happened, and I get the feeling that it was really fucking bad.

“Can you come home with me?” he asks her, his voice breaking.

“Ezra,” she sighs. “Anna leaves tomorrow. Can’t we talk then?”

He looks so lost as she talks, gazing up at her like she has the power to tear down the moon and cloak us in complete darkness.

“It’s okay,” I tell her reassuringly. “Go with Ez, and I’ll call you tomorrow before I leave.”

“Are you sure?”

No, not when Ezra looks to be on the verge of throwing up. I plaster on a fake smile, give Val a quick kiss, and push her to the window.

My stomach is clenching as I watch them walk away. I have

enough drama to deal with at school. Throwing a heartbroken friend in there is the last thing I need.

The next day is uneventful. Valerie never answered her phone this morning, but her grandma said that she got home late last night, so she's probably just sleeping the day away.

Otherwise, I spend the day helping my dad with chores around the house before I eventually have to leave.

"I don't want you to feel pressured to come here, okay?" Dad holds me against him and sways while we wait for a batch of cookies to cook. "I know you have friends at your new school."

"I know," I sigh. "But I don't have you and Franklin back in Lakeside."

And there's no Carson here. It's a win, really.

"Is your mom home often?" I don't miss the bite in his voice. He hated my mom used to leave me alone so much. It's why I practically lived here full time.

"She has time off work for the move, but I've been busy with school," I tell him. "Besides, I was never that close with her to begin with, you know that. I wish she just let me stay here. It would be easier."

He's silent as he spins me in a circle as Bon Jovi's voice fills the kitchen, making me laugh as he pulls me back into his arms.

"You'll have a lot more opportunities from being at this school. And having Henry as a stepfather, he can open a lot of doors for you."

Frowning up at my dad, I wait for a sarcastic remark that never comes.

It's common knowledge that he isn't my mom's number one fan, but now that I think about it, he has never had a bad thing to say about Henry.

"Do you like Henry? Like, for real?"

"I've got nothing against the guy."

"He's nice." I nod and nestle my face into my dad's chest. "But don't worry, you're still my number one guy."

His chest vibrates against my cheek when he laughs.

Not long after the cookies are done, and I'd taken Franklin for a walk, I'm having to say goodbye to my dad. The plan was that he would be

driving me home, but then Johnny came around and told him they had a last-minute job to run.

“How about we go look for a car next time you’re down?”

This is an old argument now, one that I’ve thought about giving into many times. Life would be easier with a car, but I can’t bring myself to agree. I’ve been given everything my whole life, and just this one thing I want to work for and earn myself.

“Dad,” I sigh.

“I hate the idea of you being there with no way to just get out when you need to,” he argues, kissing me on the forehead. The tender act is a stark contrast to the hardness in his voice. “Will you just consider it? If it would make you feel better, you could put your savings in and I’ll just pay the rest.”

Seeing no way out of this, I cross my fingers behind my back and nod. “I’ll think about it.”

“That has to be good enough for now. Well, you know the drill here, sweetcheeks.” He tucks my hair behind my ear. “I don’t care what time it is, you...”

“Call you, text you if I need you, I know.” I roll my eyes, earning a light shove.

My mom pulls up at that moment, beeping just once. I’m not even surprised that she can’t get out of the car to at least say hello to my dad. You’d think that they ended on bad terms when, as far as I know, they had an easy divorce. Sure, there were some surprises that caught mom off guard, but she was never nasty about them.

“Love you, Dad.” I give a little jump to kiss his cheek, much to his amusement.

He kisses the top of my head before ruffling my hair. “Love you, too. Text me when you get home safe.”

Quickly kneeling down, I give Franklin a belly rub and an ear scratch before running out and jumping into my mom’s car.

“Nice to see you again, Annabelle.”

My blood runs cold as I turn to find Henry’s brother in the driver’s side, already pulling away from my dad’s house.

Chapter 11

Annabelle

This guy is such a dick. I still can't wrap my head around the way he spoke to his own nephew. Who the hell does that? Carson may be an asshole, but he didn't deserve to be spoken down to like that by his own uncle.

"Where's my mom?" I ask suspiciously, buckling myself in since he didn't give me a chance to do that when I got in. Another tick on his *dick* chart.

Seth shrugs, like I just asked what we're having for dinner. "She's talking to a wedding planner. I offered to pick you up."

"That's a long drive for someone you don't know," I grind out, trying to relax my jaw. "I could have asked Henry to get me if I knew she was busy."

I don't doubt for a second that Henry would have come if I called, especially if it were between him and Seth. Speaking of which...

"How is Henry okay with this? He doesn't seem to be your biggest fan, which I'm honestly not surprised by."

From what I can see, his eye is pretty fucked from Carson's fist. A flutter of amusement spreads through me. He totally deserved that punch.

Seth's knuckles turn white as he grips the steering wheel. "Henry has just been on edge lately, that's all. We're actually quite close."

On edge, my ass. The only time I've seen Henry lose his cool was when Seth showed up unannounced. Not that I can blame Henry or even Carson. Seth gives off a massive creeper vibe.

"Well, I could have called one of my friends. You didn't have to drive this far. I don't even know you." I flip my phone around in my hands, trying to ease the tension flowing through my body.

"Oh, come on," Seth grins, loosening his grip on the wheel. "I don't mind. And we'll be family pretty soon, so you'll have plenty of time to get to know me."

Biting down on the inside of my mouth is the way to keep from cursing him out. No way in hell will I ever be his family, even through

marriage. The thought alone leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. There's something really off with this guy and the main thing my dad taught me growing up was to always trust my gut instinct.

Right now my gut instinct is telling me I'd be safer sleeping with a pack of wild lions.

"I'll be Henry's stepdaughter," I bite out. "That's the furthest my family is extending."

"Ah yes, I think he's taking that role a bit too seriously, though," he laughs bitterly.

Shrugging, I angle my body to face the window but keep my eyes forward. "I like Henry, so if you're looking to talk trash about him, I'm not the person for it. If you want to talk about your many flaws, I'm all ears."

"You have some sass, girl. I like it."

My throat tightens at the change in his voice. I don't want this man liking anything about me.

He clears his throat. "I don't think you're the kind of girl to pull your friends away from their plans just to pick your perky ass up."

First of all, that's a fucking disgusting thing to say. Second of all, he's not entirely wrong.

"You might be somewhat right, but Carson isn't a friend, and I know Henry would have pressured him to come."

"No." His voice darkens as his hands once again attempt to murder the steering wheel. "I would not have allowed you to be alone with Carson, neither would have Henry."

That gets my full attention. I give him a side-eye, my forehead setting in a deep frown.

"Why?" I ask warily.

Carson is a huge asshole, there's no doubt about that. But he had no hesitation to hit Seth when it looked like he was going to hit me; you wouldn't do that unless you cared a little bit. And despite how he has managed to turn the school against me and has some weird vendetta, I don't think he's that bad of a person. I don't want to run the opposite direction when he's close by, like I do around Seth.

"I shouldn't say anything." Seth pulls out a cigarette. "But he's dangerous, and I worry for your safety being in that house with him."

I can't help but snort. That is fucking ridiculous. Carson has slammed me against the lockers and thrown some half-assed threats at me,

otherwise it's been Jessica and her little group he gets to do all his dirty work. I'd hardly call him *dangerous*.

"I'm not trying to scare you, Annabelle," Seth sighs, taking a drag of his smoke before speaking again, his voice firm. "To be completely honest with you, I believe that Carson done something to his parents. He inherits billions if they die as their sole heir. And I know my brother. He would never just abandon his son like this. Especially to Henry."

My spine stiffens at hearing the way he spits out Henry's name. "Henry is a good man, and Carson would not have done anything to his parents. He's worried about them. You're fucking delusional."

If the rumors about him hiring a Private Investigator are true, that doesn't exactly scream *I murdered my parents*.

Seth laughs, the sound travelling through the car until a knot has formed in the pit of my stomach. "You're funny, sweetheart, I'll give you that. All I'm saying is to stay clear from Carson. I have someone trying to find my brother, so just stay low for now. I'd hate for something to happen to your pretty face."

My instincts scream at me to defend Carson some more. There's no way this jerkoff is right. I don't know what he's trying to do, but he's fucking crazy if he thinks I'm going to believe him. I may not know Carson that well, or even Seth, but I know who I would trust and *surprise*, it isn't the guy currently beside me.

It's a long ass drive to get home after that. Made even longer because I refuse to acknowledge Seth's every attempt to make small talk. The only excitement I get is from Henry texting to ask if I need him to pick me up and telling him that mom sent Seth to get me.

With any luck, Henry will give him a matching black eye.

We pull into the driveway at the same time as Henry. Seth lets out a groan as if this is the most inconvenient thing for him, while I barely contain my laughter as Henry jumps from his car without even bothering to turn the engine off.

He walks straight over to my door and throws it open, his face softening the smallest amount as he addresses me.

"Head inside, Anna, I need to talk to Seth," he grits out, his eyes locked on his brother.

I really want to stay outside and watch this shitshow, but when my

mom walks out to see why Henry drove in like a madman, she stops short, her eyes widening.

“I didn’t know you were at your Dad’s last night,” Mom says, grabbing my bicep as I go to walk past her. “A text would have been nice, Annabelle.”

It would also be nice for her to actually be around, considering I know she has the time off work. I also know for a fact that her wedding planner mostly talks with her over the phone, so it wouldn’t have been too hard to either re-schedule or just have her appointment over the cars Bluetooth.

“I thought I told you.” I shrug, jerking my arm free from her hold. “My bad.”

“Hey now, just hold on. What happened?”

I’d taken an Advil when I re-split my lip over breakfast, so I’d completely forgotten it was there.

“I tripped, it’s no biggie.”

Before she can scold me, I leave her to get her head bitten off by her fiancé and walk inside. It’s not my problem to deal with. She shouldn’t have sent a guy I don’t even know to pick me up. Dad would lose his shit if he found out.

There’s a ball of unease sitting in my stomach as I make my way up to my bedroom. The whole drive left me feeling dirty, like I’d done something wrong for sitting beside Seth for so long. I have an urge to scrub my skin raw until I can no longer smell his overly strong cologne.

My bedroom is a mess when I enter, which sets an alarm off in my head. I am not an untidy person, there’s no way I left it like this.

Did that dickward throw another party last night and leave my door unlocked?

Walking further inside, I start to gather my clothes from the floor, dumping them on the bed to sort through. Nothing looks torn up or damaged, so that’s a small plus.

Once my shirts have been put in their own pile, I can feel him. Which is incredibly irritating. I don’t want to feel his presence at all, let alone feel the shiver down my spine when he speaks in that husky voice of his. Why couldn’t he have a horrible voice?

“I’ll admit, I was expecting more than just thongs.”

Clenching my jaw, I take in the pile of clothes, quickly noticing the

serious lack of underwear. Including all my bras.

Jesus Christ, this guy is such a dick.

“Needed something aside from your own hand to jerk off into?” I snap, sorting my pants into a folded pile. “There are sex toys designed for guys, you know.”

Carson chuckles darkly, moving to stand behind me. His breath fans over the back of my neck and my nipples harden against my will. *Traitors.*

“I don’t need your panties to jerk off into, Annabelle,” he growls. “But the guys in school might.”

Starting to click on, I straighten my spine. “If sending my panties to the guys in my class is the best you’ve got, I’m really disappointed.”

He brings his hand up to the back of my neck, pushing my ponytail to the side. “Nah, this was just because I was bored. And knowing that you’ll be walking around panty-less is a nice enough image.”

“I wear panties that sit in my ass all day. Do you really think going commando is going to bother me? Or that it isn’t something I do regularly?” That’s a lie. Even if thongs are my preferred choice, I don’t free-vagina it. That’s a damn recipe for UTI’s.

He lets out a raspy groan that I can feel all the way between my thighs. “Prove it.”

I go to throw my elbow back a second too late, because he catches my elbow in his hand, using my awkward position to spin me until I’m facing him.

He’s standing so close that now I’m pressing against his chest. If I take a step back, I’ll be falling onto the bed, and that’s not a position I want to get into right now. So I remain still, trying to control my breathing. I don’t want him to feel how hard my nipples are every time they graze over his chest. Like hell I’ll give his ego that stroke.

Carson brings his hand up to my face, his thumb tracing my bottom lip. It isn’t until I flinch back from the harsh sting that I realize he can see the split.

His grey eyes darken as they lock onto my swollen lip, and his tongue darts out to swipe along his bottom lip. The move nearly knocks my knees out.

What’s that saying about red flags?

Oh, who cares? Red is a damn good color.

We stand there for what feels like hours, with my elbow still in his grip and his thumb tracing my lips. I shouldn't feel as comfortable with his touch as I do.

"This suits you," he murmurs.

His voice knocks me out of whatever trance I'd gotten into while his hand was on me. I press my hand to his chest, pausing for just a second to admire the hard ridges beneath my palm before giving him a hard shove back.

"Don't fucking touch me," I hiss, ignoring the gentle throb in my lip.

Carson smirks, looking down at his thumb where a tiny streak of blood lies. No wonder my lip is stinging. The asshole has opened it back up. With a raised eyebrow, he raises his thumb to his mouth, his tongue darting out to lick away my blood.

I watch with a raised brow, surprised at how much I enjoy it and equally disgusted by the pool of wetness soaking my last thong.

His eyes drag down the length of me, his stare burning into me like a laser beam.

"You might need to call Ivy." He grins, looking too smug. "Your textbooks accidentally made it into our bonfire last night. Total accident, of course."

"Is that seriously all you have?" I tilt my head, successfully keeping my voice steady while my heart throws a party. "Weak, Carson. Fucking weak."

"I don't know what you mean," he smirks. "We were just having an innocent bonfire. Not my fault if your things were mistaken for trash."

"Listen here, fuckface, I don't give a shit about the books, but you touch my clothes again? I'll burn every damn thing you own." It isn't even the clothes I'm bothered by, it's more so the invasion of my fucking privacy. I'll have to invest in a better lock for my door.

He opens his mouth, but I don't get to hear what he says, because my phone chooses that moment to interrupt, breaking through the tension he created the second he touched my lip. Or maybe that just followed him into the room.

Thank God for the timing, though. Watching him lick off my blood like that made the room way too hot for my liking. This is the perfect distraction from discovering a new kink.

When I reach for my phone to answer without even glancing at the screen, Carson storms off, slamming the door shut behind him.

“Hello?”

“Anna... Are you busy? I need to talk to you, please,” Jordan answers.

Chapter 12

Annabelle

“I heard you blew Mr Stevens after gym. Is it true his balls are abnormally large?” one prissy bitch giggles during English. Her identical bleached blonde friend finds this hilarious.

“I heard he swings with his wife. Hey Decker, is that true?”

Unable to bite my tongue any longer, I snort. “I wouldn’t know, but your mom and dad might. You should ask them.”

Bitch one narrows her eyes. “Leave her fucking parents out of it, slut.”

“Slut? Ooh, I’m practically shaking.”

“She’s just jealous that Mr Stevens has standards she can’t fit into,” Bitch one sneers.

Where the hell is their logic? One minute I’m blowing Mr Stevens and the next he’s out of my league. These girls are not putting any effort into this.

“Fucking bitches,” Ivy mutters, glancing up from her phone to glare daggers at bitch one and two. “Want me to punch them out? I’d totally take on detention for you.”

Despite the nails on a chalkboard giggling in front of me, I smile and even let out a soft laugh. Since I became the center of attention in the bitch club, Ivy has been wanting to start an all-out cat fight. I’m close to jumping on board, just out of sheer annoyance.

“It’s not worth the drama,” I tell her. “They can’t even get any better than me slutting it out with the teachers.”

She opens her textbook between us. Since mine were burnt last weekend, I’m still waiting for new ones to come.

The bitch twins continue to make comments throughout the rest of class, but I manage to keep my mouth shut. I meant what I said about it not being worth the drama.

Two weeks in now and Carson has still yet to do anything, which I find downright absurd. If you’re going to call your dogs on someone, at least

make a few moves yourself, don't just call the shots behind a fucking wall.

On the way to the cafeteria for lunch, I stop by my locker and instantly regret the decision when I find a pair of my panties stuck to my locker... cum-stained. Mixed with the disgust is surprise. I had been expecting a lot worse when I found out Carson had dumped my panties in the gym locker room. If all I'm destined for are cum-stained panties, then shit, I'll have some funny stories to share later on.

"That's fucking disgusting," Ivy says, her lips pursed. "What is this guy's deal?"

"That's not the first pair," Alex stops beside us, observing the offensive piece of lace.

That would have given someone some serious chaffing.

Ouch.

"Excuse me?" I frown at the stained fabric. They're held there with duct tape. "I haven't seen anything until now."

Of course, I had told them all what Carson had done. They're just as confused about this rivalry as I am.

Alex shrugs, looking apologetic. "There's been a different pair every day. I get here early with Mason and I've been taking them off before anyone could see."

I feel a rush of warmth spread through my chest. It's nice to have friends when it feels like everyone hates you.

Alex and I have gotten closer and I've even started hanging out with his childhood best friend, Mason, while we wait for Alex to finish his tutoring after school. Milkshakes have quickly become our thing, since I hate rushing home and, for whatever reason, Alex avoids his house like it's infested with the plague.

"You don't have to do that," I smile sadly, putting my hand on his bicep. "I've been prepared for so much worse." I wave my hand at the locker. "This is nothing."

"That doesn't make this any better," Alex says, raising an eyebrow. "He had no business going this far. This is disgusting."

"I got new clothes out of it," I shrug. "So it wasn't too bad."

Alex shakes his head. "New clothes don't excuse it, Anna. If you knew the shit being said about you now, you wouldn't be this chill."

The jocks have my panties, which consist of thongs, so I have a pretty good idea about the things being said. In this case, though, burying my

head in the sand is my preferred choice.

“There’s nothing I can do. The damage is already done.”

Ivy sighs. “You could tell Henry? He wouldn’t let this shit fly.”

“No, I’m not telling Henry. He has enough on his plate, and Carson is easy enough to handle on my own.”

“I still don’t get it,” he muses. “Carson isn’t usually this much of a dick, the worst he’s done is fuck around with Jess and Monique. What’s his deal?”

“Your guess is probably better than mine.”

Ivy suddenly straightens, glaring daggers over my shoulder. “Hey fuckhead, tell your bestie I’m gonna kick his ass when I see him.”

Asher steps up to where we’re gathered, cringing when he notices my locker. He’s quiet for a moment as he stares at Ivy with an unreadable expression before turning to me.

“If it means anything, I’ve been telling him to knock it off,” he tells me, shuffling on his feet awkwardly. He gestures to the locker. “I’ll make sure this stops, though. That’s fucking gross.”

“Thanks,” I say, despite the cold look I get from Ivy. “What’s his problem, anyway? You must know why he’s put a target on my back.”

There has to be more to it than moving into his uncle’s house. It’s not like my mom’s marrying his *dad*, she’s marrying his *uncle*. That hardly warrants this bullshit.

“That’s not my business to tell.” He sighs, running a hand through his hair and glancing at the locker again with a wince.

“Don’t worry, Anna,” Ivy smiles bitterly. “He’ll always choose Carson; it isn’t a you only thing.”

“That isn’t fucking fair, Ivy,” Asher groans.

“You can leave now,” she dismisses him. “Have you thought any more about changing lockers?”

I’d entertained the idea of changing lockers when some asshole—most likely Jessica—thought that it would be hilarious to pour lube through the slits in my locker for three days straight, but I’m finally able to recognize my locker amongst its twins, I’m not switching it up now.

“It’s fine.” I wave my hand, watching Asher as he walks away. “I’m not worried, this is nothing.”

“Well, if you get sick of this shit, let me know,” she says.

With a wink, she hikes her bag over her shoulder walks off in the

direction of the cafeteria. Gianna usually gets there first and will hold a place in line for us.

“Want to stuff our faces with cardboard pizza?” Alex offers, holding his hand out.

I take it with a grin. “Nothing sounds better.”

After lunch, I’d made the stupid mistake of sneaking off with Alex and Mason with nothing, but a flask filled with cheap tequila. I’m not one to normally solve my issues with alcohol, or drink in the middle of a school day, but fuck it. You only live once and all that crap.

Gianna is already sitting at the back when I walk into class. And I guess I must have drunk more than I’d realized, because my feet are feeling way too heavy, which demands my focus, and because I’m not focusing on *where* I’m going, I don’t notice when I see Jessica throws her foot out, sending me face first onto the floor.

It hurts like a fucking bitch.

With a groan, I sit myself up, feeling a tad sober already. Sober enough that when Jessica crouches down in front of me with a taunting smile, I swing my fist forward and connect with her nose without a second thought.

“You crazy bitch!” she screeches, falling to her ass and clutching her nose as blood drips down her chin. The sight makes me grin as a metallic taste hits my own tongue. “Sir, she just punched me!”

“Girls,” Mr Samson bellows, finally joining the party. “Both of you, to the principal’s office, now.”

Jessica blanches. “I did nothing wrong, sir! I was only checking if she was okay.”

“You lying bitch,” I laugh bitterly.

“I mean no disrespect, Mr Samson, but get fucked. Jessica pushed Anna on purpose,” Gianna scoffs, earning an unimpressed look from our teacher.

“You can join them, Miss Davis,” Mr Samson orders. “Miss Jalen will be expecting all three of you.”

Rolling my eyes, I take Gianna’s extended hand to help me up. Without bothering to wipe the blood I can feel dripping from my nose and lip. My lip is throbbing where it’s been split open again.

“You’re dead, Decker,” Jessica hisses, hitting me with her shoulder on the way past.

“I’m shaking in my boots,” I call after her.

All I get in response is her middle finger. It’s all class around here.

“Are you okay?” Gianna whispers, keeping her voice low as we walk behind Jessica to the principal’s. “Say the word, and I’ll smash her fucking car windows.”

I give Gianna a little shoulder bump and smirk. “She’ll get what she deserves, don’t worry. Come over on the weekend?”

She smiles, glancing at Jessica. “I’m so fucking down.”

A two-week suspension.

For me.

Not for Jessica, who started the whole fucking thing.

Gianna and Jess are sent back to class while I sit in the parking lot, waiting to go home.

The whole thing is a joke. I get tripped, injured as a result, and I’m the one suspended for practicing self-defence.

With any luck, Jessica will choke on the next dick she sucks on.

I let out a curse under my breath when I look up to find Carson walking towards me with a shit-eating grin on his too-beautiful face.

Evil people do not deserve to look so hot. It’s basically a crime in itself.

“You look fucking awful.” He smirks.

Dropping my eyes on his crotch, I wonder how much it’ll hurt me to headbutt his balls. If it does, it might just be worth it to inflict that level of pain on him. The guy definitely deserves a nut shot.

“Have you ever looked in a mirror?” I ask sweetly, leaning back on my hands and allowing myself the small weakness of slowly dragging my eyes back up to his face, taking in every noticeable muscle. “Because that’s fucking hypocritical coming from you, sweetie.”

“That’s cute.” He puts his hands in his pockets, squaring his shoulders. “I hear your locker had a few visitors this week.”

“Is that supposed to bother me?” I snort. “Tell me, Dorian. Are you gonna keep being a pussy and get others to fight your battles for you?”

His lips purse as he stares down at me.

“Just waiting it out,” he seethes. “Consider yourself lucky, Decker. It’s been a walk in the fucking park for you.”

“I’m not worried,” I shrug nonchalantly. “I think you’re just weak,

too scared to do anything yourself.”

Carson chuckles darkly, kneeling so we're face to face. “Oh Anna.” He brings his thumb up to my lip, dragging along the open split like he had last week. “I will destroy you.”

Without thinking, I bite the tip of his thumb, relishing in the hiss of pain he gives. Although he doesn't pull his thumb away, he darts his eyes up to mine, his pupils dilating. My own breathing hitches, and because I'm a dumbass, I take advantage of his frozen state, running my tongue over the pad of his thumb, tasting my own blood.

Carson growls deep in his throat, the sound setting off an inferno in my stomach.

I'm not sure what would've happened if Jordan hadn't pulled up at that moment, blasting the horn to get my attention. I jerk back, releasing Carson and standing on shaky legs.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” Carson snarls, his eyes locked on my ex, waving me over impatiently. “Tell him to leave.”

I scowl at Carson. “He's here for me, obviously. And no, I won't. My mom and Henry are gone for the night, so I plan on taking advantage of this early day. Don't bother rushing home after school.”

“I hope the fucking condom breaks,” he sneers.

Grinning, I step forward so we're chest to chest and tilt my chin up. “Who says we use any?”

With a wink, I leave Carson standing dumbstruck and run towards Jordan, jumping into the passenger seat, and accepting a rough kiss that leaves my lip stinging. I'm a little ashamed to admit that I keep my eyes locked on Carson as Jordan attacks my mouth, his stormy eyes lighting a fire between my thighs.

Calling Jordan to take me home may be a dumb decision, but I'm full of pent-up rage from Jessica walking out today, and the best way to ease some of that tension is to have my back blown out. Jordan is great in bed, and he was free. It had been an easy decision. Carson, being pissed, is now the cherry on top.

“I have the house to myself all afternoon,” I smile, planting a soft kiss on Jordan's cheek. “You want to help me forget this day, hot stuff?”

“What a coincidence, I'd already cancelled band practice for tonight.” Laying his hand across my thigh, he ignores all speed limits as he races us back home.

Chapter 13

Carson

The next hour in class is spent debating whether I should go home now and beat the ever-loving shit out of that guy or stay out of it.

Why did seeing her lip smeared red turn my dick to stone? Why the fuck does it feel like a red haze is covering my eyes at the thought of Annabelle being under that asshole right now? That bitch is turning everything upside down, and I can't stand it.

Seeing her sitting in the parking lot today, I couldn't have stopped myself from approaching her even if I wanted to try. There was a pull that resembled a chain around my neck the moment I saw her, silently seething.

I knew why she was there; I'd just come from seeing Jess and hearing her bitch about being punched in the face. Jess was given free range to mess with Annabelle, with some boundaries, of course, but tripping her over? Are we in fucking third grade? I don't blame Annabelle for punching Jess out.

Fuck, that would have looked hot... I should probably see if somebody has a recording of that.

"You're coming tomorrow night, right?" Monique asks, pulling me from my thoughts. "I'm bringing some weed if you wanna get high. The good stuff, not that shit from Jay."

I don't know how the fuck she manages to pass all her classes, considering she's either drunk or high on some shit nearly every day.

"Yeah, I'll be there," I tell her. "But I'll pass on the drugs. That shit fucked me up last time."

"That was acid," she snickers. "Not even remotely the same thing as weed. But whatever. Are you coming with McSlut?"

Monique is usually chill. It's why aside from being a girl I fuck on the regular, she's also a cool friend to have. Jess is the exception to her good mood, though. She has never forgiven her ex best-friend for stealing Michael—that's right, college boyfriend Michael cheated on Monique with Jess and ultimately chose her because of his parents pushing it. The whole thing felt

like a fucking soap opera.

“Jess is dragging Michael along, from what I’ve heard,” I confide, watching for her reaction. “But fuck them, you’re so much better than she is.”

Funny coming from the guy that fucks Jess. I’ve never hidden who I’m fucking, though, despite the drama that gets thrown my way from Jess. She hates feeling like an idiot when I’m seen with Monique, which is ironic since she has a boyfriend. That fact used to make me feel like a piece of shit, but then Jess would either open her mouth or Monique would remind me that Michael deserves to have his girlfriend cheat on him. I’ve simply stopped caring now. Jess is the one that pursues me, not the other way around.

“Good thing I’ll be too high to notice their grand entrance,” Monique snorts, drawing a detailed skull on her iPad. “Otherwise I swear I’ll throat punch that motherfucker.”

“Which one?” I smirk, nudging her shoulder with mine. “You can take Jess and I’ll take Michael, just for fun.”

Monique pauses on her artwork, grinning up at me. “Don’t fucking tempt me.”

“I’m serious,” I deadpan.

“That prissy bitch wouldn’t hesitate to press assault charges,” she seethes. “Otherwise, I’d fucking bathe in her blood.”

I glance over at her just as she throws her red hair into a messy bun, showing off the snake tattooed just behind her ear. As if she can sense my eyes on her, she turns to face me with a wink. Her contacts today are an emerald green, too fucking similar to Annabelle’s color, and the image causes a tidal wave to crash over me.

Monique hates wearing her glasses. She prefers being able to wear different colored contacts every day. Not even I know what her actual eye color is, or even her hair color. I’ve only ever known her to have either red, pink, or purple hair.

“You wanna sneak out and fuck?” She purrs, bringing her hand to my thigh and slowly dragging up to run her nails over my dick.

I must be sick or some shit because I find myself removing her hand away from my dick. “Not today, Mon. I might actually head home. I’m over this shit.”

Monique shrugs, unbothered by my rejection, and turns back to work on her iPad.

Pulling out my phone, I send Weston a text to ditch as I grab my

shit and walk out. Asher has a test this afternoon. I won't fuck that up for him by dragging him away.

Within minutes, Weston is climbing into my car, his eyebrows raised.

"You good?" he questions, immediately picking up on the tension in my body.

I can't exactly tell him I'm rushing home to beat the shit out of Annabelle's ex. Or just kick him out. I haven't decided yet. I guess it depends on what I fucking walk in on. Weston will just read too much into it. I don't even understand why I'm doing this, or why my blood is boiling. I'll just put this down to revenge; I want her to be alone and miserable. Yes. Yes, that's it.

"Yeah, man," I answer, driving well over the speed limit to make it home.

"The guys were talking about that shit with Anna again," he says, his tone tight.

Yeah, yeah. That wasn't my best move, and I fucking regretted it the second I sent all her panties out. I may or may not have broken some asshole's nose on Tuesday after he made some comment about returning the panties to their *home*. Hypocritical, I'm well aware.

That fucking blue Hilux is sitting in front of the house when I pull in, and Weston doesn't try to hide his confusion.

"Who the hell is that?"

"Annabelle's ex," I say coolly.

Weston throws me a look. "The asshole she was fighting with? How do you know that's him?"

"I saw him pick her up from school," I shrug. "And I recognized him from the party."

If Weston has an opinion on me remembering what the asshole looks like, he keeps his mouth shut.

"Look, I know you don't like the girl, but—"

"I want him to fuck off," I interrupt him. "It'll be a bonus to get rid of the dick and ruin her plans in one hit."

Weston seems convinced enough by my lie. Well, not really a lie, I do want to fuck this guy off, I'm just not doing it for the pleasure of annoying Annabelle, I'm doing this for some fucked up need I have to keep him away from her.

“I’m onboard with that,” Weston grins.

We walk inside together, listening for any noise to tell us where they are. A spark of blinding fury races through my veins as I realize they could still be upstairs fucking. I’m not opposed to interrupting; I should have that night.

“It always fucking comes back to Beth,” a male voice shouts from the kitchen.

“Beth, Chloe, Danielle,” Annabelle screams. “The list goes on, Jordan. *That* is what it always comes back to, dammit. You couldn’t keep your dick in your pants to save your life.”

Weston and I exchange a look, frozen in the foyer as their voices echo through the house.

“What does it even matter? I drove all the way here to see you when I could’ve just fucked Beth instead.”

“Oh wow, lucky me,” Annabelle seethes, followed by shattering glass.

“Quit being such a bitch,” Jordan laughs.

There’s a pause as tension ripples through the air. “A bitch? A fucking bitch! You are such a self-centered, fucking asshole.”

“I’m not doing this today. I’ll see you next week.”

“Don’t fucking bother,” Annabelle snaps.

There’s another pause as Jordan says something too low for us to hear. Then his footsteps echo through the house.

“Go and distract Annabelle. I’ll deal with him,” I whisper to Weston.

With an eye roll, he disappears in the direction of the kitchen, staying out of sight. I move to where Jordan won’t be able to see me, not until it’s too late.

As I wait for him to round the corner, I want to kick myself. I don’t know why the fuck I’m doing this. They obviously weren’t fucking when we walked in, but that doesn’t mean they were here baking. And it’s that thought that keeps my blood at boiling point. The thought of this asshole with his slimy hands on her skin is enough to bring out something sour in my stomach that I try to ignore.

When Jordan turns the corner and sees me, he freezes, his eyes going wide like a deer caught in headlines. It’s almost laughable

Wrapping my hand around his throat, I slam his back against the

wall before he can react. It helps that I have at least four inches of height and a lot more muscle than him.

“What the fuck, man?” he rasps, his eye darting around as if he expects someone to help him.

Looking into his face now, knowing that this is the guy that had Annabelle screaming under him, an unexplainable rage takes over me. I use my hold on his throat to slam his head against the wall, not caring whether he gets a fucking concussion. My fist follows, landing directly over his already bruised nose.

Now look, I’m not normally a violent person, but I won’t hesitate to defend myself or something else, so that’s what I’m going with here. He hurt Annabelle, judging from the fight we overheard. I’m just defending some chick against her jackass ex. No ulterior motive here, not one.

“Listen here, you waste of fucking space,” I growl, pressing my forehead to his. “If you ever try to contact Annabelle again, I will make your life a living hell, and that’s after I tell her father that you’ve been fucking around with her.”

Judging from the way Jordan’s face pales, I can only assume that he knows about her father’s chosen profession. At least I know my threat will sink in. I’ve heard some of the stories from Decker; it’s why I won’t do anything directly. I don’t have a fucking death wish. Even messing with his daughter isn’t the safest option. The guy is a lethal weapon, and if my assumptions are correct, he’d put this piece of shit in the ground for treating Annabelle the way he does.

“Do we have a deal?” I grin, my eyes running over the blood dripping from his nose. It’s nowhere near as pretty as the color that comes from Annabelle. This is bland, average, while her blood shines like the goddamn sun.

Jordan tries to nod, my hand gripping his throat, preventing too much movement.

It takes me a moment to calm down, to stop myself from imprinting my knuckles into his fucking skull. When I do finally manage to get my breathing somewhat under control, I release my hold on him, watching in surprise as he straightens up, his hard eyes turning on me.

“You can talk to Roman, but then I’ll have to tell him why she’s calling *me* to slam her headboard into the wall. I’m not the only one here wanting to keep shit from him, *Carson*.”

This motherfucker.

Before I can re-introduce my fist to his face again, he's walking down to his car with a smirk, splitting blood onto the path.

After taking a few deep breaths to calm the pounding in my chest, I walk into the kitchen.

Annabelle leans over the sink as she dabs a wet cloth on her lip. She must've opened the split up during her argument. It probably needs stitches at this point. Weston leans against the bench to her side with his arms folded across his chest while she groans about her lip stinging.

"Get the fuck out," Annabelle groans, keeping her eyes cast downwards. "I'm not in the mood for your shit, Carson."

Hearing the vulnerability in her voice, I feel a tug in my chest.

"I've got her. You can go," Weston reassures.

"You should get that checked out," I tell her, ignoring Weston.

A rush of heat fills me at seeing how close they look, how *friendly*. I shouldn't give a fuck. He's helping her. I should be grateful, but instead I'm bitter that it's him and not me. Not that she'd even let me near her to help.

I open my mouth to tell Weston to fuck off when my phone vibrates. I'm ready to hit cancel when I see Avery's name flash across the screen.

"Did you find anything?" I ask my Private Investigator once I've left the kitchen. This isn't something I want Annabelle to overhear.

"There was recently some activity in one of your father's business accounts," he informs me. "This one came from a bank close by. Do you know if anyone else has access to those accounts? An assistant or something?"

Racking my brain, I try to think of anyone who might know his passwords and come up empty. Dad kept me out of the business as much as he could, which was an easy enough job, considering I barely saw him. "Not that I know of. I'm the only one with all the passwords, but I haven't touched anything."

Avery hums on the other end. "I'm waiting for their security footage to come through to see if I can get a good picture on who took the money."

"How much was taken this time?" Since my parents have been gone, little bits have been leaving, each amount from different accounts. The most in one go has been three thousand.

“Whoever it is, they’re starting to get cocky. This time it was ten thousand.”

I curse under my breath. Two months of this bullshit and we aren’t any closer to getting answers. I’m still convinced this has something to do with Decker, though. The timing is too fucking coincidental. “And you said this one was close?”

Avery is silent for a moment. “It came from Doverhill Bank. Shit, I need to go. I’ll let you know when I’ve overlooked the security footage.”

“Thanks.” I hang up, my head now swimming with this new information on my parents.

Doverhill.

Fucking Decker.

Chapter 14

Annabelle

I have an early shower to get ready to marathon all the Fast and Furious movies. This has been my tradition with my dad since I was sixteen; we pull an all-nighter once a year. I could wait until I'm with my dad. I need something to cheer me up after the nightmare that was yesterday.

After I'd made the stupid decision to sleep with Jordan, he was on his phone to another girl making plans to take her to some fucking party. I hate that I hadn't been surprised; it didn't even hurt as much as it used to; it was just bloody disrespectful.

When he'd left over our blow-up fight, Weston had found me spitting blood into the kitchen sink. It was so fucking gross, but I'd managed to re-split the cut on my lip during my screaming match with Jordan. In the time Weston was helping me calm down, Carson apparently punched Jordan. It made no sense when Weston told me, considering Carson has always been obvious about his dislike for me. Maybe he just likes fighting, who knows. It sure doesn't make any sense if he hit Jordan to defend *me*.

So, add in the stress from my ridiculous suspension, the painful throb in my lip and the confusion swimming around in my head about Carson, yesterday is a day I need to eliminate with my own version of self-care.

"Anna," Mom knocks once before opening the door. "Sweetie, your friend is here to see you."

Picking up my phone, I find six unopened messages from Gianna and Ivy.

Gianna walks in, shooting my mum a beaming smile as she leaves us with a soft wave. I look over her shoulder for Ivy since I had messages from the both of them.

"Ivy is outside waiting for us," Gianna says, reading my mind before I can ask where she is. "Now get dressed, we're going to the lake."

"Do I have to?" I groan, throwing the blanket over my head. "I'm already in bed with my snacks."

The blanket is ripped away from my head. “Yes, you have to, and you’ll have a blast. Come on.”

“I’ll have more of a blast right here,” I smile, tugging at my blanket. The girl is crazy strong. It doesn’t even budge from her hold. “Gi, I hate the lake. Why do I have to go?”

Hanging around the lake in the dark is my very definition of a nightmare. Could I outrun an alligator? I don’t know, and I don’t ever want to find out.

“This isn’t up for discussion, babe.” She releases my blanket to grab hold of my wrists. “You’re coming, and you’re going to have a great time.”

I let Gianna drag me out of bed with a grumble, following her into my closet. She ignores me, picking out a pair of denim shorts and a bikini top. I raise an eyebrow, taking in her own outfit. How hadn’t I realized that she’s wearing almost the exact same?

“I don’t want to go swimming,” I protest loudly.

She shrugs, handing me the clothes. “You don’t have, but you’ll stick out if you wear anything else.”

“Why do I have to go?” I whine again, already undressing to change into the clothes Gianna picked out. “I don’t even know that many people, I’d only stick to you or Ivy there.”

Turning to face the closet wall, I wait for Gianna to tie the bikini top at the back.

“You’ll be fine,” Gianna soothes. “You know Alex and Mason, and they’ll be there. Besides, it’ll be a great chance for you to get to know other people.”

Doubtful, since Carson has turned practically everyone against me.

“How far is this party? What if I want to leave early?”

“It’s five minutes down the road and Ivy never drinks at these things, so she would drive you home.” She flicks a few loose strands out of my face. “You’re lucky you can pull off a messy bun. Now let’s go, Ivy isn’t the most patient person.”

She wasn’t lying about the party being down the road. It’s far enough that I’ll only walk home if I get desperate enough, yet close enough that the walk is doable.

“Anna, what do you drink?” Ivy asks as we pull into the parking lot.

“Anything, except beer,” I scowl at the thought.

“Perfect. We believe in bringing our own shit, so beside you on the floor there, I have a few different types. Pick what you wanna drink.”

A few would be an understatement. She has a cooler filled to the top with different types of alcohol, ranging from mini bottles of hard liquor to wine coolers. I grab three mini bottles of vodka while Gianna grabs a six pack of beer.

She smirks, cracking one open. “You beer hater.”

“I don’t know how you’re drinking that with a straight face.” I cringe when she drinks a large mouthful.

“Says the girl choosing straight fucking vodka,” Gianna laughs, giving me a shove. “If I wanted gasoline, I’d hang around the gas station.”

“I’ll take fire over pee water.”

She gasps. “Pee water? You haven’t been drinking the right stuff.”

We continue our argument as we start to make our way down to the lake, where music is blasting through the air and teenagers are humping each other. It’s only nine and everyone seems to be plastered already, with empty alcohol bottles scattered along the sand and a couple of empty condom wrappers.

Classy.

“I need to go see Lily about something,” Gianna announces before walking off towards a group of girls dressed in only bikinis.

Looking around, I see what Gianna meant about standing out. Everyone is dressed to go swimming, even though it looks like nobody has even stepped foot in the water.

Smart move. Anything could be lurking in there.

“Let’s go see Alex and Mason,” Ivy says, leading me to the two guys who look to be stuck in an argument.

Mason is the first to notice us approaching, turning away from Alex and pulling Ivy into a hug. Alex glares at the back of his best friend’s head before turning to me with a smile.

“Damn,” he whistles, running his eyes down my body. “I may be gay, but I’d sure make an exception for you.”

I hear a mumbled curse from Mason, but chose to ignore him and allow Alex to pull me under his arm. His body is still tense from whatever he was arguing with Mason about. They always seem so relaxed, it’s hard to picture them as anything but.

“Are you drinking tonight, sexy?” Mason asks Ivy, playfully nipping her neck.

Oh yeah, did I forget to mention that Mason is also Ivy’s ex? They broke up a few weeks before I moved here, but they’re still close, so it wasn’t on bad terms or anything.

Ivy shoves him back, only to follow him and wrap her arms around his waist again. “You already know the answer to that, asshole. Where’s your *lady friend*?”

“In my arms.” He winks, earning another push from Ivy. “Don’t be like that, baby. Hey Anna, wanna do some shots with me? Alex here is too much of a pussy.”

Alex scowls, ignoring the dig.

“I might pass, too,” I shrug.

Mason boo’s us, leaving us for a table that has been set up for beer pong. Ivy watches him for a moment and not for the first time, I wonder what ended her relationship with Asher. She’s cool with Mason, flirty even, yet if she isn’t stuck in a verbal version of World War 3 with Asher, she’s shooting laser beams at him with her eyes.

“I might go keep an eye on him,” Ivy says.

Alex hums, earning an unimpressed look from Ivy.

“And that has nothing to do with him playing against Asher and you wanting to make the poor guy suffer?” Alex smirks, nodding to where Asher is pouring the alcohol into the giant red cups.

“*Poor guy*?” Ivy scowls. “I don’t give a fuck about Asher being there. This is me wanting to make sure my friend doesn’t get black out drunk *again*.”

“Sure, sure, whatever you say,” Alex winks. Ivy flips him off, then walks off to join Mason.

“Do you know why she hates Asher so much?” I ask.

Alex smiles sadly. “I don’t. But whatever happened tore that entire friend group apart, so it wasn’t anything little.”

I watch the table as Ivy joins. Asher flinches when Ivy wraps her arms around Mason and kisses his cheek, and I find myself feeling a little bad. Asher and Weston are at the house often, and unlike their fuckhead friend, they’re actually nice guys.

“Wanna watch me get high?” Alex asks, waggling his eyebrows.

“Sure,” I answer, taking his outstretched hand. “Might as well have

some entertainment since I'm stuck here."

"That's the spirit!"

He leads me over to the farthest end of the lake where less people are gathered. We walk in silence until we reach the woods.

The thing screams unsolved murders, but I follow him in anyway.

A few logs have been gathered to sit in a make-shift circle, already full of kids I barely recognize. Except one.

Vibrant red hair, black eye contacts—which look equally as cool and terrifying—and platform doc martins. She was the culprit of my lack of sleep last week when Carson felt the need to have an all-night fuck-fest after I told him he was a repulsive human being at dinner.

"You're Monique, right?" I smile shyly, taking the only available space next to the intimidating red head and accepting the joint she hands me.

Smoking weed had never really been my thing. I've done it a few times, sure, but either the stuff I used to smoke had been shit, or I was just never bothered by it.

She grins, "That'll be me. Forgive me, I kind of remember you, but I was also high as fuck when I saw you."

I take a drag before handing it off to Alex, who has taken the seat next to me. "That's fine. Honestly, I mostly remember your hair. I love the color."

Monique fluffs her hair up. "Thanks, babe. I'm actually thinking of switching to violet soon. Kinda getting over the red."

A sense of relief washes over me the more I talk with Monique about her hair color and the process she uses. It's known throughout the school that she and Carson get together on a regular basis when he isn't with Jessica. I was worried at first that she would be another Jessica and take this opportunity to start some shit up.

Ryan soon joins us, looking annoyed as he approaches Alex.

"Oh damn, I'm in trouble," Alex snickers, standing to give Ryan a quick kiss. "Hey baby."

"Don't *'hey baby'* me," Ryan snaps, looking around in disgust. "You told me you were done with this shit. Did you fight with Mason again?"

"Take your negative bullcrap elsewhere, Ryan," Monique calls. "Alex isn't doing anything wrong." She leans over to whisper loudly in my ear. "He is very judgemental of us stoners."

Ryan dismisses Monique with a scowl, lowering his voice to argue

with Alex. The poor guy seems to be attracting trouble tonight. First Mason, now his boyfriend? Shit, maybe I should stay by Monique.

“Fucking men,” Monique scoffs. “If it wasn’t for Carson having a huge dick, I’d exclusively fuck women.”

My first reaction is to cringe. Because I don’t want to ruin the relaxed buzz I have going on to talk about Monique’s sex life with Carson, and also because I have not forgotten how much that asshole is packing. He still doesn’t deserve it.

“Sorry, you probably don’t wanna hear that,” Monique grinned, grabbing the vodka we’ve been sharing and taking a drink. “Have you ever hooked up with a girl?”

“Just once,” I answer honestly.

By this point, we’ve turned to straddle the log, facing each other. I feel weightless, and my skin tingles. This is exactly what I needed. I never felt this way with the stuff I smoked in Doverhill.

“How far did you go?” Her eyes twinkle and her lip curls.

It takes me a moment to pull up the memory. It had been during one of my thousand breaks—an actual break, Rachel and Ross—with Jordan. “Not very. We were both high at a party, dancing together, when she kissed me. We went upstairs to one of the bedrooms and made out, but my ex pulled me away just as we were getting into the groping stage.”

“Fuck that guy.” She frowns.

“I did,” I giggle. Truthfully, I have no idea how far I would have gone with Jen if Jordan hadn’t barged in and lost his shit.

“So you only experiment when you’re high?”

Considering my answer, I take a second to take Monique in. She’s attractive, and she has a great body, but I don’t feel the need to straddle her lap and start making out with her. Maybe it was just something I shared with Jen that night.

“I don’t think so,” I answer.

We’re silent while we take a few more drags of a new joint. Everyone is sharing it around, which normally I would find unsanitary, but I’m too chill to care right now.

“I get it, ya know,” she whispers after handing the joint off beside her. “Why Carson wants to fuck you so bad, even though he denies it like hell.”

My shock must be displayed on my face because Monique lets out

a booming laugh.

“Carson Dorian?” I laugh. “No, he hates me. I don’t know why, but he makes that pretty obvious.”

“He hates you because he wants to fuck you,” she winks. “Oh, and because of who your daddy is.”

“What do you mean?” I question warily. “He doesn’t even know my dad.”

Monique suddenly turns away, her face closing off. “Fuck. I wasn’t... That’s not... Shit, I gotta go. I have to feed my bird. I’ll see you around, buttercup.”

She jumps up too fast for my head to catch up, tapping Alex and Ryan on the shoulder to say goodbye before practically fleeing from the woods back out to the party.

Chapter 15

Annabelle

When I find Gianna and tell her what Monique had said, she's just as confused.

"And you're sure they've never met?"

"Nope, never. I basically lived with my dad full time, and Carson was never even mentioned. I don't even think he knew Henry had a nephew," I tell her, running over a possible explanation in my head. It isn't an easy task when I feel weightless. "But it also makes a little sense. I mean, I've done nothing to him, and he's hated me from day one. I just don't know what the fuck his issue with my dad would be."

"Maybe you should confront him about it," she offers, lifting one shoulder. "What could it hurt?"

"My mental state," I answer dryly. "But I guess I could. There aren't really any other options."

The buzz I'd gotten from the weed and vodka is not enough to keep my mood from souring. This news about Carson hating my dad and taking it out on me is confusing as hell, with a heavy dose of goddamn annoying.

"He just walked out to the car park. You should follow him now," Gianna urges, giving me a nudge. "He's drunk, so he might even fess up."

"Or I could not do that, he might murder me."

Gianna smirks, "What's the weapon, his dick?"

"You won't find this funny when you're being questioned in a smelly interrogation room later while my body rots away in a morgue." I'm definitely being dramatic.

"Jesus Christ. Go after him, you drama queen. I'll make sure you're a hot corpse for your funeral."

Laughing, I head off in the direction of the creepy car park. One light flickers, giving the whole thing a horror movie vibe. You know the one where that idiot wanders off from the crowd to follow the weird noise. That's me right now.

This ambush better work.

When I find Carson, he's leaning against a car, his phone pressed to his ear.

"Dammit Avery," he slurs. "Look into him more, I don't trust him."

I stay out of sight behind a Jeep, straining my ears to listen. Seth's words come back to me in this moment; he seems to think that Carson has something to do with his parents' disappearance. I didn't believe him at the time, but what if he's right? Gianna is the only one who knows I'm here alone with him, and she's hammered.

Fuck, I really am about to be murdered. I didn't even brush my hair after my shower, I just threw it up in a bum. I wonder if they'll brush my hair in the morgue or if they just don't care about that stuff.

"Someone else has the codes then. Fuck. *Fuck!*" he shouts, storming to a tree and kicking the trunk, losing his balance and falling on his ass. "Shit. Call me when you have more."

He lays back, dropping his phone to the ground beside him. I stay where I am, stuck between wanting to laugh at the clumsy jackass and not wanting to be caught in case he's packing a gun and shoots me.

Not a minute passes when he takes the decision out of my hands.

"Seth did it, you know," Carson explains, his voice still a slight slur. "He's a fucking two-faced lying liar who lies."

My curiosity wins out as I walk over to Carson, moving to lay beside him since he seems to have no plans on getting up anytime soon. The cement is nice and cold against my bare back. It clears some more of the haziness out of my mind.

"How do you know?" I ask. I don't have to ask what he's talking about, it's obviously about his parents.

"He was always a jealous fuck," Carson explains. "He's also smart enough to hack into my dad's computers to steal money. Which is what he's been doing. I just can't prove it."

I'm almost afraid to keep talking. This is really the first time I've had a proper conversation with Carson where he isn't insulting me, even if he is drunk for it.

"He told me he thinks you have something to do with your parents' disappearance," I confide, taking a huge fucking gamble in trusting him with this.

"Yeah, I know. Not the first time he's tried that one," he sighs.

I turn my head to look at him. His jawline is covered with dark

stubble, his lips more pink than usual—yes, I often stare at the jerks’ mouth—from the alcohol, and his hair is messier than it had been earlier in the night.

Like this, unguarded, he’s more attractive than when he’s perfectly dressed and scowling at the world.

“Did you?” I regret the question as soon as it leaves my lips. His lips curve into a frown, his eyebrows scrunch up.

He doesn’t look mad at my question; he just looks sad.

“No. No, I didn’t,” he says, turning his head toward me. His eyes look even darker under the stars, holding me captive. “You’re high.”

“No, I’m not,” I grin despite myself. “I’m completely sober.”

Carson scoffs, breaking our contact to face the sky once again. “And I’m Jesus fucking Christ, nice to meet you.”

We lay in silence for several moments. It surprises me at how comfortable it is. The music coming from the lake is like a soft hum, settling over us.

If someone had told me an hour ago I would be lying beside Carson Dorian in a carpark watching the stars, without him being a jackass, I would have laughed myself to an early grave.

When it’s clear Carson has no plans to talk, I steal the opportunity to ask about my dad, ruining the peaceful mood we’ve somehow created.

“Why do you hate me?”

Carson sighs, reaching his hand out to entwine our fingers. A jolt moves up my spine at the contact, my hand burning up under his. “I don’t.”

I let out a sarcastic laugh, causing Carson’s lips to stretch into a smile so beautiful that he makes the stars look like just a bunch of dots.

“Let me rephrase.” He smiles, bringing our joined hands to his lips, kissing my knuckles. My heart goes insane when his lips brush gently. “I *want* to hate you.”

This side of Carson is nice, I decide. If I could lock this guy in a jar and throw out the old one, I totally would. Maybe I should try to get him drunk more often.

“But why?” I ask, proud of my voice for not coming out shaky despite what’s going on in my chest. “Because of my dad, right?”

He releases my hand in an instant, and my body automatically screams for his touch again as the cold air hits my hand like a sharp bite.

“You know?” His words are no longer soft. I feel a pang in my

chest when I realize that our peaceful moment has passed.

Sitting up, I meet his hard stare unflinching. “I don’t know anything, except that this bullshit has something to do with my dad. What the fuck has he ever done to you?”

Carson stands, taking a second to regain his balance when he stumbles. “He ruined my fucking life.”

“My dad doesn’t know you, you fucking lunatic,” I argue.

“Is that what he told you?” he laughs bitterly. “I’m not even surprised.”

He storms off, and I make no effort to chase after him or even stop him. This might be a conversation I need to have with my dad, because there’s no way I’m dropping it. Not now that I know Carson’s vendetta against me is entirely personal and not some stupid high school new girl shit I’d originally assumed.

Two weeks pass without a word from Carson. Even things at school have died down after my return from suspension, which has been the most surprising thing. I went from dealing with bullshit from Jessica every day to suddenly nothing but stares and, behind my back, whispering.

It would be nice, except there’s a feeling in my stomach that tells me things are about to get really bad. Call it paranoia or whatever, but something is coming.

Friday rolls around slowly. Carson has spent the last couple of days with Weston for whatever reason, and I hate the house has felt empty without his music blasting from his room or listening to him argue with Weston and Asher from the movie room. For guys that are apparently best friends, they fight an awful lot.

When I wake up, that itchy feeling in my stomach has grown to a nauseous level. It doesn’t help that I sleep through my alarm.

Throwing on my favorite *Friends* sweater, because it’s freezing cold today and I don’t have time to look for my school blazer after the quickest shower known to mankind, I race out the door to catch the bus without getting anything to eat or a coffee.

Another thing to add to my growing nausea is the only bus to take me to school does a fucking loop of the town, and I end up missing my first two classes.

At this rate, I really should have just called in sick. It’s not like I

don't have the grades to miss just one day.

At school, the first place I run after visiting my locker is the bathroom to throw up. I knew something was going to happen, so I guess I can't act completely blindsided. I just didn't expect *this*.

Ivy and Gianna are at my locker when I walk out of the girls' bathroom, their faces scrunched up in disgust.

Right there in the middle of my locker happens to be a taped photo of a half-naked girl. Her arms are covering her face and she's dressed in matching blue panties. There's nothing special to them, since she only went to that party to have a few drinks for her friend's birthday. My stomach twists to a point of pain and I strain to stand straight.

"I'm so sorry," Ivy says, putting her arm around my waist.

Gianna comes to my other side, resting her head on my shoulder. "If it matters, we know this isn't you."

"It is me," I confess, staring at the photo. I still feel fucking sick, despite having just thrown up.

I'd gone to that party with Val and Ezra. It was her birthday and Jen was throwing this party for her. Jen used any excuse to drink, and that weekend it was Valerie's birthday. The night before, I'd broken up with Jordan for the second time, so I was excited to just drink and forget about him for the night. Matthew was persistent, I was pathetically upset over Jordan, and so I messed around with his friend. We didn't get that far, since Valerie walked in and found Matthew taking photos without me realizing.

For months after that night, pictures kept showing up exactly like the one in front of me right now. Mike and Slater - being the tech geniuses they are - got them taken down, but apparently they didn't get them all.

"What?" Ivy looks from the photo to me.

Gianna lifts her head to stare at me, her eyes betraying her pity. At least they don't seem to believe I'm just some slut.

Gesturing to the photo, I smile weakly to Ivy. "Helpful tip—don't get drunk and try to fuck your ex's friend."

Her jaw drops. "Seriously?"

"Unfortunately." I tear down the photo, unable to see it anymore. Embarrassment washes over me. "It wasn't my proudest moment."

"We've all been there, babe, don't worry." Gianna shares a glance with Ivy.

"Oh no," Jessica's voice flows down the hall. "Look who finally

decided to close her legs and show up for school. Sorry, did I say legs? I meant legs.”

Gianna and Ivy move back enough so that I can turn to face Jessica. She walks up to me, stamping her feet to create an echo from her heels. I notice Mia not far behind her, her eyes cast down. So far I’ve had no issues with her, her only flaw seems to be acting as Jessica’s shadow.

“That was really bad,” I laugh. “I’ll give you a minute. I’m sure you can think of something better.”

Jessica stammers, her cheeks turning red. “Fuck you. At least I don’t make it a career to pose naked for guys.”

At her not at all subtle knowledge of the photo, heat spreads through my veins. How the hell did she find about the photo? How did she know it was me? Slater and Mike are the best at hiding anything they want in the tech world; I doubt they’d have left any stones unturned.

“You should at least look into it,” I shrug casually, keeping my voice bored. “Sex workers can make a crapton of money. Hell, I won’t deny that I’ve thought of being a stripper. There’s no shame in it, honey.”

“There’s plenty of shame. It’s disgusting,” she spits. “You’re fucking disgusting. I’ve heard the rumors going through the boy’s locker rooms, of you paying them so they’d fuck you.”

She laughs, but it lacks the bite she probably hoped for. She sounds frustrated, worried. Probably because this is backfiring on her and she’s not getting the reaction she clearly wanted. Hell, the only reaction I want to give is by laying her ass on the floor and rearranging that nose.

“How do you know what’s being said in the locker rooms?” I cock my head, a smirk stretching across my face when she stutters for words. “Yeah. I wouldn’t go around throwing stones when you live in a glass house.”

“You little—” Her voice is cut off when Monique struts right up to our little group and punches her in the face.

I exchange a look with Gianna and Ivy, who share the same shocked expression on my face.

“What the hell, you crazy bitch?” Jessica shrieks, attempting to kick Monique from the floor.

Monique turns her head to wink at me before crouching down to face Jess. She grabs her by the back of her head and leans in. “If you ever go near Annabelle again, I’ll torch your fucking car. Then I’ll let your boyfriend

fuck me while we livestream the whole thing, since he keeps begging me to jump on his pin dick again.”

She releases her hard enough that Jessica falls to her back, screaming like a toddler throwing a tantrum. “You’re so psychotic, Monique.”

“If she gives you shit again, tell me,” Monique says softly for nobody else to hear. “I’ve been dying to torch that shitbox she calls a car.”

“Nothing like a good cat fight to get me in the mood,” Carson grins, joining the party and throwing an arm around Monique’s shoulders. “Nice photo, babe. If you’re ever down for another porn shoot, my door’s open.”

“I’d rather wander into the desert and die a slow, painful death,” I smile, trying to ignore the sharp pain in my chest when Caron throws his head back and laughs, leading Monique away from Jessica as she continues to spit insults. At least her attention is now off me as she screams at the back of Carson’s head.

“I’ve never actually heard her talk,” Gianna thinks aloud, her eyes following Monique with barely-covered interest.

Ivy agrees. “Her voice is softer than I imagined.”

Jessica finally gets up with a growl, glaring at the three of us and storming into the bathroom with her other shadow, Amanda, scurrying after her. Surprisingly, Mia sticks around, fidgeting with the sleeve of her blazer. Gianna curls her lip, narrowing her eyes on the timid blonde.

“I’m sorry about that,” Mia says. “I tried to stop her from doing that.”

“How did she get that photo?” I ask her, ignoring the sharp look Gianna throws my way. What the hell is up with that?

“Her boyfriend, Michael, but that’s all I know. She doesn’t tell me much.”

Offering her a small smile, I turn my attention to watch Carson as he stands with Asher further down the hall with Monique still under his arm. It’s not a surprise to see them together. I already know that they hook up.

What is surprising is the acid burning away at my insides. It’s the jealousy now pumping through my blood. It’s the realization that I’ve fucking *missed* hearing his voice around the house.

How fucked up is that?

Chapter 16

Annabelle

I have seen my dad angry plenty of times, but I can count on one hand how many times that anger has been directed at me. Now is one of them.

“You should have told me.” His voice is still hard, but at least we’ve moved past the yelling. “And I thought Slater got rid of all those photos. Do you know where it came from?”

His angry pacing is seriously starting to make me dizzy. “Some college guy. I don’t know who he is. And I didn’t tell you what was happening because I knew you’d freak out.”

“You’re damn fucking right I would have. You’re my daughter, I won’t just stand around twiddling my fucking thumbs while a bunch of brats are giving you a hard time.” His expression would scare the crap out of anyone that walked in right now.

Even Valerie had bailed the second Dad exploded. Which was as soon as he walked into the house. Apparently, someone had sent him the same photo that was taped on my locker, and a lovely list of all the extra-curricular activities that have been circulating.

Valerie gave me the heads up to Hurricane Dad when he called her to ask if she knew what was happening at school, so she packed a bag to come and spend the weekend with me. Dad arrived ten minutes after she got here.

“I’ve got it handled, Dad,” I sigh heavily.

“How?” he hisses, finally coming to a stop in front of me. “Because from what I can see, it’s only gotten worse. Am I wrong?”

Groaning, I roll my head back to stare up at the ceiling. “Please, just stop. It is what it is. I’m not curling up in bed every night crying. It really isn’t bothering me. Can we just drop it?”

“Does your mother know?”

That would imply we sit around and talk, which we do not. “No, because I’m not a little kid. I am healthy, physically and mentally.”

“I should still talk to Sydney, see what we can do.”

Horror fills me at the prospect of my dad riding into Lakeside like some avenging white knight. Hell no. “Dad,” I whine. “I am begging you to stay out of this. I didn’t say anything because it really isn’t a big deal, and I can stand up for myself.”

After a moment of silence, he lets out a sigh. “I’ll drop it, *for now*. But if I hear one more damn thing, Annabelle, you are coming back home.”

Who would have thought that would now be considered a threat? Funny how things can change. Once Valerie and I realized that we still have weekends, and an hour isn’t *really* that far, I allowed myself to enjoy this place. Leaving now would be upsetting, even with all the shit Jessica tries to throw at me.

I jump up from the bed and wrap my arms around Dad’s waist, pressing my cheek to his chest.

“I promise I will tell you if anything else happens,” I mumble into the wall of muscle.

“If you don’t, I will go in there, guns blazing.” He presses a kiss to the top of my head as he relaxes.

Pulling back, I swat him on the chest. “That isn’t funny.”

“I wasn’t joking.”

That’s why it isn’t funny. “Couldn’t you have yelled at me over the phone? This was a long way to come just to scold your kid.”

“I wasn’t about to risk you hanging up on me and blaming bad service. Besides, I’m meeting Slater in the next town over. We have a meeting with someone.”

Cautiously, I slide my arms back around his waist and stop at the hard metal pressed into the back of his pants. *A meeting.*

“Be careful, *both* of you.”

With a sad smile, he tucks my hair behind my ear. “I got to go. You’ll call me?”

“Yes, Dad. Pinky swear.”

After my pinky is swallowed by Dad’s giant paw, we walk downstairs in silence, passing Valerie on the couch, typing away on her phone with a concentrated look on her face. She lifts her hand in a wave without looking up.

Just as Dad reaches for the door handle, the door swings open, revealing my red-faced roommate from hell.

For a moment, I’m confused about the look of utter hatred on his

face. Then I remember what Monique said about him hating me because of my dad. With all the shit going on, I'd completely forgotten to question my dad.

Although now I don't think there's any point. Dad smiles at Carson, holding out his hand as if he's a stranger.

"You must be Carson. I'm Roman, Anna's old man," Dad introduces himself.

Carson is hesitant, but he takes Dad's hand, his grey eyes darkening further as they shake hands. I don't get it. My dad genuinely looks like he has no idea who Carson is, and I'd like to think I know the guy well enough to know whether he's lying.

"Anyway," Dad whistles awkwardly when it's clear Carson doesn't plan to speak. "I'll talk to you later, peanut."

The second Dad climbs into his car, Carson turns to me and I'm sure he might kill me by the fury on his face.

"What the fuck was he doing in my house?"

I recoil back as if he'd just slapped me. "Excuse me? My dad was visiting me, in a house I now live in, too."

"And he has his own house," Carson spits, shoving past me to get into the house. "He isn't fucking welcome here."

"Listen here, you jackass," I snap, intending to follow him when I see Val sniffing on the couch, the blanket thrown over her shaking body.

"This isn't over," I shout at Carson's retreating back, in which he replies by flipping me off. I sit beside Val, holding her tight when she all but collapses into me. "What's going on?"

"Do you remember that night Ezra came and got me?" she croaks.

"I remember."

"He cheated on me," she sobs into my chest. "We had that fight before I came to your place, because he was going to Liam's party and you know how much Liam hates me. He had just fucked some bitch he didn't even know the name of, then came to your place to get me. I wanted to forgive him. I really did, and I *tried*. But yesterday, yesterday I left him, and I... I just."

Shock blends in with the rage I feel towards Ezra. It's something I never expected from him, not with the way he worshipped Valerie. Sure, he was a known player before they dated, but he became a different person with Val. His world revolved around her.

“It’s okay,” I soothe her, dragging my fingers through her hair in the way I know she loves. “He’s an idiot, I always thought so.”

“You loved him,” she laughs weakly, choking on a sob.

I shrug, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. “Ah well, opinions change.”

From the opposite side of the couch, I see her phone screen flash with *piece of shit* written across.

“Do you want to block his number?”

Her sobs turn to hiccups. “Am I an idiot if I say no?”

“No, you aren’t.”

She wiggles around until her head rests on my lap. Her puffy eyes are like a stab to my chest. “Sorry to just dump that on you. How’d things go with your dad? And then Carson? I heard you arguing before I lost my shit.”

This right here is one of the many reasons I love her. Even when I can see her heart shattering, she’s making sure I’m okay. I’ll have to deal with Carson, because that crap made no sense, but Valerie comes first.

“When don’t we argue?” I grin. “Everything’s fine, I promise. I’m fine, you’ll be fine, we’ll all be just fine.”

She offers a shaky smile. “What am I gonna do, Anna?”

“Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do.” I grab the remote and press the Netflix button. “Tonight we binge on Grey’s Anatomy to get all our tears out. Tomorrow we’ll go shopping for some new hot as fuck outfits, then tomorrow night we find a party and get absolutely hammered. Sunday, we can order our weight in burritos and sleep the day away. How does that sound?”

I’m the last person to give advice on this situation. Ideally, she’d block Ezra and stay clear of the path I took with Jordan, but I’d be a hypocrite to suggest that.

Val sits up straight, her eyes watering once again. “That sounds perfect. I swear, sometimes I think you’re my soul mate.”

“Maybe I am,” I laugh, taking her hand in mine.

“It’ll only work if I wear the strap on,” she snuffles. “Sorry, but I’m not about to be topped by someone tinier than me.”

Relief warms me when I see a genuine smile, even if it’s shaky. “Deal. I’m not big on doing all the work anyway.”

“Lazy bitch,” she chuckles.

Two episodes in and half a box of tissues later, Asher and Weston

stroll through the front door like they live here.

Henry looks away from the screen with a beaming smile. Who would've thought he's a huge Grey's fan? He came bounding down the stairs as soon as he heard Dr Bailey in episode one.

"My boys!" he speaks. "What brings you by so late?"

"Hey, Dorian," Asher greets him, walking over to fist bump him. "We're here to get Carson."

Henry nods, turning his attention back to the screen. "Well, you boys be safe. Downstairs in the gym, I believe."

Weston gives a single nod to Henry, his eyes locking on Valerie.

"Are you okay?" he asks Val, earning a blush from her when she notices him staring.

"I'm fine," she smiles weakly. "This is just a sad episode."

Weston pulls a face when he looks to the tv. "My grandma watches this crap."

"Your grandma has impeccable taste, then," Henry chuckles.

Asher goes in the direction of the basement door, where Henry has the gym set up, leaving Weston, who appears hesitant to follow his friend. He doesn't move his eyes from Val. I know that he'd given her his number when they'd first met, but I just assumed that she threw it out. Do they talk? Because he isn't looking at her like a guy that got turned down.

"You look good," Weston finally speaks. "Even when you've been crying."

Valerie looks away, her cheeks deepening to a darker pink. "You're too kind."

He stands there with his head tilted, staring like he's wanting to say something. After a moment, he lets out a heavy breath and turns to me with a smile before following the direction Asher went in.

If Val thinks we're about to go back to the depressing show without acknowledging what the hell that was, she's dead wrong. Henry and I both turn to stare at her, waiting for an answer.

"Okay!" She throws her hands up. "I kept his number, and we text. But that's it, he's.... nice."

Henry whistles low. "He's a good kid. I've known him almost his entire life."

Val gives him a look. "I'm not interested in him like that, but thanks for the character reference, Henry."

Henry heads off to bed half-way through episode three, while Valerie makes it through another two episodes before passing out.

From personal experience, couches aren't exactly comfortable to sleep on, and after the last few weeks Val has had, I don't want her to wake up with a cramp in her neck or back. The only problem is that she's too heavy for me, and if I want to get her into bed, I have to either find Carson—who is unfortunately awake—or wake Henry.

Henry has had a huge day with Carson's family lawyer and his own work, so I'm hesitant to bother him. It's bad enough that he's admitted to sleeping horribly whenever my mom is on a night shift, which just so happens to be tonight. And practically every other night.

Maybe with some luck, Asher and Weston are also awake and I can ask one of them for help. I haven't seen them leave, and we have a clear view of the foyer from the living room.

Carefully moving Val's head off my lap, I take a moment to stretch and work out any kinks before heading off to the movie room, where the sound of an action-filled video game is being played at an increasingly high volume. *Jackass*.

When I bounce down the small step, I curse myself to find Asher and Weston passed out on the beanbags, Carson being the only one awake.

He looks up when I enter, his lips curving into a dazed smile.

Of course he's drunk. Why else would he actually be happy to see me?

"Hey baby," He slightly slurs. "Nice tits."

Refusing to acknowledge that comment, I simply lean into the doorframe—yes, I went with the crop because it makes my boobs look hot, but whatever—and raise a brow in his direction.

"Look, you're the last person I want to be asking for help," I start, only to stop when he holds his hand up.

"No."

"Are you kidding me? You haven't even heard what—"

"Kiss me."

My heart stops. Completely. I just know it. My blood fucking overheats. My intestines are doing things they shouldn't and my heart stops.

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" I loudly whisper, leaning off the wall and stepping further into the room to avoid Val possibly waking up to hear me commit murder.

“I wish. It would make more sense,” he sighs, dropping the controller to drag his hands over his face. “But you want my help? Then kiss me.”

Scowling, I take a step back when he stands, strolling over to me and looking more sober than he probably is. “I’m not kissing you. I’d rather kiss a damn alligator before you.”

Unfortunately, when I take a step back, my back connects with the wall. Carson comes to a stop in front of me, bringing his hand up to hold my cheek.

If my heart wasn’t beating before, it’s doing fucking somersaults now.

“Get away from me,” I breathe, my voice not coming out as steady as I’d like.

Carson clicks his tongue, his thumb moving to drag across my lip. “You don’t want that.”

My heart is officially beating more than it probably should. He leans in close, his lips just a breath away from my mouth.

“You’re psychotic.”

“I get so hard when you insult me, baby.” His lips brush against mine with such a featherlight touch that I’m not sure it even happened. As if to prove his words, he presses his crotch against me and dear God, my brain short circuits.

Dead. I have died and entered some alternative universe. Because there’s no goddamn way that Carson Dorian is grinding his hard dick against me while asking me to kiss him. Nope. This isn’t real.

A small part of me is desperate to bring up his drama earlier with my dad. If this is real, it’s the perfect time. It might be my only chance to get a real answer out of him.

And yet.... I can’t bring the words to leave my lips. I can’t force myself to break this moment.

“Kiss me, and I’ll help you. Just one kiss.”

I know he can feel my breasts pushing against his chest with every breath I take. I just can’t bring myself to feel embarrassed over it. Not when my body is in a war with my brain. One side wants Carson to rip my clothes off and fuck me until the sun rises, while the other side is screaming at me to headbutt him.

“You know what, I don’t need your—”

I'm cut off when Carson leans in, pressing his mouth to mine and washing away every thought I have in the process.

There isn't a second of doubt as I kiss him back, my own sudden eagerness matching his. His lips are slow against mine, adding just the right amount of pressure to make my head spin. It doesn't turn into this frenzy rush to consume each other, which only makes it more bittersweet. It's everything I didn't even realize I wanted until now, which seems to ignite some need in me.

With his hand cupping my face, he brings his other to my hip and continues to dig his weapon of mass destruction against my hip.

Flood. Tsunami. Niagara Falls. All of those things could be used to describe how I ruin my panties. All from a kiss. It would be embarrassing if I were capable of any coherent thought.

My hands reach up into his hair at the same time Carson nips my lip hard enough to elicit a moan from my throat.

That snaps Carson out of whatever possessed him. He pulls away and takes a step back with a scowl marring his too-perfect features. My body turns to ice when I no longer have the heat of his pressed against me, and I suppress a shiver.

"Get out," he growls, his voice more raspy than usual. He drags his hands through his hair, pulling his own head back.

Shocked, and slightly ashamed that I'd allowed this to happen without much of a fight, I walk back to the living room with my stomach spinning painfully. I'd rather wake Val and deal with her catty attitude than go back in there to see Carson again.

Chapter 17

Carson

Why am I such a fucking idiot?

I wish I could blame the alcohol for that kiss, but I'd barely been drunk by that point. All I remember was her walking in, looking sinfully delicious in her sweats and tiny top. Her hair was thrown up in a pony, her lips perfectly pink as the sweet scent of caramel pulled me in.

I've always hated caramel.

I barely slept last night. How could I when all I could feel was the softness of her lips? When my stomach continued to turn in circles even after I had told her to leave? Kissing Annabelle had been life changing, in more ways than one. Because I'm still not sure that her father hasn't ruined everything I've ever known. That caused some conflicting emotions; confusion, arousal, and a sickening rage that battled with betrayal.

Roman fucking Decker was in my house last night, acting like he didn't know who the fuck I was. That pissed me off more than anything. I'm my mother's clone, right down to our eye color and the curl to our hair. If his affair with her meant anything, he should have at least had a double look. Unless the jackass knew exactly who I was.

Asher grumbles from the beanbag, rolling onto the floor with a heavy thud. Within a second, he's right back to snoring alongside Weston.

They'd wanted to go out last night, but when I mentioned beer and video games, they got on board. That was another thing I wasn't ready to face, why I hadn't jumped at the opportunity to leave, choosing to stay where I knew Annabelle would be.

When I hear a bang coming from the kitchen, I get up. Henry stopped by an hour ago to let me know he was heading off to work, and Sydney walked through the door five minutes later. She would be upstairs sleeping, though. I don't see her much. That woman works almost as much as my parents.

My breath catches when I find Annabelle in the kitchen. She's been awake long enough to shower, judging from her wet hair and the way it's

curling at the tips.

I stand in the entryway watching her, mentally scolding my rapidly growing dick. She has an ass that I'd pay money to just grab, and now that ass has been squeezed into a pair of skinny jeans. Her hips and lower back are completely on display as she wears another crop top, showing off two dimples on her lower back that my mouth waters for.

She must sense that I'm here because the muscles in her toned back tense.

"Did you want waffles?" she asks timidly, her voice merely above a whisper.

Her question shocks me. Especially after the photo fiasco yesterday. Surely she knows I'm the one who planned that, or well, I ordered Jess to. I fucking hated doing it, especially after I heard the story behind that photo from Michael. It helped to have someone who had been at that party, even though it left a sour taste in my throat.

Sending everything to Roman to rattle him was the goal, though, and judging by the fact he was here last night, I guess it worked.... So why do I feel like a piece of shit?

"Planning on poisoning me?" I joke, already taking a seat at the island.

"Poison can be traced back to me," she says deadpan, mixing up the batter. "If I wanted you dead, I'd have other people do it for me."

Of course, little miss organized crime would have someone else do her dirty work.

"Too scared to get your hands bloody?"

Finally, she turns to face me with a smirk on her pretty lips. "Not at all. And who said murder had to be bloody?"

My gaze falls to her lips for longer than I'd care to admit. The memory of them pressed to mine causes an electric shock to my system. Why she kissed me back, I have no idea. We're truly a fucked up pair.

"Ah, of course you would know how to kill someone," I say. "Your daddy is a criminal, after all. What is his body count, anyway?"

"How do you know who my dad is?"

Well shit. Can't exactly admit to having a PI, can I? "It isn't like he doesn't have a reputation, even around here."

I'm talking complete shit here, but she nods along as if she believes me. Truth is, until I hired Avery, I'd never even heard of Decker aside from

what I'd heard from Henry.

Annabelle scowls, looking beautiful even when her little nose scrunches up. "What the fuck is your problem with my dad, anyway? He doesn't even know you."

From what I've been able to pick up from her arguments with Sydney, she mostly lived with her father, so how the fuck doesn't she know? They didn't bother with hotels; my mother was seen going into Roman's house.

"As if you don't know," I scoff, furious with my dick for not getting on board the *Annabelle is a lying bitch* express.

"No, I don't." She turns to pour the batter into the waffle machine.

She has to be lying. This must all be some hilarious joke to her. I bet she calls her fucking daddy and the two of them laugh about his affair.

"So do you often pose nude?" I smirk, moving the topic away from her father. It's clear she wants to play stupid. So be it.

Anna chuckles, confusing the hell out of me. "I was expecting something worse, to be honest."

Irritation boils in my blood, battling with the desire I have for this girl. She was supposed to get worse. I was going to have her drugged and dumped in the fucking woods. Jess was going to steal her clothes while she was in the locker room showers.

She has gotten special treatment for some fucking reason.

Jess has been eager for all the small shit; rumors, catty comments, dropping food on her in the lunchroom. But she's been on my ass about the bigger stuff happening. I just can't bring myself to go through with any of it. The thought of anyone hurting Anna like that drives me insane and that pisses me the fuck off.

The bitch is in my head, and I can't seem to get her out.

It isn't like we've had some big moment to push me off from this path of revenge. We can barely hold a conversation at dinner without one or the other throbbing verbal daggers, so why am I unable to walk over that line?

It could have something to do with the fact that her laugh stirs something deep inside my chest, even though I'm never the cause for it. Or it could be that I keep finding myself *wanting* to be the reason behind her laugh.

"I have shit to do," I mutter instead of arguing, stalking off into the

movie room to find Asher and Weston awake and talking. “I’m going to see Avery.”

When I’d woken up after my *nap*, the first thing I saw on my phone was a text from Avery telling me he had an update for me. Calling would be the easy option, but after an unsettling morning and an even more unsettling night with Annabelle infecting my thoughts, I need to get away for a while.

Weston looks up. “You want company, bro?”

“Nah, you know he likes keeping his shit private.” Probably because he’s dodgy as fuck.

“Well, we’re gonna go raid your fridge.” Asher yawns, standing up to stretch.

“Anna’s cooking waffles,” I tell him, ignoring the arched eyebrow I get from him. “She might make extra if you sacrifice a small child or something.”

Weston smirks, wisely choosing to keep his mouth shut. Asher isn’t that smart.

“You called her Anna,” He grins. “I knew you didn’t really hate her.”

“Yes, I do,” I sigh angrily, failing to convince either of my friends. “Her fucking father—”

“Exactly, her father,” Weston shrugs, deciding against staying quiet. “She’s a nice girl, and you know we’ve been against this shit since day one.”

Much to my dislike, they’ve both gone out of their way to talk to her, both at home and at school. Although lately I’ve been finding myself... weirdly okay with it.

Yeah, I’ve had enough of trying to sort through my shit this morning. I’m leaving that one alone.

“He’s right,” Asher agrees. “There has to be some other way you can get back at Roman without ending up in a grave.”

“I don’t know.” I drag my hand down my face. “I just... I don’t know.”

This is something I’ve already run through my mind. I’m not about to ignore what he did. He ruined my family, and that’s fucking unforgivable. But it’s hard to hurt him when that means hurting Annabelle.

“What’s this, a goddamn orgy?” a voice joins us.

I narrow my eyes when I notice the slight pink creep up Weston’s

neck when Valerie walks further into the room. He ducks his head almost shyly, his hand scratching the back of his head. Valerie folds her arms across her chest, sparking something like recognition to go off in my head. From the moment I met Annabelle's best friend, she's been familiar in a way I can't put my finger on.

"Jealous you didn't get an invite, babe?" Asher winks, earning a punch in the arm from Weston.

Valerie smirks, a teasing glint in her eyes. "If I wanted to be disappointed by multiple men at once, I'd just watch hetero porn."

"Hold up. Wait right now," Asher laughs, holding a hand up. "*Hetero porn?* Please share with the group, what type of porn do you watch?"

Weston grunts, sending a glare at Asher. "Shut the fuck up, man."

Valerie winks at Asher, mouths something we can't make out, then turns on her heel to walk out without another word. Asher rubs his arm where Weston punched him with a deep frown.

"What the fuck was that, dude?"

"Don't be a dick." Weston walks after Valerie, leaving Asher and me staring at each other with a matching expression.

"I thought he said they didn't fuck?" he asks.

Shrugging, I reply, "That's what he said. I think they still talk, though."

My phone rings as Asher goes to speak, Avery's name lighting up the screen.

"Shit, I gotta go," I tell Asher. "I'll call you later, alright?"

"Yeah, no problem. I'm going to go drown myself in food."

Avery's office is in the dodgy part of town, in a rundown bar. I wouldn't ever have found him if it weren't for Asher; apparently, he used Avery a few years ago to look into something for him. I suspect it has something to do with Ivy, but he's taking that shit to the grave, even though we can all see how it's eating him up.

The bar is thankfully closed when I walk in. I've only been here a couple of times when it's been open, and I nearly left without a fucking limb both of those times.

Drunk bikers with a trigger finger and junkies aren't my preferred company.

"Dorian," Avery greets me from behind the bar. "You want a

drink? You might need one.”

One reason Avery is dodgy—he doesn’t give a fuck who drinks in his bar as long as they’re over the age of sixteen and won’t rat him out to the cops.

“I’ll take a Scotch,” I say, hopping up onto the bar stool. It’s coming up to midday, but if Avery’s got an update *and* offering me alcohol, I know I won’t like what he has to tell me. “Lay it on me, dude.”

“Well, I got the bank’s security footage.” He pours two glasses of scotch, sliding one over to me. “Couldn’t see anything, and the guy I spoke to was useless because he described your father.”

Avery raises a brow, giving me time to connect the dots. It doesn’t take long. My father wouldn’t be sneaking around to withdraw money from his business accounts... Seth, however, is a sneaky fuck that I’ve already suspected has something to do with the disappearing money. He also looks like my father.

“I’m not entirely surprised,” I mutter, taking a swift drink and enjoying the heat lighting my stomach on fire. “It’s not like we haven’t been suspecting Seth. This just confirms it.”

When I’d first found out that my father’s accounts were accessed from Doverhill, of course Decker was the first person I had thought of. He was with my mother. Maybe he’d been using her to get to my father’s money. That theory was thrown out just as fast as it came in, though, when I realized Seth had been around recently.

I may hate Roman Decker, but I’m not stupid enough to let that hatred guide me, not when my suspicions are on another bastard.

Avery takes a long drink, stuck in a thought. With my patience rapidly growing thin, I’m about to curse him out for wasting my fucking time when he finally speaks again.

“I couldn’t get a location on Seth when this went down, so the chances of it being him are high. Usually he’s easy to find. It isn’t like he has much of a life outside of work.”

“How much do I have to pay you to just fucking shoot him dead?” I’m only slightly joking.

He takes his time having another drink. “I don’t doubt you have the kind of money for that job, but you already know I don’t recommend it.”

“Party pooper,” I grumble.

Avery is quick to pour me another drink when I finish mine. It isn’t

smart to drink and then drive, but I'm beyond caring at this point. Maybe if I'm reckless enough to get arrested, my father will run in to prevent any charges.

"There's one more thing.... Your mother was seen leaving Decker's house during the week."

My blood turns to ice and suddenly the warmth from the alcohol is too hot as it battles with the cold.

That fucker is still seeing my mother? I've had my assumptions that their affair was a thing of the past, and the reason behind my parents' radio silence is that they're trying to fix their marriage. That's what the young boy in me had been hoping for, anyway.

Avery tosses a handful of photographs on the bar, and sure enough, my mother is being walked out to her car by the same man who acted like he didn't know who the hell I was just last night.

"She was there for roughly forty-five minutes," Avery says, waving his hand at the photos.

"Try to pinpoint Seth's location for that day. He would have had to slip up." I grind my teeth so hard that I'm surprised they aren't shattering, then I gather the photos, ignoring the burn I get once they touch my skin.

My mother's betrayal is a bloody hard pill to swallow, something that hasn't gotten any easier since I first found out about her affair. I grew up believing that my parents were happy and in love. Sure, they had their arguments, but my father always ended them with flowers and a weekend away to a place of my mother's choosing.

They may have been workaholics, but I never saw either of them as the type to *cheat*.

Avery keeps his eyes locked on me, calculating as always. "I'll check surrounding footage, try to figure out the direction he's heading."

Tapping my knuckles on the bar twice, I leave my drink unfinished and walk out. Avery isn't big on hanging out and talking about the weather. He prefers business to be straightforward.

The photos weigh my arm down. Proof of my mother's infidelity with no other than Roman fucking Decker.

Chapter 18

Carson

I don't make a habit of inviting girls over to my place—well, technically Henry's place. So imagine my surprise when I find Monique walking inside from the backyard, wearing a tiny string bikini and dripping wet.

She works out, and it shows with her toned thighs and the faint shadow of a six-pack. Usually at this sight my dick would be standing on attention, but for whatever reason—maybe I'm still fucking drunk from last night—I'm not even semi-hard.

I'm frozen on the spot, wondering what the hell my fuck buddy is doing in my house. Did I black out last night and message her?

"Oh relax, you big grouch," Monique snickers, coming up and kissing me on the cheek. "I'm here with Anna and the girls."

Even though the logical part of my head is telling me that Monique jumped to this girl day because she wants Gianna to sit on her face,—her own words—the irrational part is beyond irritated that Anna is now worming her way into Mon's life. It's bad enough she has Asher and Weston on her team.

"You shouldn't be hanging out with her," I say, glancing over her shoulder to look for the lying bitch herself. I wonder if she's met my mother, if they all sit around and eat together while laughing about my father behind his back. "She's not who she says she is."

Monique scoffs, giving me a light shove. "Get over yourself, Carson. You need to move the hell on. Her dad wouldn't hesitate to shoot you if you hurt her."

I don't doubt it. And I don't fucking care anymore. He ruined my family. Sure, we weren't perfect, but my parents were happy before Roman Decker came along.

If he wants to break my family, I'll break his daughter.

Tit for Tat, Decker.

The photo from Michael was a good move; it got the exact reaction I was hoping for from Roman. Now I just need to up my game. Which unfortunately means involving Jess once again. Maybe I can pull my head out

of my ass and get some shit done myself. It isn't fair to keep using Jess, but it's practical. Decker would never hurt a girl, I know that much, so Jess is the smart choice. He wouldn't hesitate to bury me alive for hurting his precious fucking princess.

"I'm not doing anything to her," I shrug.

Monique makes a disgusted sound. "No, you get Jessica to do all your dirty work so this shit doesn't come back to you. It's fucking pathetic, Carson."

"What's pathetic is that she can invite that piece of shit into my house," I snap, waving my hand towards the deck like she doesn't know who I'm talking about. "She knows about the affair, yet look at her out there, fucking careless. She probably even knows where my parents are."

"You need to stop," she sighs disappointedly. "She's a great girl, and I genuinely don't think she knows anything."

"You don't even know her," I snort, leaving her there as I turn to walk away.

"Neither do you," she calls out.

As I move towards the stairs, I swear I almost trip over my own feet.

The back wall has been opened up, showing the group of girls standing out on the deck. Gianna and Ivy jump into the lake at the same time, shouting for Valerie to join them, who doesn't hesitate to cannonball into the water. I feel the usual stomach cramp as I watch my two former friends laugh. We'd all been so close; I'd even been the first one Gianna came out to. On days like this, the pain of losing such important people from my past stings, but Asher will always come first in this scenario.

When they start to pull each other under the water, my gaze shifts back to the stunning blonde who first rendered me motionless.

Her bikini is doing a shocking job of covering her ass and when she turns briefly—searching for Monique, I assume—she spots me. I want to shut my mind off to the way my heart skips a beat as I meet her lush green eyes, and when my dick responds to her narrow waist, leading up to her tits that are threatening to fall out of her top, I can't help but imagine how soft her skin would feel in my hands, how she would taste.

And then she flips me off and my semi grows.

"Uh huh, I can just see all the hate you have for her." Monique winks, then darts off to join Anna.

With a growl, I turn on my heel and practically run to my bedroom, slamming the door behind me and leaning against it, panting like I'd just run a marathon.

Sydney is home tonight, so Henry has insisted on all of us having dinner together. It's been a while since we've done this. Sydney has been working night shifts and Henry has been busy with some huge client that's flown in from California.

Valerie is stuck in a debate about whether snakes make good pets with Henry. That man could stare down a fucking bear, but if you put a snake in front of him, he'll run the other way. Apparently, Valerie owns a Diamond Python and is personally offended by his hatred for the scaly reptiles.

"Muffin isn't that bad," Sydney defends the girl. "He's a cuddly little thing."

Henry blanches. "You named your killer snake *Muffin*?"

"Muffin isn't a killer snake." Valerie puts her hand to her chest in a dramatic gesture. "The mice are dead when I feed him."

Henry shudders, taking a drink of his Whiskey. On the rocks, of course. We don't mix drinks in this family. "I'm close to losing my appetite."

"Okay, I'm with Henry," Anna pipes up, throwing Valerie an apologetic look. "Sorry Val, but you know that snake freaks me out. Can we please talk about something else?"

I watch in silence as the conversation is moved away from Valerie's reptile. Anna has changed out of the sinful bikini into jean shorts and a simple black tank top. I can't get the image of her body out of my head, though. Even after jerking off this afternoon, my dick is still threatening to make itself known, clearly unsatisfied from dealing with my hand.

Tough luck, buddy. Monique is friends with the enemy. She won't be getting back on her knees for me. Speaking of which, it's been quite a while since I have had her on my dick. Maybe that's why he's so demanding today.

The mention of a party brings my attention back to the table.

"What party?" I ask, my voice raspier than normal from having not spoken since earlier today.

Anna ignores me, which only sets a fire in my blood. I want to smash that can of pop out of her hand and force her to look at me. She hasn't even fucking glanced at me since I sat down.

“Do you girls need a ride in?” Henry asks casually.

Valerie shrugs, looking at Anna for an answer.

“Mason is picking us up, but thanks,” Anna answers, causing my eyes to narrow.

Mason may have something going on with Ivy, but he’s also a player, and from what I understand, they aren’t anywhere near exclusive. He’d fuck anything with legs and a skirt, and I’d be blind to not see how he’s been staring Anna down lately.

Henry nods, continuing to eat. “Well, if you need a ride home, either of you, call me. I don’t care what time it is, don’t be afraid to wake me.”

“Mason is an asshole,” I say bitterly, stabbing at the steak on my plate, unwanted jealousy coursing through my veins.

No, it isn’t jealousy. I don’t care who Anna fucks.

“Takes one to know one,” Anna rolls her eyes.

“Real fucking mature.”

“*Real fucking mature*,” she mimics me using a high-pitched feminine tone, sharing a sly smirk with Valerie. Fuck, her attitude sets my blood on fire.

Sydney warns her off, shooting a look at Henry like he’ll step in. He wants princess Annabelle’s approval too much to scold her.

“So tell me, can we expect another porn shoot after this party tonight?” It’s an asshole thing to say, and I regret it as soon as it leaves my lips. But it shuts her up.

To my surprise, Valerie is the one to jump to her defense. “Why? Are you wanting an invite? Because I think I can safely say that for Anna, she wouldn’t touch you with someone else’s pussy.”

“Girls,” Sydney groans, dropping her face into her hands as Anna chokes on a laugh and reaches across the table to high-five her.

The party is being held at Matt’s house. Being on the football team, he’s usually the main person to throw these parties. Parents that do whatever he wants and a huge house tends to automatically put that on his shoulders, not that he minds. He’d throw a fucking party every week if he could.

Weston had disappeared as soon as we walked in, while Asher has been sulking beside me.

“Shut the fuck up,” I grumble, elbowing Asher in the ribs. “Go find

Sienna and apologize if you want your dick sucked. Or find another girl.”

I don't know the full story, mostly because I wasn't paying attention, but I heard enough in the car to know that Asher acted like a dickhead and Sienna called quits on whatever their arrangement was.

“I've already been with all these girls,” Asher complains, pouring himself a drink. I shake my head when he offers me one. I didn't come here to get shitfaced. “And it's not Sienna I'm pissed off about.”

“Ivy?” I guess, even though it's not a hard one.

He chuckles dryly. “I can't wait till I'm away at college, where I won't have to see this shit anymore.”

I feel for my friend, I really do. It can't be easy to watch your childhood sweetheart throw herself over someone else whenever you enter a room.

“She's only doing this thing with Mason to hurt you.” I clasp my hand on the back of his neck to keep his eyes on me when I see his gaze dart towards the front of the house. No big guess on who just arrived. The back of my own neck prickles with awareness, my body sensing Anna before I even see her. “Find another girl to fuck your issues away.”

Asher aims a punch at my abs, but I tense before he can make the contact.

“I just wanna get fucked up tonight, that's all.”

“Have at it then, you can crash at mine to avoid your parents.”

His parents, both detectives, always stink up a fucking fuss when Asher shows up in the middle of the night drunk. They aren't stupid. They know he's going to drink, but they prefer it when it isn't right under their noses.

Smart, really, because then they aren't obligated to report underage drinking.

“Anna's over there.”

“She's nothing but trouble.” I grind my teeth when the sound of her laughter hits me like a fucking train. “I actually need to find Jess; I have something for her to do.”

“Dude.” Asher narrows his eyes, trying to look deeper into my head. I keep my face hard, not letting him see anything I don't want him to. “You've obviously got a thing for her. Not that I can blame you, she's fucking hot.”

A low growl vibrates through my chest, catching me off guard.

Asher too. With one brow raised, he flicks his eyes to Anna again.

“You already know I won’t touch her, so knock the jealously shit off. But if you don’t get your head out of your fucking ass, and leave her out of your crap with Roman, you won’t ever get a chance with her.”

I open my mouth to argue, to tell him I never want a chance, and that I’m not, most definitely, *not* jealous. All those things leave my mind the second Anna walks into my line of sight.

She’s wearing what she wore at dinner, only now her hair is thrown up into a high pony, showing the curve of her throat. I feel a strong urge to sink my teeth into the tender flesh, to drag my tongue down the nape of her neck to see if she tastes as good as she smells.

My desire for the blonde is soon forgotten as the person responsible for the smile on her face steps into my line of sight.

Fucking Jordan.

This dickhead must have a death wish.

The two walk into the kitchen, ignoring Asher and me as Jordan pours himself a drink. I notice Anna already carrying a drink, one of Ivy’s pre-packed candy flavored things. There’s a sharp pinch in my chest when I remember why Ivy won’t drink at these parties.

“Isn’t that her cheating ex?” Asher growls, straightening up beside me. He doesn’t try to lower his voice, and for that I almost smile.

Jordan’s face pales, his cup halfway to his lips while Anna scowls in our direction.

“Mind your own fucking business,” she snaps over her shoulder.

Her feisty tone goes straight to my dick as I imagine how pretty her lips would look wrapped around me. That would be one way to shut her up.

Jordan whispers something to Anna that I can’t hear. There’s a sick satisfaction crawling in me when I watch his shoulders tense, his face still drained of color.

“I’m sure your daddy would love to know about the company you keep.” I smirk, soaking in the fire that burns in Anna’s green eyes. I wonder if she brings this fierceness to bed.

“Oh, will you fuck off already?” She whispers something back to Jordan, causing him to cringe.

“Why?” It’s a simple question. I don’t know why I asked it, though.

Anna takes a second to stare up at the ceiling as if she’s asking for strength. When she meets my eyes again, she’s cold, almost detached.

“No. Actually, this works.” I’m convinced the only reason she twists her hand in Jordan’s hair and presses a quick, hard kiss to his mouth is to kill me. It’s the only explanation. “I’m quite good at angry sex, aren’t I, baby?”

Yep. If words could kill me, I’d be dead. This fucking bitch. I have to hurry this shit along so she can fucking go back to where she came from.

Asher laughs, winking at Anna. “You’re trouble.”

She shrugs and smiles innocently, grabbing Jordan’s hand and pulling him away. If I was certain my father could drop the charges, I’d fucking kill the guy.

“Where’s Weston?” It’s too hot in here and the walls are closing in.

Avery glances at his phone with a deep curve on his forehead. “I think I saw him go outside.”

“You’ll be fine?”

“Fuck off already,” he says, his lips tilting slightly.

It’s early enough that everyone is still inside, drinking and dancing, so it doesn’t take me long to locate Weston. Only when I do, he isn’t alone.

“Fucking block him then,” Weston shouts. “I’m so sick of this.”

He’s just around the side of the house, so I can’t see who he’s arguing with.

“I was with him for years; it isn’t that simple.” She’s whispering, but it would be hard to miss Valerie’s voice after being subjected to it all night through dinner. “You’re the one that said this was just fun, anyway.”

“Well, fucking *sorry* for wanting to take shit slow.”

“Taking it slow? You’re kidding, right? You won’t even let me tell my best friend what’s going on, because everything has to be a goddamn secret with you.”

“Leave then. I don’t want someone that’s still fucking hung up on her ex, anyway. Go chase Ezra, I don’t care.”

There’s a loud slap, followed by the sound of heels clicking over the concrete. Valerie rounds the corner, her eyes shining with tears. Something in the way she walks rings familiar, but I shake it off when she storms past me, muttering under her breath.

I walk around the corner to see Weston crouched on the ground, his hands buried deep in his hair.

“Valerie, huh?”

Weston looks up, his eyes vulnerable. The sight surprises me. How

hadn't I known about this? How long has this been going on?

“Not anymore.”

“You want to talk about it?”

He laughs harshly. “That’s the last fucking thing I wanna do.”

Are girl problems contagious right now or some shit?

Chapter 19

Annabelle

My first mistake of the night was not kicking Jordan in the balls when he showed up. I'd had every intention of telling him to fuck off, but after seeing Carson and being hit with the memory of our kiss, I suddenly felt like I had something to prove.

That kiss meant nothing. Less than nothing. I definitely did *not* stay up half the night tracing my lips and feeling a weird shift in the universe. Nope, didn't do that.

"I really have missed you." Jordan nips the spot below my ear. Usually I would feel weak at that move, but I'm too aware of Carson. I can feel his eyes on me, burning my skin and leaving a mark that I'm afraid I'll never be able to remove.

"Jordan," I sigh heavily, taking a small sip of the wine cooler I'd gotten from Ivy. They aren't the best, but it's still better than beer. "I'm not taking you back."

"Then why the hell am I here?" His voice changes instantly, going from soft and teasing to hard and full of irritation. "Are you fucking that guy? Is that why you decided to keep me here, to make him jealous?"

He could've just as easily been referring to Asher, or any guy at this party really, so why does my mind automatically jump to Carson? Am I actually doing this to make him jealous? I did enjoy the fire in his grey eyes when he saw me with Jordan.

But no. Just no. I hate him. He's a fucking asshole. And he orchestrated that stupid photo. Luckily, things seem to have died down, at least on social media. I guess everyone got bored when they didn't get the reaction they wanted.

"That's ridiculous." I run a hand down my face, leaning back against the couch. "Why'd you even show up, anyway? You were a major dick the last time I heard from you."

After my totally smart decision of fucking Jordan before he'd gone off to another girl, I hadn't heard a word from him. Not until he showed up at

the house before we left. I should have told him to leave, but the chance to piss Carson off was an offer I couldn't pass up, and for whatever reason, Jordan's presence bothers Carson like nothing else.

Jordan has the nerve to look sheepish, taking a long drink before replying. "I fucked up, okay. I'm sorry."

Apologies stopped meaning anything from Jordan years ago.

"But uh," he stumbles, and when he reaches for my hand, lacing our fingers together, I let him. There was a time when I really did love Jordan, and even now, when he does something as simple as hold my hand, my skin warms against his. "I only just found out today, so please don't be too mad at me. I promise you, I didn't know."

"Found out what, Jordan?" My stomach sinks as his voice shakes.

"Do you remember that summer, when we were at the beach house?" Only one night in particular stands out from that summer, but I nod anyway. "His name was Lucas..."

My heart sinks as I begin to realize that the one night I'm remembering is the night Jordan is referring to.

Lucas had been the new guy in our year and took every chance he could to flirt with me. He was attractive, so whenever Jordan and I had gotten into a fight, I accepted the advances and flirted right back.

This particular summer, we all stayed at Jenn's house. Jordan had this idea that a threesome would keep us from fighting—I never said it made sense—because it would put him in my shoes to see how it felt to have someone touch me. It was a stupid idea, but I was in love and a part of me wanted to hurt him back just once. So I agreed. Jordan only stayed for the first part before leaving, and I should have stopped. But I was high, drunk, and Lucas gave me the attention I'd always craved from Jordan.

He moved three months after that night, and I never heard from him again. So I don't know why Jordan is bringing this up now.

"I remember," I nod.

"I think it'll be better if you see for yourself."

With a lump in my throat, I wait while he pulls out his hand, keeping our hands locked together.

"I fucking swear I didn't know, Anna."

Nausea pulses through my stomach when I stare at the screen, the picture leaving nothing to the imagination.

I'm butt-ass naked, straddling Lucas, who is just as naked. My head

is thrown up and his hands are gripping my hips. To make everything worse, Jordan presses play, and my moans fill the air as Lucas thrusts up.

Having already seen enough, I turn the screen off and set the phone on the couch between us. Jordan is talking, but I can't hear him over the ringing in my ears.

Lucas made a sex tape?

Lucas. Made. A. Sex. Tape.

It's like my blood has completely turned to ice. Can blood even be cold? Because I'm almost certain that mine is right now.

I finally shoot Jordan a look that has him ducking his head to avoid whatever must be showing on my face.

"I'm so sorry," he sighs.

"How do you have this?"

"He sent it to me," he says, moving his hand back to my thigh. "I ran into him at a party, and he brought up that night. I fucking lost my shit, said some things... then I woke up the next morning to this message."

It makes no sense. Why would Lucas have this? Surely he knows he can't post it online. There's a law against that shit now. I just don't understand why. I mean, things grew kind of messy before he left, because he wanted to keep messing around, but I made up with Jordan. Was he really that pissed off with me that he kept a goddamn sex tape as...what? Blackmail?

"I think you should leave." I move to stand, but Jordan moves his hand to my thigh. "Jordan, please. I can't do this right now."

"I miss you, baby. When he sent me this video, I lost my mind. I hate that he's done this, and I hate it was my fault you were even with him in the first place. Please, I can fix this. I can fix *us*."

I should have seen this coming. It happens every time I see Jordan; I start to move on, then he jumps in and pleads his case about deserving another chance. It's a lot easier to say no now that I don't live two blocks from him.

"I love you, Anna." Once upon a time, those words alone would have been enough for me.

Smiling sadly, I shake my head. "Our love was never going to be enough. We were young, we were stupid, and we were toxic for each other. You deserve so much more, and so do I."

"Is this because of Lucas? I swear, when he shows his fucking face

back in Doverhill, I'll break his nose."

It's hard not to find that sweet. *God, I'm messed up.* With a tender smile, I run my fingers through his soft hair.

"He isn't worth the assault charge."

"I miss you, Anna. And I'm not just talking about the sex, although that was never our issue, am I right?" His own laugh spurs on my own. His laugh had always been my favorite thing about him. "I miss hanging out with you. I miss waking up with you in my arms even though your hair used to choke me. I miss walking Franklin with you and watching re-runs of Gossip Girl, because we both know I secretly loved that shit."

Blinking against the sudden burn behind my eyes, I curl my hand around Jordan's jaw and push down the flutter in my stomach when he leans further into my hand. Despite all the shit we put each other through, he really is a great guy, and he's always been an amazing friend. Having this conversation not only puts the lock across the door of our relationship, but it also closes the door on our friendship. It's impossible to not get a little emotional.

"You'll always be my first love," I smile sadly, dragging my thumb across his cheek. "But you and I have never worked, you know that. One day you'll find a woman who you *want* to be loyal for, you'll find someone that shines a light on every dark part of you, someone that will love you in spite of your faults... Because sorry dude, but you have a lot." He gives a shaky laugh. "Focus on you, baby. Do your thing, whore out if you want to, but you gotta sort out your shit. And we have to stop this. Okay?"

"What if I'm in the mood to argue? What will I do then?" His smile finally starts to lift until he's teasing.

Slapping his cheek twice, I grin. "Then you call and remind me of all the times you fucked around on me, that should get me going."

"Alright, I hear you. But..."

It isn't hard to guess when his eyes darken on me and his hands fall to my hips. The ache in my chest is still there from having this conversation, but it eases a bit as the mood shifts. "But?"

"We were always so great at break up sex..."

Looking up, I'm distracted as I meet Carson's eyes. A smirk is playing on the corner of his lips, confusing the hell out of me. I could've sworn he was jealous earlier, but maybe it was all in my head. He sure doesn't look bothered now.

The stab of rejection I feel is downright annoying. Of course he wouldn't care, which isn't an issue at all. I don't care either. I'm here with my ex, one I've just broken up with for the zillionth time. An ex that I'm about to let fuck my brains out for the very last time.

When I turn back to Jordan with a sly smirk, he wastes no time in smashing his mouth to mine. I want to enjoy the kiss, and I do to an extent, because this is Jordan and he knows my body better than I sometimes do. But fuck, I'm too focused on comparing him to Carson. The feel of his lips, his scent, the hurried aggression compared to the slow tenderness I got from Carson. It all makes my head swim as I force my attention back to Jordan and the heat between my legs as she starts to cheer for her longtime friend.

Yeah yeah, my vagina and Jordan's dick are friends, best friends actually. Big deal.

Just as I'm about to pull away and suggest we find a room, Jordan is suddenly jerked back. I look up to see Carson standing over my ex, his fist flying forward. The smirk on his face is replaced by a sneer and his eyes appear almost black.

I'd be damn well lying if I said that this side of him isn't hot as hell.

This kink for bad boys is going to get me killed one day, I swear.

Nobody steps forward to pull Carson off Jordan, not until he's gotten a few decent punches in. It's infuriating to watch because what right does Carson have to cockblock me? I thought that was the one thing we were staying out of, otherwise I'd have ruined his booty calls a long fucking time ago.

Weston finally steps in, grabbing Carson by the shoulders and pulling him back. Jordan must have gotten one good punch in, because Carson turns his head to spit blood onto the floor.

"You're fucking insane," Jordan shouts, pulling his arm away from Asher who has just jumped in to lift him off the floor.

"What the hell is your problem, asshole?" I step forward and shove Carson as he turns his glare on me. "You are fucking deranged, I swear!"

"Let's go, babe." Jordan tugs on my hand, glaring daggers at Carson over my head.

"You're a goddamn idiot if you leave with him," Carson hisses, uncaring about the crowd gathering around us.

His words hit me with more force than I'd like. This can't be

anything more than him wanting to ruin my night.... right? Anything else would be too weird. Carson doesn't care, he's made that clear from the day we met.

So why are his eyes pleading with me to stay?

Fighting against the urge to stay and demand answers, I allow Jordan to pull me away. The disappointed frown on Carson's face before I turn away does not ease the confusion now flooding through my head.

We find Valerie playing a game of pool with Mason and Ivy. I toss her my house keys and ignore the arched brow. Apparently, I'm all about ignoring tonight. "Just text me when you're on the way home, okay? It's the black key to get in the front door."

"Everything all night?" Her eyes narrow on Jordan, who looks like a mess, with blood dripping from his nose and his eyes already beginning to bruise. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"Subtle, Val," Jordan snorts.

"Can't blame me for not trusting you," she smiles sweetly.

Those two have never gotten along, so I need to prepare for a verbal bashing later on. She'll definitely have a strong opinion on this.

"Don't worry about me. I'll see you at home. Stay safe!"

"I will. And wrap it up, we don't need any spawns of Satan crawling around."

Jordan flips her off before draping an arm around my shoulders and steering me out to his car. Where we go back to my house for some slightly awkward, yet hot break-up sex.

Monday passes by in the blink of an eye.

Carson never came back from the party. I assume he'd stayed with Weston or Asher, since he's rarely anywhere without one of them. What had been a bit surprising was my disappointment when I woke up on Monday morning to have breakfast with Henry, with nobody to argue with about leaving dirty mugs on the kitchen bench and the unnecessary need for tight shirts.

By the time Tuesday comes around, I'm irritable. Who would've thought that I'd miss being insulted? Or that I'd miss the way his eyes darken when he looks at me, as if he doesn't think I've noticed how his eyes now swim with desire and no longer hold the same level of hatred they had at the beginning.

The morning is uneventful, with Ivy off sick from some bad sushi last night, and Gianna stuck on her phone in a heated debate about true crime documentaries vs true crime podcasts with a girl she met online.

After working my ass off in Gym, I walk my sweaty self into the locker room with my bag slung over my shoulder, running into Mia. She freezes, her pale paling.

“Oh, hey Mia.”

Despite her only flaw being who she keeps as a friend, I like Mia. She’s always by Jessica’s side, so it isn’t like we’ve had a chance to braid each other’s hair and gossip, but she’s stayed clear of all the shit that follows Jessica around.

“Uh, hey, Anna,” she stammers, looking over her shoulder nervously. “I should really start watching where I’m going.”

“Same girl,” I laugh lightly. “Are you okay?”

A flash of guilt shines in her eyes, causing my suspicions to rise. She looks like a kid who just got caught with their hand in the cookie jar, which isn’t a look I’ve ever seen her wear.

“Yeah, I’m just late to class. Bye.” Her bye was way too high-pitched to be innocent.

Shrugging off Mia’s skittish behavior, I make way for the showers and start to undress. I like the girl, just not enough to stress over why she was acting weird. Maybe she was smoking or something.

Judging from the slight echo with every move I make, I can make a safe bet that I’m alone. Not that it would stop me. Being naked isn’t something I’m ashamed of. I’ve worked too damn hard to be happy with my body and to have the confidence I do today.

Grabbing my towel and shower caddy, I step into the steaming water.

Usually I avoid the showers at school, but on a day like today where Mr Clarke woke up with one fucking foot in hell, we were stuck running laps around the football field for forty minutes. I would go insane sitting through two more classes with an insane amount of boob sweat.

Gross.

Lathering up my hair with enough conditioner to bathe a gorilla in, I find myself trying to bat Carson out of my head.

As much as I’d want to pretend that the kiss never happened, my head isn’t too keen on following that order. I keep finding myself replaying it

over and over again. The intensity in his pale eyes, how it had burned me from the inside out to feel his touch on me, and his damn scent I can somehow still smell.

This is someone I should be hating, someone I barely know. It could just be the bad boy thing. Maybe I am just that messed up. I hung around with Jordan, after all, and he doesn't exactly scream stable and respectful. This thing with Carson isn't any different, because while I know he isn't a good guy, I still fantasize about riding the monster he has in his pants. I bet hate sex with Carson would be explosive.

After drying my hair and wrapping myself up, I step out and am not even surprised to find all my clothes gone.

I should have expected this, really. It's the most outdated prank. If anything, I'm surprised it's taken this long.

Did they really learn nothing from the photo? I have no shame when it comes to sex or my body, and if that means walking naked in a towel to my locker, where I was smart enough to store some spare clothes, then I guess I'm about to give one hell of a damn show.

Walking out into the hall, I bite the urge to duck away when I see Jessica has gathered a small crowd of over-excited guys....and Carson.

I am not weak.

"Did you get permission to run your little business from the locker room?" Jessica cackles, clutching onto Carson's arm and laughing like she's the damn comedian of the year.

My stomach flips as I make eye contact with his steel-grey eyes. Of course he was behind this. He's been the one pulling the strings to everything. Only he hasn't bothered to make an appearance at the scene of the crime until now.

I adjust the towel tighter around my chest, ignoring the prickling sensation spreading down my spine from the fire in Carson's stare. Though I know he's done this, it's confusing to see the conflicting emotions battling in his eyes, the desire, the guilt, the indifference.

"What's it to you?" I shrug. "Actually, I'm surprised you've done this. You don't strike me as the type of girl to want anyone's attention on someone other than you."

Jessica stutters over her words, looking to Mia, who I've just noticed is half hidden behind her.

Suddenly her jittery behavior earlier makes sense. She knew what

Jessica had planned, and while she may not have agreed with it, she couldn't say anything to warn me.

"Does your daddy know you're working as the town bike?" Carson smirks, his jaw twitching and throwing off the careless attitude he's trying to give out. "I guess we'll find out soon enough, trailer trash."

Again with the trailer trash, for Christ's sake. Be original, dude.

Carson's words bother me more than Jessica's do, and I don't want to put too much thought into why that is. I just know that he'll pay for this. I may not care all that much about standing here wearing nothing but a towel, but I'd be damned if I stood by and let this get any worse. I am so fucking done trying to ignore all this shit.

"What did you think I was going to do here?" I smirk. "Cry? Run away? I look fucking hot. Why should I care who sees me?"

Jessica flips her hair over her shoulder in a completely cliché move. "Do you own a mirror? I wouldn't call anything about you hot."

"Again, are you waiting for me to cry?" I chuckle. "The day your words mean anything to me is the day dinosaurs come back to walk the earth...wait, I forgot who I'm speaking to. Jessica. Dinosaurs. Will. Never. Come. Back. To. Life."

It could be my imagination, but I'm certain that Carson's cough is to cover a laugh. Jessica must think so, too, because her face soon resembles a tomato.

"You stupid goddamn slut," she hisses. "Nobody will ever want you, because you can't keep your legs shut for five minutes!"

Where the hell do they come up with this shit?

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Gianna shoulders past Mia, who blanches at the icy demeanor.

Gianna reaches me and grabs my hand, shooting a look at Jessica that has the power to ice the entire school.

"Be careful, Jess," she says, her voice hard. "Rumors going around that you've got a little crush on Anna here."

Jess's face darkens. "You disgusting bitch! I'm not a fucking freak like you."

"Do not call her that." The sudden hardness in Carson's voice shocks me. I don't think he means for it to be overheard, because his eyes shoot up to Gianna almost shyly before that mask of indifference is back on his face. "I'm sure Anna here would be down for a threesome, anyway. She

doesn't seem the type to turn down dick."

"Just yours. STD's aren't on my bingo card," I smile sweetly, pulling my hand free from Gianna and walking forward. His expressions falters for a second before he recovers, but I saw the surprise there.

By now, more people have joined to watch the shitshow that just happens to be my life. I hope they enjoy what's about to happen next, because it'll be the star performance of my dreams for the rest of my life.

Patting his cheek and ignoring Jessica's bitching, I bring my knee up to connect straight with Carson's groin. The pained grunt that follows is like music to my ears.

"Annabelle Decker!"

My father's voice booms down the hallway, turning my blood to ice.

Chapter 20

Annabelle

“Dad, please,” I beg weakly. “I can’t do my senior year online.”

Dad walks out of the room without a word. Again.

This has been an ongoing battle for two weeks now. Ever since my dad stumbled across the lovely scene of me kneeling Carson Dorian in the school hall wearing nothing but a towel, *after* being told anonymously everything there was to know about the ins and outs of my relationship with Jordan, he has been a damn warden.

When we arrived back home in Doverhill, he spent a whole hour on the phone to my mom having it out about that place being toxic for me.

Which, like, he isn’t entirely wrong.

That phone call did rattle my mom enough to get her to agree to me staying here for a while, so long as I continued my schoolwork online.

Any other time, I would have been all for this. I’ve had Val over almost every night, and when my dad isn’t here, he has Mike ‘hanging out’ with us. Which is really code for playing the guard dog.

There’s an itch underneath my skin, though. That confrontation with Carson in the hall hadn’t been enough. I’m still craving his presence. To hear him insult me, to watch the internal battle unfold as he desperately tries to hold on to his unreasonable hatred for me. I miss the damn way my stomach would flip whenever he’d enter the room.

“I think I could be a doctor,” Val sighs heavily, throwing a handful of popcorn into her mouth. “But only if I could find a hospital that has a McDreamy.”

Mike walks in with a fresh bowl of popcorn, sitting beside me and patting his thigh for my legs to go back across him. Dad had left earlier for a run, leaving me with Mike and Val.

It hasn’t been too bad. We’ve managed to rope Mike into our Grey’s Anatomy marathon, and even though he asks way too many questions, it’s been fun.

“No, see, I’d prefer McSteamy,” Mike comments, throwing a piece

of popcorn at Val, who catches it in her mouth. “Those smoldering eyes just call to me.”

While he fans himself, I let out what I can only describe as a snort-laugh. They’re very attractive.

“I would just take them all and have my own reverse harem.” I quickly dodge Mike’s hands as they start to tickle the bottom of my feet.

“You greedy bitch,” Mike gasps.

After turning into a tangled mess of limbs as I fight off a tickle assault, because nobody over the age of five could actually enjoy that shit, we settle down to gossip about people we know with the residents of Seattle Grace providing the background noise.

“Your mom is picking you up in an hour,” Dad announces over breakfast. “Just promise me you’ll stay away from trouble, and I do mostly mean boy trouble.”

My coffee is bitter this morning, thanks to the disappointed lecture I’ve received once again from my dad. I know he doesn’t blame me for anything that’s happened. He’s made sure that much has been clear. He’s only disappointed that I felt like I had to lie to him, especially about Jordan. From what I’ve been told, he’s been given a firm warning to stay away from me, and Dad reassured me he only used words.

“I just wanted to protect him,” I mumble into my mug. “I knew you would’ve freaked out.”

Dad sighs heavily, stabbing at his pancakes. “I’m not just upset about that punk, although he’s lucky he’s still breathing after what he did. I mean school, too. You told me things were going good, and it sure as hell didn’t look that way when I saw you.”

Ah yes. I still haven’t told my dad exactly what’s been happening there. He knows things have been a mess. He just doesn’t know the whole story. And I don’t want to throw Carson under the dad bus. I’d rather deal with that jackass myself.

“It was just this bitch at school,” I confess, giving up half the story. “They do it to all the new kids. The guys get it, too. Carson thought it was funny, and he was the closest to me. I shouldn’t have done what I did, though, and I’ll own up to that.”

No, I should’ve punched him in the face instead. His balls might heal faster than a black eye will.

“So Carson hasn’t been making things difficult?”

I freeze with the mug touching my lips. “No. I wouldn’t say we’re friends, but he’s keeping to himself.”

A non-friend that could smash my head against a headboard anytime.

Dad makes a humming sound, keeping quiet long enough to finish off his breakfast.

A sloppy wet tongue hitting my bare ankle makes me jump. Franklin pants from his spot under the table, waiting patiently for some food.

“Hey buddy,” I smile, reaching down to run my fingers through the German Shepard’s fur. “I’m gonna miss you, I promise to be back soon.”

“He’s been giving Slater hell,” Dad smiles fondly, dropping some food onto the floor, which Franklin practically races to inhale. “Every trick you taught him has apparently gone straight out the window.”

Waiting for Franklin to come back to my side, I hold out my hand in a silent command, waiting until he sits his furry paw in my hand. I shoot my dad a mischievous grin.

“Slater is too much of a pushover with him.”

Shrugging, Dad gathers our plates together. “You aren’t wrong there. So when will I get to see you again?”

“I have exams coming up, it would have to be after them.”

There was once a time where I would have loved being back here, when that was all I wanted, but now that I have my friends in Lakeside, I’m excited to go back. I’m sure I’ve missed a good amount of gossip that I’ll be caught up on.

“Just stay out of trouble, kid, or the next time you’ll brought here, you won’t be going back.”

Crossing my fingers behind my back, I make a promise to my dad to be good.

After my dad drops me off home with a quick kiss, I walk in to find my mom packing her dinner to leave for a fifteen-hour shift.

You would think she’d be a little interested in hanging out with her only daughter after not seeing her for two weeks, but no. Instead I receive a half-assed lecture about behaving myself, because she doesn’t want my dad to have any more ammo in taking me back full time. I don’t know why she even cares. Her life wouldn’t change if I go back to Doverhill.

The house seems to be empty as I walk up to my bedroom to dump my bag. There were a few outfits I'd decided to bring home from Dad's: my favorite being Jordan's old Bon Jovi shirt. The shirt is comfortable as hell to sleep in. I'm not giving it up.

Lighting an ocean-scented candle, I mess around with the heat for my room since I apparently left the window open before I left, and it's been storming for the past week. The room is so darn cold that my nipples could cut glass.

I'm about to head into my bathroom to braid my hair back when I hear something fall on the other side of the wall. On Carson's side.

My heart gives a flutter that I mentally squash down as confusion takes hold of me. The only car outside had been my mom's.

Another small smash carries through the wall, and without even thinking, I'm already on my way to barge in on a potential burglar with a gun. Oh well, I can be used in a case study for student detectives: Annabelle Decker, the idiot that willingly walked into a robbery. I'll be a good lesson for everyone.

Before now, I hadn't stepped foot in Carson's room. Immediately, I'm overcome by the lingering smell of his cologne, and it nearly knocks me on my ass. Why can't he be gross and smelly? It would make my life easier.

His king-sized bed is perfectly made with black satin sheets—of course—with a dozen pillows organized. That's probably the most confusing thing, honestly. Not the folded clothes sitting on his desk, or the mini fridge with a half empty bottle of Whiskey on top. No, it's the bed, because until now I've just assumed Carson sleeps on a twin with no bottom sheet like a fucking frat guy. He can sure act like one.

My quick assessment of the bedroom isn't the smartest thing to do, considering I've skipped over slimy Seth walking back in from the closet.

"Do you think you'll be less grumpy now?" I remark, begging for my heart to slow down. "You've finally come out of the closet. That must be a relief. Congratulations."

My attempt at humor goes unnoticed, which is unfortunate, because that was funny.

Seth throws a handful of photos onto the bed, glancing up at me with a raised eyebrow and gestures to the scattered photos.

Taking an unsteady step forward, I look to the bed and feel a frown take up permanent residence on my face.

“Looks like Carson just got promoted to your new step-brother,” Seth smirks, taking obvious enjoyment from my shock.

Any plan to question him about why the fuck he was here in the first place leaves the building. Staring up at me are photos of my dad, walking with who I can only assume is Carson’s mother. It would have to be her, otherwise the stepbrother comment makes no sense. There are a couple of my dad walking a gorgeous brunette woman to a Tesla outside of a cheap looking motel. The rest of the photos are from my dad’s house; one of the two hugging, another of the woman kneeling down and petting Franklin and the last few being the most recent because my dad had only just trimmed his beard down and those ones are of him walking her out of the house to the same Tesla from the earlier photos.

“I told you Carson isn’t who he says he is.” He clicks his tongue and shakes his head in what looks like disappointment. “This is concerning. You shouldn’t be around him. I have a suite. You’d be welcome to stay with me.”

The urge to laugh almost wins out against the shock, *almost*. This guy is mental. In what part of this does he believe Carson has something to do with his parents’ disappearance, when it’s clear that his mother is still alive? Hell, if anyone looks suspicious here, it’s my dad. Is this why Carson hates me? Because he thinks my dad is fucking around with his mom? Or does he think my dad has something to do with his parents leaving?

“Carson hasn’t done anything,” I argue. “You’re the only shady asshole here, breaking in and snooping through someone’s bedroom.”

Maybe poking the creepy guy when nobody else is here isn’t the smartest idea. Another lesson I’ll be able to offer in my true crime documentary.

“You’re an idiot if you think that,” Seth scoffs, straightening up. He stands just under six feet, so he doesn’t look as intimidating as he thinks. I wonder if his height makes him mad. “These were hidden in his closet, Annabelle. Be serious. My dear brother and sister-in-law are nowhere to be found, and then I stumble on these? Carson cannot be trusted.”

“How did you get in here?” I settle for ignoring my father’s laughing face and the eerily familiar face of the woman.

“Henry’s predictive, always has been,” he shrugs, examining his nails like he doesn’t have a care in the world. “Underneath the third rock has always been his favorite hiding spot.”

“Surprised you could lift it,” I say. “That’s one heavy pebble.”

Seth lets out a heavy sigh. “Nobody is here...you could leave with me, and they won’t have any idea. You’ll be safe.”

“I think you need to leave,” I tell him firmly, gathering the photos before he can reach out and take them. “Carson will be home any minute, and I don’t think he’d appreciate you snooping around his room. And quite frankly, your presence is the equivalent of kidney stones.”

With a sneer, Seth rounds the bed, coming to stand too close to my side.

Fear rattles through me, causing my spine to stiffen. Seth gives off too much of a creepy vibe. I would’ve preferred the crazy robber.

He brushes the back of his knuckles down my cheek as I cringe away. “So beautiful. It’s a damn shame, really.”

“Your face is a shame,” I snap. It isn’t my best work, but my voice doesn’t shake, so it has to do. “Were you born looking like that, or did you suffer from some horrific accident?”

He tenses beside me and takes a step closer as my skin prickles from the sudden cold washing over me. “It’s a fucking shame you’re so stupid. I could have helped you if you weren’t so brainwashed, I could have taken care of you.”

I just know that his version of taking care of someone involves a cold basement, a dirty mattress, and some wall chains. Acid burns through my blood as disgust and anger chase away the fear. How fucking dare this jerk come into this home and make stupid ass accusations and call me *stupid*.

That’s right. It’s the stupid comment that finally pushes down the fear.

“I’m stupid? Are you *fucking* kidding me?”

Slimy Seth smirks and raises his hand to push my hair back when I hear Carson’s footsteps stomping up the stairs. I was totally bluffing about him being home soon. There was no way I knew where he was or what he was even doing. I can’t fault his great timing, though.

There’s a quick shift in energy when Carson’s footsteps come to a stop somewhere behind me. Tension fills the room like we’re dressed in red and a raging bull has just had been released.

“Get your hand off her before I break your fucking wrist,” Carson barks. “Then you can get the fuck out.”

Seth moves his hand back to his side, and without realizing I was

even holding my breath, I let out a breath of relief. The warmth of his skin on mine is still there, crawling over my flesh like a hideous bug.

“So irritable he is,” Seth muses, grinning down at me. “Think about my offer.”

“I’d rather swallow shards of glass,” I snarl.

Chuckling, he walks out with an ease that sends a shiver down my spine. Once the quiet settles over the room, I suddenly feel like an idiot for barging in here like some hero. I should’ve just let Seth go without getting involved. Carson deserves to get his shit messed around with. I could have even joined.

“My uncle, huh?” Even though he sounds pissed off, it’s easy to pick up on the slightest touch of concern. He threatened Seth for touching me. For whatever reason, Carson didn’t want him touching me. And yet there was that drama with Jordan. What’s up with that? “I knew you spread your legs, but that’s low even for you.”

The insult strangely works to calm my racing heart; it’s finally given up trying out for the Olympics. This is familiar territory.

“What can I say?” I shrug, refusing to turn. I’m still staring down at the photos, trying to make sense of them. “A dicks a dick, right?”

In a rush, Carson is behind me, hand on my bicep and spinning me so that I have no choice but to face him and *goddammit*. It isn’t fair that he looks so good. Then again, wasn’t the devil an angel or something? That red dude of fire is a prime example that good looks don’t equal to a good personality.

“Did he hurt you? I’ll fucking kill him.”

Snorting, I yank my arm out of Carson’s hold. I don’t step away, though. We stand chest to chest, his body heat warming the space around us and practically burning a hole through my shirt.

“Why?” I challenge, tilting my head up and folding my arms across my chest. He doesn’t even try to be subtle about checking out my boobs. “Is this some territorial thing? Only you’re allowed to hurt me?”

“I’ve done nothing to you,” he smirks.

Motherfucking asshole. “You’re right. You’re too fucking scared to, so you get your little fuck buddy to be the bad guy. And guess what? It doesn’t bother me. I. Don’t. Care.”

It’s a little lie. At first, I couldn’t have cared less. But when you hear that shit every day, it starts to wear you down, as much as you try to

fight it. The locker room incident is what pushed me over. I just don't want Carson to know. I'll get my revenge, but I need the element of surprise.

"You think so?"

"I *know* so." I step forward and lower my arms back to my side, ignoring the marching band in my chest and reminding my vagina that I'm about to knee him in the balls again, not grind on him like a dog on heat. After calling quits with Jordan, my vibrator is the only thing she'll be getting for a long time.

His eyes harden, and I can see the internal battle behind those pale grey eyes. He doesn't speak, though, which bothers me more than I'd like to admit. I want the fight. I need him to say something, *anything*. I hadn't realized until right now just how badly I have craved this asshole's presence.

It's all kinds of fucked up.

Just as his lips part, his eyes dart down to the bed and narrow into slits. "What the fuck are you doing with those?"

Right! The photos. How the hell did I even forget about these?

Picking one up, I tilt my head slightly. "Is this your mother?"

Stupid question, but I'm still not entirely sure that this woman is Sophia. Our fight about Carson being a pussy can be tucked away for later. This one will be much better. He might finally admit why he hates my dad. Fingers crossed and all that jazz.

"As if you didn't fucking know that," he chuckles darkly, reaching out to snatch the photo from my hand. I let him, watching as he picks up the rest and flicks through them. "Here to destroy the evidence for your precious daddy?"

His words make no sense. "What are you talking about? I don't know why your mother is with my dad. I only saw these when Seth pulled them out."

He takes a step back, and the cold that hits me when I no longer have his warmth so close is like a shock to my system. "Do you know how long your dad's been fucking my mother? That's the only thing I can't seem to find out. How long has this shit been going on?"

His hatred of me from day one, the need he has had to break me down for no damn reason, the vendetta he has had on my dad and all those comments about my dad ruining his family. It all comes from his assumption that our parents are fucking?

I can't hold it in. I start to laugh. Stomach cramps, tears in my eyes,

laughing.

“Are you serious?” I gasp, clutching my stomach.

Carson looks as if he’s ready to commit murder, his jaw clenched tight enough to crack his molars and his chest rising and falling with every deep breath he tries to take.

“For Christ’s sake,” I laugh. “You fucking brat, are you *serious*?”

“I’m a brat?” He rears his head back like I’d just slapped him. “Your father has torn my family apart.”

Explaining this would be all too easy, but damn.

“You acted like a *brat*! You attempted, and failed, might I add, to turn the whole goddamn senior year against me, all because of a stupid assumption you made? That is beyond the levels of pathetic, Carson.” The laughter has finally died down, giving way to the anger that something this small and stupid is the reason behind the shit I’ve been dealing with. “Are you honestly a fucking child? Your mother can fuck whoever she wants, because she is her own person, but in this case, it isn’t my dad.”

“You’re dumber than I thought,” he grinds out. “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

Snatching one of the photos from his hand, I stare down at our parents. Sophia is laughing and my dad’s hand is on her shoulder. I suppose it could look the wrong way, but Carson didn’t even try to confront me on this, he just jumped to the worst-case scenario.

“Carson,” I sigh and run a hand down my face. “My dad is gay, and happily married. I guarantee you that he isn’t pounding your mom.”

Chapter 21

Annabelle

If I had my phone on me, I'd totally take a photo of Carson's face. Wide eyes, slightly parted lips, eyebrows furrowed.

Hilarious.

"No," he murmurs. "No, he's not."

"I was at the wedding," I say deadpan. "I don't think my dad would go quite that far to cover up an affair."

This is something my dad and Slater would find hilarious. They've been married for five years now, after a small ceremony on the beach with Franklin carrying the rings in his little bowtie. It was beautiful. Both guys wore white suits with a red rose clipped to the front of their vests, and they'd written their own vows. For that one day, they were just two men in love, without any concerns in the world.

"This makes no sense," Carson stutters, bringing his hands to his hair. "The photos don't fucking lie, they're obviously together."

"Not in the way you think," I snap, unable to bite my tongue. "I'm just as confused as you are about this. But you know what would solve this problem? Communicating, you dick. Let's just go and ask my dad."

His mouth thins. "Why bother, he'd only fucking lie."

"You don't even know him!" I throw my hands up in frustration. "You only know whatever bullshit you've come up with in your head, and considering I lived with him and his *husband*, I'd say you probably shouldn't trust your opinions."

"I know he started sneaking around with my mother, then all of a sudden she and my father fucking disappeared," he shouts, now pacing the room.

"That doesn't mean my dad did anything," I scream back. "Why don't you look into your slimy fucking uncle since it was him snooping around your room?"

Carson pauses, turning to head to stare at me. I can't explain the look in his eyes at that moment. It's like a mix of confusion and realization,

like he's finally listening to what I'm saying. His chest is moving rapidly with every breath he takes, and my eyes are drawn to the defined muscles stretching his shirt.

"You didn't know?" His voice is barely above a whisper.

"I didn't know." I take in a deep breath, internally cringing when it comes out shaky. I'm all too aware of how tight his shirt is stretched across his chest and arms—what is with this guy and tight shirts, we get it, you work out—and his slightly damp hair.

"You didn't know."

"Are you a goddamn parrot?" I snap.

For several long ass moments we stand there in silence, taking in the bomb that has been dropped. Neither of us knows why our parents are meeting, or why it's been kept a secret. Of course, they aren't sleeping together. That theory flew out the window when my dad came out as gay and divorced my mom.

Carson's shirt distracts me from my thoughts once again. He must have just gotten back from the gym or something because it clings to his chest in an obscene way. Any other time I'd be all for the view, but we have bigger things to deal with than boys who do not deserve the looks they were blessed with.

"Did you have an interview with a strip club or something?"

Looking down at the shirt from baby gap, he looks back up with an arched brow. There's no comment, though. No insult. He just continues to stare at me with a heat in his eyes that makes me want to forget all about confronting my dad.

"We should go talk to my dad," I rasp. My heart is battling against my chest while I ache to jump his bones and beg him to fuck me until I can't walk.

His eyes dart to my lips so quick that if I wasn't already staring at him, I wouldn't have noticed.

"Let's get this shit over with then."

Neither of us speaks during the drive, making the one-hour trip feel like five torturous hours.

His fingers clench around the wheel, knuckles white. The spicy hint of his cologne is creating a flood of swarming bees in my stomach every time he makes the smallest movement. I've always had a weakness for guys that

smell good, so this isn't a Carson-inspired reaction. Alex once came into class wearing a new cologne, so I spent the whole time sitting against him.

When he pulls up in front of my dad's house, I notice the tension in Carson's shoulders. Reaching out, I put my hand on his bicep without thinking.

There may have been a moment of appreciation when I felt the hard muscle twitch under my palm, but I won't admit that out loud. I'd rather walk across hot stones than feed into his ego.

"I really didn't know, Carson," I tell him again.

His jaw twitches, and I swallow a groan. The move could end my life, I'm sure of it. Again, this is just a weakness of mine, something I developed with Jordan; he'd do the same thing during our fights and it usually ended in make-up sex.

"I know." His voice is hard as he stares out the window. "I just—fuck. This is a lot."

Removing my hand from his bicep to lay over his on the steering wheel, I push down the warmth shooting from my hand as our skin touches. It isn't difficult to touch the guy, that's for sure.

"It's okay." It isn't, not by a long shot. If I can convince him that I'd brush this all under a bridge, though, my revenge would be a walk in the park. He doesn't get to try and make my life hell all over a stupid misunderstanding.

"No, Anna, it's not. I... I'm sorry."

This isn't the time or place to hear his bullshit apologies. I wouldn't believe them, either. He can't take back what he did, and even if he believes his reasonings were valid, they really fucking weren't.

"Let's go inside and find out what's going on, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah alright."

Neither of us moves. My eyes are glued where our hands connect as I push down the slither of pity for Carson's whole situation. It doesn't matter why he did what he did; it doesn't matter that he was just trying to get revenge for his dad or some shit. I don't know. None of it matters because he still did what he did. He made the choice to try and break me down because of something my dad did.

"Anna," Carson starts, his voice heavy with regret.

My traitorous heart soars when he doesn't call me Annabelle. She never was on my side.

“We’ll talk later,” I interrupt, finally removing my hand and running it down my thigh. “Let’s go.”

Franklin is the first thing I see when I open the door, almost tackling me to the floor before I tense my thighs against the impact. I laugh, running my hands through his soft fur.

“Does Slater have you jumping now, too?” I chuckle, nuzzling my face into his neck and feeling Caron’s presence at my back.

“Jesus, that’s a big ass dog,” Carson comments.

Franklin surprises me by trotting over and nudging Caron’s leg for a head scratch. He doesn’t take to strangers, hence why he makes such a good guard dog around here.

Usually.

“His name is Franklin,” I tell him, watching in awe as he gets down to his haunches and gives Franklin tummy rubs. “He was a rescue from a dog fighting ring.”

I have no idea why I tell him this. It’s none of his business. It’s not like he’ll ever be coming back here.

“Why Franklin?”

A smile spreads across my face against my will. “Because nobody is expecting a seventy-pound dog when you call out for Franklin, they expect a little old man with a walker.”

“I can’t argue that,” he laughs.

“I should’ve have known this was coming.” Dad walks down the hall to join us by the door, whistling for Franklin to get up. “Carson, it’s nice to see you again.”

Caron looks up at my dad, his face hardening. I shake my head, a silent warning to behave. We have a silent stare-off and when his jaw relaxes; I find myself surprised. I didn’t think he’d actually listen to me.

“So you know why we’re here?” I ask. Considering I’d only left a few hours earlier, he shouldn’t have been expecting me back.

Dad runs a hand through his hair and lets out a breath. “Unfortunately. Let’s talk in the den. I’ll need a damn drink for this.”

Carson straightens to his full height, glaring at my dad’s retreating back. Taking a step forward, my hands fall on my hips as I take on the disappointed stand.

“Can you try to hold back on the attitude, or do you need to throw a tantrum now to get it out of your system?”

“Fuck, you’re a bitch,” he scowls.

Shrugging, I meet Carson’s stare without backing down. “I see you’ve finally moved on from trailer trash. Would you like an award?”

He makes a show of checking out the foyer, then gestures towards the hall. “I’ll give you this one, it’s an alright looking trailer.”

“Let’s hurry this up. Every minute I spend with you seems to kill brain cells.” As much as I try, my words don’t hold the same bite. It’s a shame, I quite like the arguing and petty comments.

Carson follows me as I lead him through the hall and into the den where my dad has a full bar set up. It’s not somewhere I usually go, because dad takes care of his business stuff in here. Once I accidentally walked in and found the bar and table littered with guns, so I made sure to steer clear after that. The less I know about what he does, the better.

I’m surprised when I find Mike and Slater sitting together. That is, until I see a map between them that Mike quickly tucks away into a bag.

“Hey Mike,” I smile, walking around the table to plant a kiss on his cheek. “How’s the love life going?”

Carson’s eyes are burning a hole into the back of my head, and when I turn slightly, I hold back a laugh at the barely hidden anger on his face. With the memory of him hitting Jordan coming back to me, I push Mike’s elbow off his knee and take a seat on his thigh.

My dad will probably chew my ear off later, but judging by the way Slater looks between Carson and me, I’d say he has a good guess on what I’m doing. This is just an experiment, though.

“*It would be better if you would let me take you out,*” Mike flirts in Spanish.

I let out a laugh, louder than I normally would. When Carson looks away, his jaw twitching, I feel a sense of satisfaction. And a rush of arousal. Guess it was less of a wanting to piss you off, and more of a jealous thing.

“Anytime,” I wink.

“*That guy wants to beat my ass,*” he grins, resting his hand on my thigh. It’s a bold move in front of my dad and Slater. “*Boyfriend?*”

A snort leaves me before I can hold it back. “*Fuck no, I would take you back into my bed before I let him in.*”

Mike mocks gasps, removing his hand off me. He knows I’m joking.. sort of. Neither of us would go back there again, and not only because we were each other’s first, and it was not a good time, but because

we're friends and aren't too keen on having him buried in the backyard. "No need to be rude, I'm amazing in bed."

"Hey, none of that crap," Dad grumbles, pulling out two bottles of Corona and handing one to Carson.

Dad hates when Mike and I speak Spanish because he has no idea what we're saying. Which works for us, since we tend to shamelessly flirt. That's something a girl doesn't need her dad to overhear.

"My memory of you has to disagree," I joke, ignoring my dad's warning look and Carson's disgruntled grunt as I give him his cheek a pat.

"Can we hurry and do this?" Carson snaps.

Standing, I lean down and linger a kiss on Mike's neck. He shoves me back with a laugh. To Carson it would look intimate, but to everyone else, I'm fucking with Mike because the guy *hates* his neck being kissed; it's a huge ticklish spot for him.

"Hey doll," Slater greets me, standing to pull me into a gentle hug. My stepdad is all lean muscle with a boy-next-door type of look. You'd never guess that he's the Reapers Enforcer.

"I hear you're being too soft on my boy." I give him a playful nudge and he throws a mock glare to Franklin, sleeping in the corner.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Shaking my head with a laugh, I move to the bar and sit down on the empty bar stool beside a grumpy-looking Carson.

"Does your daddy know you fucked his friend?" Carson whispers into my ear, causing a knot to form in my stomach.

No. There's no way he understood that. He's just messing with me. He's been doing this for months.

"Lakeside has an amazing Spanish class," he continues. That damn knot grows tighter with fear. I've put up with a lot, but if he opens his mouth to my dad, there's no way I'll take it lying down.

"Alright." Dad drinks half his beer before turning to Slater and Mike. "Slater, you want to take that shit to the deck?"

My step-dad and Mike head outside, leaving behind a thick tension that seems to suffocate us. Carson is fidgeting with the label on his drink while Dad shoots off a quick text.

"You're here about your mother, I presume."

"No, I came to see your fucking garden," Carson growls, bringing his eyes to level with my dad's.

Dad narrows his eyes. "I'm gonna let that go, because what I'm about to say won't be easy to take in."

Without thinking, I reach over to lay my hand over Carson's thigh, feeling the muscles bunch up under my palm. He looks at me, eyebrows furrowed, but he doesn't remove my hand. Instead, in a move that shocks me to my core, he puts his own hand over mine, interlacing our fingers and giving a gentle squeeze.

The move does something to my chest that I tuck away for later. Now isn't the time to confront my messed up feelings. I'd prefer to never confront them, actually. I'm not a bitch, though, so while we face whatever my dad has to say, I'll give this small bit of comfort to Carson. Even though he doesn't deserve it.

Dad finishes his corona and mumbles under his breath.

"I met your mother in middle school," Dad starts. "We were always in the same friend group, and when I joined the Reapers in our Senior year, everyone left but her. She wasn't shy about voicing her opinions, but she didn't turn her back on me. Now, before you ask, we never dated, never even considered it. Sophia was my best friend. I loved her like a sister."

"She never mentioned you," Carson interrupts. His shoulders have relaxed, but he hasn't released my hand. "If you were so close, why did I never hear about you? I'm eighteen, not eight. That's a long time for someone to go unmentioned."

Dad takes a deep breath, his face contorting as he gets sucked into an unpleasant memory. "This is where things will be difficult to hear, and where you'll get your answer on why you don't remember me." I exchange a confused look with Carson, but dad continues talking. "Things were rocky between your parents when you were born. Your dad had business in Australia, so you and your mom came to stay with us for a month. Sydney was back at work and I'd stepped back from the Reapers to stay home with Anna, so I didn't mind the extra company."

Shooting another glance at Carson, heat rises to my face when I find him already watching me. It's crazy to think that our paths have crossed before, even if we were both too young to remember it. We grew up in two entirely different worlds. It almost doesn't feel real. I hope I pooped on him.

"I was still in the Reapers, though. And you know how close I was with Mitch." Dad looks to me and I nod. Dad had been best friends with Val's dad until he was arrested. "He was always around, even more so when

he met Sophia.”

Beside me, Carson intakes a sharp breath. I flip my hand over and interlace our fingers again, this time squeezing his hand. His hold on me leaves a scorching burn mark.

“I warned Sophia, I did. She was so fucking smart, still is, but I didn’t want her being caught up in this life.”

“Where are you going with this?” Carson’s voice is low and cold.

The front door opens and closes with a bang, cutting through the sudden silence. Dad winces and gives me a look I don’t understand.

“I’m only doing this now because they’ve asked me to,” he admits, looking to me and Carson with an apologetic look. “I’ve never approved; I just need you to know that.”

“Dad, what are—”

“Anna!” Val runs into the room and throws her arms around my neck. When she looks down at my hand clasped in Carson’s, she raises a brow disapprovingly. I still don’t remove my hand.

Dad gestures to the stool beside me. “Sit down, Valerie. This is for you to hear, too.”

What the hell?

“This better be good, Ro,” Val smiles, unaware of what she’s potentially walking into. “I blew off a date for this.”

“What date?” I ask with a touch of accusation in my voice.

Shrugging, she brushes her hand through the air. “Just some guy on Tinder. Anyway, what is so important that you told me to come over?”

Her comment about her date goes ignored as my brain starts to put together pieces that I really should have noticed a lot earlier. Val’s matching grey eyes, the dimples that mimic Carson’s and her natural sun-kissed skin that does not come from her pasty ass father.

“Valerie is Carson’s sister,” I whisper, staring at my best friend like I’ve never seen her before.

“What?” Carson scoffs, leaning forward to look at Valerie. Narrowing his eyes, he shakes his head. “No. No, I’m an only child. My parents couldn’t even handle one fucking kid.”

Valerie sits shell-shocked, her eyes darting from mine to Carson’s, before settling on my dad.

“It’s true.” Dad smiles sadly at Val, tilting his head as he now speaks to her. “Sophia Mary-Anne Dorian is your birth mother.”

Chapter 22

Carson

If it weren't for Anna holding onto my hand with a death grip, I'd probably float away. Or just collapse. Either one.

I stare at the girl beside Anna as Roman's words swim around in my head.

Valerie.

There have been many times that I've looked at her and felt something familiar lurking there, but I never put much energy into figuring out what it was. Now it's all there, clear as day. Those grey eyes, a mirror of my own and my mother, her honey-colored skin, and the dimple that shows up when she gives a grimace. How had I not seen how similar she is to my mother? Was I really that fucking blind? And Weston... He's been seeing this girl. Why didn't he say anything?

This can't be real.

My mother was loyal. I was wrong about her with Roman, so he has to be wrong about this. There is absolutely no way she had an affair.

"No," Valerie whispers. "My mom died during childbirth. Please tell me this is some messed up joke."

"I am so sorry, honey," Roman tells her, smiling sadly. "This is one thing I have been fighting Sophia on since she came back. But you need to understand, she wasn't in the right place for you, and she did what she believed was best."

She takes a shuddering breath and looks helplessly at Anna.

"Mitch was infatuated with Sophia," Roman continues when the silence stretches into awkward territory. "I think Sophia just liked the attention, and let it go a bit too far. She never wanted more kids. She had enough trouble with you, Carson, because you were a colic baby, but she fell pregnant to Mitch, and he begged her to have the baby. He wanted her to choose him and stay in Doverhill, to become his Ol' Lady. She didn't, obviously, she loved your father, despite what she did." When Valerie makes a small choking sound, I see Anna move her free hand on her thigh and

squeeze. “I guess luck was on her side because your dad’s trip was extended to a year in Brisbane. She gave birth to Valerie and handed her over to Mitch for him to raise. A week later, she had taken Carson and left. I didn’t hear from her again until last year.”

“If she hated this gang so much, how could she just leave me in their hands, then?” Valerie snaps, asking the question that’s spinning around in my own head.

“Because she knew you would always be safe,” Roman says. “Mitch loves you beyond belief, as do your grandparents, as do *I*. You have never known a day without love, Valerie, and that’s because she made an incredibly selfless decision.”

I feel Anna’s hand start to loosen in my grip, and without thinking, I tighten my fingers, keeping her locked in place. She wants to offer Valerie support, and while a part of me can understand that, I fucking need her right now. Call me a selfish asshole, I don’t care. I’m not ready to face my feelings or dig deeper into why I need her touch right now. I just know that if she moves away right now, I’ll lose it.

I need her, even though I know damn well I don’t deserve her.

Roman’s words are still roaming around in my head on a fucking loop as we fall into a heavy silence. The rage I had for my mother when I thought she’d been screwing Roman has intensified. This is so much worse. *Another child?* Having an affair is one thing, but to have another baby and just give her away? That’s a low I never thought my mother was capable of.

“Does my father know?” I ask, pleasantly surprised when my voice comes out steady.

Roman steps back from where he’d been comforting an obviously upset Valerie. “She told him a couple of years ago.”

That must have been when my father spent four months in Europe on *business*. I was sixteen. I hadn’t thought anything of his sudden disappearance since he was a professional at it. We didn’t have the type of relationship where he waited around to give me a hug and tell me to behave. Instead, I’d either wake up or come home to a note on the fridge letting me know the housekeeper would be around more often to check in on me.

“What the fuck,” Valerie breathes, turning to me. “Please let this all be a bad dream.”

“Right,” I snort. “You’re the one stuck in the nightmare?”

“Yeah asshole,” she snaps, brushing Anna’s hand off her thigh. “I’d

call having any relation to you a *nightmare*.”

Anna squeezes my hand, dragging my attention to her. Her soft eyes are on my face, searing into my damn soul. The rest of the room disappears until it's just me and her sitting here. Her scent fills my nose, pulling me in. Her full lips part as a small sigh leaves her mouth, her peppermint breath fanning over my face and driving me damn near insane. What fills my blood isn't lust, though. It's this need to pull her into my arms, to breathe her in until she has consumed every inch of me. I don't deserve to feel this rush of calm from her presence, not when I've spent so long only allowing myself to feel desire and anger every time she waltzed into my mind.

Valerie's phone buzzes, drawing her attention. Her eyes flicker over to me as she angles her phone away. I don't give a fuck who she's texting, so why hide away? I'm sure as hell not about to jump into a big brother role, if that's what she's worried about.

“I have to go, my dates waiting. I uh, I need to process all this.”

“Call me, okay?” Anna takes her hand, placing a kiss onto Valerie's palm. An unreasonable ball of jealousy lodges itself in my throat. “When you get back from your date?”

“I will.”

After a painfully awkward goodbye to Roman and Anna, Valerie practically runs out of the house with her phone pressed to her ear. I watch after her, wondering who the fuck her date was that she felt the need to hide that information. Is she back to seeing Weston? Does Anna know they'd had a thing going on?

“There is something else you should know, Carson,” Roman's hard voice brings me back to this shitty reality.

I look to Roman, suddenly hopeful for any news on my parents. He's been seeing my mother, so he must have contact with her. “Do you know where my parents are right now?”

He looks between Anna and me before opening another drink. He doesn't strike me as an alcoholic, which must mean that dropping the sister news on me hadn't been the heavy part of the conversation.

“I'm just going to say it... your uncle Seth has a hired hit.” Roman's voice is somber as he drops a fucking verbal bomb on me. “That's why your mother has been coming here, which I assume you already know because your little PI may be good, but not good enough to go undetected by

an MC.”

A slight flush creeps up my neck at the thought that Decker knew I was spying on him all this time. Strangely enough, he doesn't look bothered by this fact.

Then that is squashed when the rest of his words register. It's so far from what I've imagined that I have the urge to laugh. Seth... and a hired hit. What the fuck has my life become?

“Slater is good at the tech stuff, so we've been able to keep Seth from accessing any of your father's accounts, since that's where this all begun. He has a tampered will, one that names him as your guardian until your twenty-first birthday, not Henry. If this hit he has on your parents goes through, he'll have access to not only your father's business accounts but also your trust and your mother's money. I'm sure you can figure out just how much is involved in this.”

My father runs a billion-dollar company and my mother is a fashion designer, not to mention my trust fund is mixed with an inheritance from my grandparents. Seth doesn't know about the inheritance, since it came from my mother's parents, but the trust fund alone is probably close to fifty million at this point.

I push down the red haze that threatens to fill my vision. Now is not the time to lose my fucking cool. That can wait until I'm face to face with Seth, when I can rip his heart out from his chest with my bare fucking hands.

Why couldn't my parents have just decided that being parents weren't for them? It would have made more sense. This could be a goddamn soap opera, with the secret half-sibling, missing parents and murderous uncle.

“Wait,” I say. “You said Seth hasn't touched any of my father's accounts, but you're wrong. He was here not too long ago, posing as my father. He withdrew money from one of my father's accounts.”

Roman's brows draw in as he processes what I've just said. “Where was he?”

“At Doverhill National Bank,” I answer.

He pulls out his phone, shooting off a quick text with a pinched expression. “There must have been an account we've missed. We'll extend the lock. Thankfully, your mother goes under a different name that Seth isn't aware of, so her money is safe for now. She isn't the main target.”

Nodding, I finally take a drink of the bitter beer. I fucking hate beer, but it's better than nothing. My head is spinning as I try to process

everything. Life was much simpler when I believed my mother was just having an affair. This is too fucking much.

“So my parents. Where are they now?”

“They’re in hiding until we can find enough evidence that Seth is behind this. As far as we know, he’s using a third person to pass information through. We’ve placed a bug on his phone, but he isn’t meeting with anyone or having unusual conversations.”

“I’ll fucking get answers,” I seethe, feeling that familiar heat fill my veins. My muscles beg me to move, to release this tension filling me before it explodes out of me.

“No,” Roman shakes his head firmly. “Seth is dangerous. You all need to steer clear from him.”

“He comes to the house,” Anna says, looking up at me with wide eyes. The fear on her face triggers a reaction in me, something primal and fierce. “He once told me Carson had something to do with his parents’ disappearance, told me to stay away from him.”

“What?” I growl, my heart pounding in my chest. “How often are you alone with him?”

I’ll murder the fucker. It probably sounds hypocritical after everything I’ve had Jess do, but I swear I’ll kill Seth if he hurts so much as a hair on Anna’s head.

“Not often. Just what you’ve seen and when he picked me up from here once.”

Her confession is like a punch to my stomach. We don’t live down the fucking block, so that wasn’t a small drive she took with Seth. They were alone in the car. Anything could have happened to her. With everything that happened at school, I was always there, making sure it never got out of hand. Anna will never find that out, but if Jess ever tried to take things too far, I’d step in from the shadows and warn her off. If one of the guys tried to make a move, I was there to offer them an opportunity to receive some plastic surgery.

“You’ll never be alone with him again,” Roman speaks up before I can. “This is important, Annabelle. Seth is a dangerous man. He’ll stop at nothing to get what he wants. If he’s saying this about Carson, it’s only to try and alienate him, do not listen to him.”

Annabelle nods, her eyes darting between Roman and I. “What do I do if he just shows up, though? He was in Carson’s room earlier today. He

said that Henry always keeps the spare key in the same place.”

So much has happened since then that I completely forgot about finding him with Anna in my room. Fuck, did that really happen today? It feels as though five weeks have fit into this one day. I’m exhausted.

“So he was looking for something,” Roman nods, taking in Anna’s words with a dark expression. “Do you have anything hidden in your room, Carson? Codes, passwords, documents on your parents?”

“Of course not. I keep everything in an encrypted file. Henry helped me set it up when I moved in with him. Seth has no idea it exists.”

“How can we trust Henry?” Anna’s voice is small, unsure of her own words.

I get where she’s coming from. I’ve had moments where I’d doubted Henry. But he’s the most loyal person I know, too loyal, if anything. Something Seth has taken advantage, especially when they were younger and Henry had wanted to be a professional photographer. I don’t know the full story, but I know Seth hadn’t wanted to take the reins of my grandfather’s marketing company, so he’d blackmailed Henry into running the company for him.

“Henry is a good man,” Roman answers his daughter. “I’ve known him for years. Who do you think convinced him to check out that hospital fundraiser?”

Anna’s head jerks up. “Wait, you had them meet?”

“Meet *again*,” he corrects with a wink. “What your mom and I had was more friendship than anything else. We were both lying to each other and ourselves. I knew she left her heart with the photographer from Europe. She knew I wasn’t entirely straight. When I found out that the photographer was Sophia’s brother-in-law, it wasn’t too hard to organize something.”

“Wow,” Anna whispers, her emerald eyes sparking with what I’m guessing is admiration. “Henry told me how they met years ago, but I had no idea you knew.”

“It was kind of hard not to,” Roman chuckles, shaking his head. “She carried a photo of the two of them in her wallet. That kind of love, it doesn’t ever stop. I should know. I’ve been in love with Slater since we met. I was just too much of a naïve fool to think much of it.”

Seeing the smile on Roman’s face as he talks about his husband has me feeling like the world’s biggest douchebag. For so long, I’d blamed this man for my parents’ disappearance. I’d blamed him for having an affair with

my mother. I'd taken my anger out on his daughter, hoping to give him some of the pain I'd been feeling. This isn't who I am.

I can only hope that Anna will forgive me, that she'll give me a chance to explore what the hell is happening inside my chest. Because as new as this all feels, I know without a doubt that I want her, that I'll do whatever it takes to earn her forgiveness, to take all this shit back and make her see that I'm not usually this much of a jerk.

"We're doing what we can." Roman's voice breaks me out of my thoughts. "All I ask is that you keep going on with your life as normal, and if you see Seth, call me."

A headache starts to form, practically blinding me. I feel like I could sleep for weeks. I'm too fucking young to deal with this. This isn't some action movie; this shit just doesn't happen in real life.

After Anna and her dad speak a bit more, we get up to find Slater and that fucking Mike kid to say goodbye. There's nothing left for me to say. I just need to go home and let all of this information soak in.

When Mike wraps his arms around Anna and whispers shit I can't hear into her ear, I want to break his filthy hands and punch his teeth out. *Bit extreme? Possibly.* But after hearing their private little exchange and realizing that they have a history, a red curtain descended over my vision. I don't want anyone touching Anna, I don't want even the idea of it. Seeing Jordan with his hands and lips on her was bad enough, and just look at how I handled that.

When Roman gives Slater a chaste kiss, my stomach cramps up. I'd jumped on the affair train without even wanting to confront anyone. I just wanted revenge.

Revenge on someone that never deserved it.

Chapter 23

Annabelle

It's been two weeks since Dad dropped the bomb about Valerie and Carson and slimy Seth.

Val has only been around once, and while it started off pretty awkward, she actually found that she had a few things in common with Carson. They both enjoy binge watching *Hoarders*—Carson was a bit reluctant to admit to that one—and are into video games; more specifically racing games. I zoned out when they got into an in-depth conversation about car mods and what their favorite models are. It's been nice to see Valerie making the effort, despite the pain I can see lingering behind her eyes. For years, she mourned a mother that never existed.

I've tried to get her to come around more, or to even meet up, but she's been unusually quiet. She tells me everything is fine, yet I can't shake this feeling in my gut that she's hiding something from me. I just hope that she isn't back with Ezra. She deserves better than someone who would cheat on her. Yeah, yeah, it makes me a hypocrite, and I don't care. I know exactly how it feels to be with someone like that, and Val never deserves to feel that way.

Carson has been weird as hell. All my snarky comments are brushed aside with either a wink or an amused laugh. He takes whatever chance he can to sit down and watch whatever I have playing. Last night I tested him by playing *The Sex and the City* movie, and surprisingly, he stayed the whole time. He also had a lot of comments to make on *Mr Big*. I hate to admit it, but I've found myself looking forward to him joining me with a bag of popcorn that he insists we share.

Valerie and Carson also aren't the only ones acting strange. For the first time, my mom has been coming home at a decent hour. I'm not sure if the threat of me moving back to Doverhill shook her up, or if she's feeling some type of way about her only—at least I hope only—daughter turning eighteen in just two weeks. It's been different to see her around so much, but it's been nice.

Ivy sits beside me, leaning against the headboard while Gianna lays on her belly at our feet. We've been discussing plans for my party for the past hour, and I am struggling to keep up. Do I want a casual thing at the lake? Do I want to host the party here? Do I want to hire a DJ? I was happy with something casual until these two refused to allow such a thing.

Before moving here, I never gave my eighteenth much thought. Originally, I was just planning on going to the movies with Valerie and Ezra, then eating our body weight in pizza and ice cream. Since Ezra is out of the picture, and I have Ivy and Gianna now, movies and pizza were pushed aside. Val has apparently been texting with Gianna, and together they agreed that a huge party is the best way to go.

"How do you feel about a smoke machine?" Gianna rolls onto her back, twirling a pen between her fingers.

"God no," I chuckle. "They are so tacky."

"A popcorn machine?" Ivy enquires. "Or cotton candy, everyone loves cotton candy."

I look between the two in amusement. "Is this a party or a damn carnival? Where are we fitting the Ferris Wheel?"

Ivy wiggles down until she's lying flat. "Beside the haunted house, obviously."

"Obviously," I say dryly.

Gianna laughs, swatting Ivy on the leg.

"I don't even know that many people," I say, mimicking Ivy and moving to lay on my side. "Who am I even meant to invite?"

Ivy chews on the end of her pen as she ponders, and Gianna swipes through her phone, most likely on *Tinder*.

"Well, things are good with Carson now, right?" Ivy asks causally, with a hint of suspicion lurking in her eyes. "So you can invite the whole year if you want."

My stomach flips at the mention of Carson. That's been happening quite a bit lately, and I can't say I'm a fan. The last time this happened, I was thrown into a loop of arguments and cheating. So what if my heart flutters every time Carson sits too close to me and critiques my favorite movies? Who cares if my head spins whenever I smell his cologne and the sweetness of his shampoo? None of that is important, because nothing will ever come from it. We won't ever work.

Footsteps pace outside my bedroom door, cutting me off before I

can respond to Ivy. My heart leaps into my throat, hoping that it's Carson outside my door. I shut that thought down as soon as it enters my mind, furious at myself for even thinking that.

There's a soft knock. Too soft of a knock to be Carson, and my heart pummels back down with a painful thud. Got to love being betrayed by your own body.

Mom pokes her head in, her face transforming into a warm smile.

"Hey honey," she smiles, standing in the doorway. "I got called in to cover someone's shift. But I just wanted to let you know that my request was approved, so you can still have your party, but I've got you for the day."

I'm surprised that she had put the request in to have my birthday taken off. I sure didn't expect it. "I was going to have lunch with Dad."

Her eyes don't darken at the mention of my dad. If anything, she smiles wider. "I know. I spoke to him. We thought it would be nice for us all to have lunch. Just you, me and your dad."

"Should I have 911 on speed dial?" I joke, earning a snicker from Gianna and Ivy.

Mom points her finger at me, clicking her tongue. "You're hilarious. I'm heading out now. Please don't stay up too late, girls. Goodnight!"

We all wish my mom a goodnight before she leaves.

"So, has Valerie been back around?" Ivy asks, packing away her study books that we never got around to using.

"Nope." I shake my head. "I haven't heard from her much. I don't know if she's mad at me or thinks that I knew about all of this before and just didn't tell her."

We've been texting, but something has shifted since the news of her birth mother and I don't know what it is. It's a Friday night, and usually she's here with us. We've become a close foursome—with the rare exception of Alex—which makes it strange to not have her here tonight. I look to Gianna because I know they've gotten close.

"She's been talking to Ezra," Gianna blurts out, avoiding my eyes. "She didn't want you to know, because she knew you'd be disappointed."

The stabbing pain in my chest isn't pleasant, even if this is something I was starting to suspect. I've known Valerie for so long. How could she ever think that I would judge her? I wouldn't approve, obviously, but I have always supported her decisions. I never kept my drama with

Jordan a secret, even when we'd argue about his many faults and she'd beg me to leave him.

"Ezra is a jackass," I say.

Sure, I'd once considered him a good friend, but that title was thrown aside when he cheated on my best friend.

"That's what I tell her," Gianna smiles, maneuvering around to fit between Ivy and myself. "I've never met the guy. She just told me what he did. That shit isn't forgivable in my books."

"What did he do?" Ivy moves onto her elbow.

"He cheated on her," I answer with a curl of my lip. "I can't believe she didn't tell me."

"I think she's worried it'll get back to Carson," Gianna admits quietly.

Narrowing my eyes on her, I mimic Ivy's pose. "Why would he care? They aren't exactly brother and sister of the year."

Gianna sits abruptly, startling me as she reaches for her phone. I wait for her to speak, exchanging a look with Ivy, who looks just as confused as I feel. When Gianna begins to stroll on Instagram, humming a show tune, it becomes clear she doesn't plan on talking.

"Gianna," I warn, slowly sitting up. "Why would Carson care if Valerie is talking to Ezra?"

"He wouldn't," Gianna sighs.

Ivy sits up next, keeping her eyes locked on Gianna. "If he wouldn't care, then who would?"

My heart slows down rapidly as I start to wonder if Valerie is trying to keep someone else from finding out. Like Weston. I've noticed that they share these little looks when they think nobody else is looking, and I do know that they text... or were texting? I have no idea. Val doesn't talk about Weston. I just assumed that there was nothing there because she never hinted at anything. We've always told each other everything... or at least we did.

"Has she been seeing Weston?" I ask, and when Gianna drops her face to the mattress and groans, my suspicions are confirmed. Only it just leaves me feeling.... sad. Val has been with Weston for however long, and I had no idea. I had no idea about Weston. I had no idea about Ezra. When did we grow so distant that I didn't know any of this?

"Yes," Gianna groans, falling onto her back and narrowing her eyes on me. "But you didn't hear it from me! I swear, she's planning on telling

you. I only found out because Weston answered her phone when I called about your party last week, and that's also when she told me about Ezra. She doesn't want Weston to know, though, and she's worried that Carson would somehow find out if she tells you now. She also said it's a conversation she needs to have face to face."

"It's still so weird to think that she's Carson's little sister," Ivy chuckles.

And just like that, we all relax and laugh, moving onto more party talk that I grumble and groan through.

Later on in the night, after we've finished an awful horror movie from the eighties, Gianna and Ivy pass out. Ivy has taken Gianna's previous place at the end of the bed, and Gianna has fallen asleep while laying across my stomach. My brain is too wired to join them, though. From the creepy music of the movie and everything about Val, there's no way I can get any sleep. Especially when Gianna is like a human heater and is burning fucking holes through my stomach.

Just as I reach for my phone to occupy my time, I hear footsteps pass my door. Only one set, heavy and quick.

Carson.

I haven't seen him all day, except when he walked through the lunchroom with Asher by his side. He was wearing his ridiculously tight shirt, but instead of being infuriated by it today, I find it strangely endearing. It was just so him, even though he's turned into this completely different person.

A person who I still crave the touch of, probably more now that his sneer is replaced with a smile that lights up his face.

With my heart pounding in my ears and my hands growing clammy, I slip out from under Gianna and stand on shaky legs. Looking around my room, I wonder if I should throw on pants. Halfway through the movie, I'd stripped my sweats off, leaving myself in plain black boy shorts and a baggy Nirvana shirt. I could put pants on, but I know exactly why I'm going to find Carson, and it isn't to ask him if my fucking hair looks nice.

With my mind made up and my mental break up speech to my vibrator, I walk out of my room almost on a high. My nipples are already hard against the soft fabric of the shirt and there's a heat between my thighs that is urging me forward. He could reject me, sure, but I won't know if I don't try. And something tells me that those lingering looks and the innocent

touches from him have been building to this moment.

Memories of that first kiss when he'd been drunk float around in my mind. If he fucks as good as he kisses, he will ruin me for any other guy. Although I'm pretty sure he already has; I'll just save that thought for another time, like in fifty years when I'm going through my second divorce or something.

It's almost like I zone out as I cross the small space separating our rooms, because before I know it, my hand is on the door handle and I'm pushing the door open.

Chapter 24

Carson

Anna stands in my doorway, her eyes locked on the towel wrapped around my waist. I use the moment to take her in and feel the oxygen being sucked out of my lungs. She's got on a shirt that's about two sizes too big for her, with what I'm guessing is just panties on underneath. The soft blonde waves of her hair cascades over one shoulder, begging for my fist to wrap around them and tug her head back, exposing her smooth throat to me. I've been dying to dig my teeth into her flesh and mark her as mine.

When Anna shifts on her feet, my eyes dart back up to her face. Her eyes slowly rise off the towel, pink coloring her cheeks and her pouty lips parted. It takes all my self-control to stand in place and not stroll forward to take her in my arms.

Why the hell is she here? I've been trying to spend time with her, sitting through movies and shows that made me want to gouge my eyes out, and throughout all those times, she never once initiated anything. Even when I dropped innuendos or brushed my hand against her thigh and hand, she kept her eyes off me and gave me nothing in return. I've finally started to tell myself that nothing is going to happen, that I made my bed and I just have to lie in the thing.

"What are you doing in here?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

She draws her bottom lip between her teeth, meeting my eyes. I wish I couldn't see the darkening of her eyes, how her pupils have almost covered every bit of the gorgeous green, the desire she isn't even trying to hide.

"You weren't home." Her voice is shaky as she takes a step forward. "Why?"

I scoff, shaking my head as she takes another step forward. At some point she'd closed the door, and now it's like there is no air at all. It's too damn hot, like the steam from the bathroom has followed me out. "I was with Asher and Weston."

They agree I need to give up on Anna, despite how little I want to do that. I don't deserve her, not after what I've done.

"I forgive you," she gives a sly grin. "I don't think I ever told you that."

My stomach drops. "You shouldn't."

"You thought my dad was tearing your family apart," she continues, taking another steady step forward. "And you had pictures, so it wasn't just some made up theory you had. It wasn't okay what you did, but I understand, and I forgive you."

"Stop it," I spit out, taking a step back when she gets close enough that I can smell the sweetness of the lotion she uses. Caramel. I'd snuck into her room more times than I'd admit, just to be surrounded by her scent. It's pretty pathetic when I think about it. "I fucked up. Even when I didn't want to hurt you, I still did."

"I can think of a few ways you can make it up to me," she says. She steps right up to me now, so close that with every breath she takes, her breasts brush up against me. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she could feel how hard I am. It's like there's no controlling the thing when she's around, and there really isn't any hiding when I'm wearing nothing but a towel.

Taking a deep breath, my eyes shamelessly drop to her shirt. "And what would they be?"

"Well." Now she brings a hand up to my chest, laying her palm flat over my hammering heart. Fuck, she'll be able to feel how fast my heart is beating. I don't need that. "There's no use denying this attraction between us. I want you, and I can feel how much you want me."

I never thought she was some innocent little thing, but this is a side to her that has all my blood rushing down to my dick. Her touch is similar to a branding iron as she drags her hand slowly down my chest. I don't bother trying to stop her. I don't *want* to stop her.

If she wants to offer herself up, I'd be fucking insane to turn her down. I've been wanting this very thing since the moment I laid my eyes on her, even if I wanted to believe it was just about sex.

"This doesn't have to be anything," she says, continuing her tortuously slow path. "We both have needs, and since you got rid of the guy I was fucking—"

Her words are cut off as I feel the last thread of my control snap, grabbing her wrist and pulling her against me completely. Her breasts press

firmly to my chest and my erection digs into her stomach. A growl rumbles through my chest as I bring my lips to her ear.

“If you want me to fuck you tonight, bringing up that asshole isn’t the way to do it,” I growl, nipping her earlobe, which results in a breathy moan.

Pulling back, the sight of her hooded eyes and pouted lips nearly knocks the air out of me once again. Jealousy floods through me as thoughts of that asswipe Jordan touching her like I plan to very soon invade my mind. I keep those primal feelings locked down, aware that I’d look like a fucking hypocrite since I’ve been no saint myself.

“Take your shirt off,” I rasp, releasing my hold on her wrist.

“This will only be sex,” she declares, lifting the hem of her shirt at a pace designed to drive me insane.

Her words ignite something deep inside. If she actually thinks this will be nothing more than fucking, I’m about to turn her entire world upside down. One dose of Anna won’t be enough. I’ve barely touched her and I already know that. Once I’ve had her, nobody else will ever touch her. I’ll rip their fucking arms off with my bare hands.

With her shirt finally off, I take a step back and drag my eyes down her chest. I’ve seen her in a bikini, in tight shirts, in her underwear, so I’ve had enough material to jerk off to. This, though. With the only thing keeping her from being completely naked are a tiny pair of black panties, my blood burns. Her nipples stand to attention, begging for attention. She looks like she’s been created from a wet dream, with a tiny waist and hips that I want to hold on to, perky tits and an ass that will bring me to my knees.

“You’re perfect,” I breathe, finally bridging the inch of distance between us and smashing my lips to hers.

She tastes like fucking sunshine. Meadows and sandy beaches and shit. Everything that is good in the world. I put everything I have into kissing her, bringing one hand to the nape of her neck to hold her against me while my other hand grips onto her small waist. When she lets out the softest sigh, I dive my tongue past her lips, tasting every inch of her and pressing her so hard against me that we’ll both walk away from this bruised.

I can’t get enough of her. As much as I want to rip her panties off, drop my towel and lift her against the wall, I can’t bring myself to remove my lips. Air isn’t important when her tongue moves across mine like she was designed only for me.

All too fucking soon she pulls away, gasping for air and pressing her hands to my chest like she can't go without touching me, either. As it is, she's already too far away, so I dive my face into her neck, leaving kisses over every inch of skin while she catches her breath. Her skin is soft and sweet, my new favorite drug.

"Carson," she sighs, sagging against me. "Wait, we should stop."

"Fuck that." I suck on the skin below her ear, leaving my mark behind. If she really does walk out right now, she'll be reminded of this, of how my lips felt on her.

There's a moment of hesitation where I worry I pushed too far, but just as I pull back, her eyes drop back down to my towel, and I have no doubt that she can see exactly what she's done to me. The bead of pre-come stains the white towel, proving just how turned on I am right now. I'm fucking light-headed because my cock has hijacked all my blood.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea," she says softly, her fingertips tracing along my abs. My muscles quiver from her gentle touch. "But I don't think I can stop."

She brings her hand to my face, dragging her knuckles over my jawline, then catching my bottom lip under her thumb. Every bit she touches is set alight.

What the hell is she doing to me? I've fucked enough girls, but none of them has gotten so under my skin like Anna has. I've never felt so starved for air, so increasingly frustrated the longer I go without her bare body pressed to mine.

"Don't stop," I rasp. Her thumb is still on my bottom lip, caressing me as she seems stuck in her head.

"I am curious about something," she wonders aloud.

My heart skips and my dick jerks at the rough edge in her voice. I want to lean forward and capture her perfect lips again, tasting that peppermint sweetness.

"And what is that?"

When she takes her hands off me, I want to protest; I want to beg. But when she shimmys her panties down her legs and kicks them to the side, I can't even remember to breathe. Why the fuck am I still wearing a towel?

Pressing her finger to my chest, she gives me the smallest shove, enough for me to take the hint and lie back on the bed. Now usually I'm one to take charge in the bedroom. I hate being the one that's told what to do. Yet

here I am, fucking unable to speak as Anna crawls over me, making sure to avoid my aching hard on. That's probably for the best right now, since I'm sure one light touch from her will make me blow my load.

"I'm wondering if your tongue is good at something other than talking shit." Her voice is lower, huskier than before and goddamn it, she'll end me. Annabelle Decker will be the one to destroy me, that I can now say with one hundred percent certainty.

Suddenly the position makes sense, and I really hope I'm right. This has been a recurring dream I'm now desperate to play out.

"Get up here and find out," I say. My voice is embarrassing rough, there's no hiding how turned on I am, in case my cock didn't give enough of a message.

Dropping down, she gives me a quick kiss, slipping her tongue in to caress my top lip before retreating, not even giving me the chance to deepen the kiss.

I help her out by grabbing onto her ass and lifting her up. *Fuck*. She really is perfect. When she straddles my head, I swear I'm about to come handsfree. I quickly think of my grandmother and those disgusting cigars she used to carry around, even though she coughed up a lung whenever she smoked. It works well enough that my cock stops throbbing and the heat moving down my spine eases.

Anna takes so damn long lowering her pretty pussy that I eventually wrap my hands around her soft thighs and push her down, closing my lips around her tiny clit and sucking hard. She lets out a hoarse cry that she covers with her hand, and that pisses me off. When she was with Jordan in the next room, she didn't fucking bother to cover her screams. Her muffled scream only fills me with determination.

Her smell, her taste is like a drug that I can't get enough of. I bring up every trick I have; racing to spell out the alphabet is always a good one, and one that quickens Anna's breathing, but it doesn't get her to lose herself. Her hands do fall to my hair and pull when I flatten my tongue, though, so I make a little routine of fucking her with my tongue, flattening my tongue and sucking hard. It still doesn't get quite the reaction I'm after, but I'm not a fucking quitter.

Breathing isn't an important factor in this. Anna screaming out my name is the only goal here, one that I will get. Her thighs start to shake on either side of my face and I know that she's close, so with that, I suck her clit

hard and drag my teeth down gently enough to shove her over the edge, and when I do, she finally lets out a scream that fills my chest with pride and brings me right back to the edge myself.

Determined to keep going, I continue dancing my tongue, imprinting the sweet taste of Anna onto my brain, and when it becomes too much, she falls off my face and brushes her hair out of her face. I roll onto my stomach, wiggling slightly to adjust my dick, then press my face to her stomach, pressing kisses around her belly button. She smells so damn good that I want to drown myself in her.

“Wait.” She puts her hand on my forehead when I start to kiss up her ribs. “I need to take care of you.”

“This is taking care of me,” I mumble against her flesh, reluctant to remove her mouth from her. I’ve never shied away from giving oral, but I’ve never been *this* into it before.

Anna moves away and the sight of her is painfully beautiful. Her breasts are practically bouncing with how heavy she’s breathing and her entire face is flushed. I want to take a photo so that I’ll always have this memory.

“Lay back and close your eyes,” she smirks, dragging her hand over her stomach and cupping her breasts. Her eyes flutter closed as she brushes over her nipple and I let out a groan. She’s killing me here. “Trust me, okay?”

“It’s hard to close my eyes when you’re doing that,” I tell her, my eyes glued to her fingers as they roll the small pink bud. My mouth waters as I imagine leaning forward and taking her nipple into my mouth.

She drops her hand with an innocent smile and I lean back, closing my eyes even if it’s the very last thing I want to do. My dick sure doesn’t protest, though, as he stands in a straight salute.

Her scent surrounds me, burning a permanent place in my memory with no objections from me. I could eat her out for the rest of my life and be happy. Her soft cries, her sweet taste, is enough to erase every trouble in my life. Maybe I should get back on the grandma thoughts, because I won’t be lasting long once she touches me.

Concerned about how much time has passed with no sound, I pry my eyes open.

To find my room empty with her clothes gone.

Fucking bitch.

Chapter 25

Annabelle

My nose tickles as a disgusting, bitter smell attacks me, drenching my room.

Ivy groans from the end of the bed, and Gianna buries her face in my hair. At some point during the night, we must have gotten around to spooning, because she's curled around my back like an overheated koala.

"Is the house on fire?" Ivy's voice is muffled.

"It smells more like someone that should never be trusted near an oven is in fact, near an oven right now," Gianna replies. She rolls onto her back and throws the pillow over her face. "I vote we go out for breakfast."

While the thought is tempting, especially with whatever that atrocity I can smell is, I have plans with a certain redhead today. Or maybe her hair is pink now. I can never keep up.

"You two should go," I say, still relaxed from my little field trip last night.

Now I went to see Carson with the intention of fucking his brains out and getting it out of my system, but when he kissed me and all I could feel was him, I panicked. Something had started to shift, and I hated it. I didn't want anything to shift between us. There was no way I was going to blue ball myself, though, and I thought he owed me one after the shit he's been pulling. I can't even say I regret it. That was the fastest I'd ever come from oral alone.

"You want to try surviving whatever that is?" Ivy hops up and throws her hair into a bun. "Also, I call first dibs on the shower, bitches."

Gianna throws the pillow at her head and laughs as it bounces right off Ivy's back, and she flips her off over her shoulder.

"I'm not that hungry," I say, snuggling back into the warmth of Gianna. I was on too much of a high last night to fix the air before going back to bed, so my room currently resembles Antarctica.

"Can't blame you there," Gianna chuckles.

Ivy leaves the door open to the bathroom, and after a few minutes,

my bodywash fills the room, replacing the horrid odor of burnt food. Gianna props up on her elbow, looking down at me with a grin on her lips.

“Liam’s having a party tonight, you wanna come?”

I’ve only been to one of Liam’s parties once, and trust me, that was enough. He lives on the lake and his dad is obsessed with alligators; they have a gator head over their fireplace. His house is my worst nightmare.

“That would be a strong no.” I shiver and bring the blanket right up to my chin. “I’d rather swim with sharks.”

That’s a lie; sharks are also terrifying. But if I had to choose, I would choose the sharks, since they can’t just fucking walk out of the water to chase you.

“Come on, it’ll be fun.” She pokes at my ribs until I squirm away, giggling.

Slapping her hand away, I jump out of bed. “Nothing you say will make me go to that dinosaur house.”

“We don’t even have alligators around here, you dork.” She rolls her eyes.

Logically, I know this. But we still live along a lake, and I can’t just wake up one day and not check the yard for any stray dinosaurs strolling around. The day that I don’t, one will most likely slither in from the backyard... do alligators slither? Oh, who cares?

“You don’t know that,” I grumble. Walking over to my closet, I pull out a pair of jean shorts and a sweater. It looks like it’s going to rain, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’ll be cold. “I have plans with Monique, anyway. She’s coming to hang out.”

Ever since we met at that party on the lake, I’d gotten kind of close to Monique. From what she’s told me, her days of banging Carson are over, even though they’re still good friends. She knows—against my will, thanks to a heavy dose of Peach Schnapps—that I’d bend over any day for him, and according to her, he wouldn’t hesitate to drag me to the closest flat surface. I’m not quite sure if I’m ready to tell her what happened last night. She already has a big head, and telling her she was right will put us all at risk of that explosion.

“She’s pretty hot,” Gianna comments. “We hooked up once, last year, sometime. It didn’t go further than a one-night stand, though. Girl has major commitment issues.”

“Like you don’t,” I toss over my shoulder as I get changed.

Some sick part of me wants to wait a little bit longer to shower, to keep Carson's scent on me for as long as I can get away with.

"Whatever, at least I'm not harboring secret feelings for my step cousin."

"You can't be talking about me, because I fucking hate that guy."

Gianna lifts a shoulder, trying to hold in her laughter. "I've always loved a good enemies to lovers."

"We were never enemies," I say, tugging on my sweater. "And we'll never be lovers, so you can throw that out of your head right now, thank you."

I don't bother mentioning that we kind of toed the line of lovers last night.

"Hey Anna?"

She sits up and glances back at the wall above the headboard, a smirk stretching across her face. "I didn't take you for a screamer."

After getting Gianna to pinky swear that she'll keep her mouth shut about what she heard last night, I stand in the doorway and wave Ivy and Gianna off with a knot in my stomach.

I had a message from my mom letting me know she has to stay a bit longer at work, which would mean that the banging and cursing coming from the kitchen is Carson—Henry is too good of a cook to even entertain the idea that it's him.

I'm a ball of nervous energy after last night. Would he pretend like it never happened? Would he go back to being an asshole? And why the hell am I *worried* that he'll act like nothing happened?

Deciding to pull up my big girl panties and face the music, I lift my sweater to cover my nose and mouth to head into the kitchen. I feel like I should need a hazmat suit or something, because this is downright diabolical.

"You have to flip them!" Henry sounds exasperated.

"Why can't the heat just soak through and cook it all at the same time?" Carson yells, frustration lacing his voice.

Standing in front of the kitchen island are Henry and Carson. They're facing off with a plate of black circles. Are they *pancakes*? They look like they were just picked up from the crematorium. Who doesn't know how to cook pancakes?

“Because that isn’t how it works.” Henry drags a hand over his face, clearly over the conversation. “Why were you attempting to cook, anyway? If you want to learn, start easy, with toast.”

Biting the inside of my cheek to stop from laughing, I stay just out of sight as I watch them bicker about the funeral ready pancakes.

“I hate toast,” Carson mumbles, poking at the pile of pancakes.

“You hate everything,” Henry retorts. “Clean this up, then we’ll run out and get some breakfast. I have too many meetings to risk my health by eating this.”

Carson lets out a scoff. “That’s a bit harsh.”

Henry pauses as he moves to walk past me, quirking up a brow and grinning. I can’t help but smile and shake my head.

“Here to apologize?” Carson calls out, clearly sensing my presence.

I step out and barely hold in a laugh when I see him pouting down at the charred bits. “I have nothing to apologize for. What is that, anyway?”

“I was making blueberry pancakes,” he muses, tossing them all in the trash. “I thought they’d be fitting. You know, because of my blue balls and everything.”

There’s my answer to whether we’re ignoring this. I just wish that my heart didn’t jump up at the easy way he brings it up. Pulling myself up on the bar stool, I snag a banana from the fruit bowl. I could’ve gotten an apple, but this will be so much more fun for me.

Shrugging, I slowly peel the banana while holding his stare. “That sounds like a you problem, not a me problem.”

“Oh no, this is very much a you problem.” His eyes are locked onto my mouth. “Although I can’t deny that I didn’t deserve that.”

Guys are so fucking predictable. Starting at the bottom, I drag my tongue up the length of the banana, a smirk tugging at the corner of my lips when Carson lets out a groan. I’m not usually into bananas, apples are much better, but when an opportunity arises, they can be useful. Holding in a cringe, I wrap my lips around the top of the banana and push it into my mouth until the entire thing has disappeared.

Thank you, no gag reflex.

“You’re playing with fucking fire right now.” His husky voice causes a shiver down my spine.

Popping the disgusting piece of fruit from my mouth, I wink. “Let me help then.”

His eyes light up at my words, clearly misunderstanding what I mean. Leaning forward, I watch in amusement as his eyes dart from my mouth to my boobs now squashed on top of the island. His full lips part and I could bet that he's hard right now.

This is something I used to do with Jordan, and it pissed him off every time.

I slowly wrap my lips around the banana again, letting out a moan like it actually tastes good. Then just as Carson growls, I dig my teeth in and drag up slowly, letting him see the deep indent, then I add the cherry on top by biting the tip off.

Carson flinches and looks away, his jaw locking. "You're a fucking bitch."

Satisfied enough, I force myself to swallow before I toss the rest of the fruit out. "Just here to help out."

As I turn my back to leave, Carson grabs my elbow and pulls me back until I'm pressed against his chest. His dick presses against my lower back, hard enough to drill a hole through me and for just a split second—a serious lapse in judgement—I get the urge to stand on my tiptoes and grind my ass back against him.

Keeping one hand on my elbow, he uses his other hand to wrap around my throat as his lips come to my ear. "If you think that little act will scare me off, you'll have to try harder. I've tasted the forbidden fruit, baby, and there's no going back."

He releases me with a shove forward, walking past me with one hand in his pants, readjusting.

Monique's house is nothing like I'd pictured. The only color she has is her hair and contacts, otherwise the girl lives in black. Her house, though, it looks like a damn rainbow has thrown up in here.

"Don't say shit," she warns, leading me through the house. "And don't tell her you like the house, I almost have her convinced to paint the walls."

The hall we walk through is a literal rainbow, with strips of different colors on both sides. There aren't any photos, or side tables, just an attack on my eyes with bright yellows and pinks. We reach the kitchen at the end of the hall and through the stacks of Tupperware, I can see a stunning woman twirling around with a mixing bowl cradled in her arms.

“Mom,” Monique calls out over the Jazz music blasting. “Mom, can you turn down the music for a sec?”

The woman turns with a beaming smile, and for a second, I swear they could pass as twins. She looks young, too young to have an eighteen-year-old, with piercing blue eyes and flaming red hair, a splattering of freckles across her nose and a smile so beautiful that it takes my breath away. There’s no way this is Monique’s mom. She looks more like her sister.

“This is Anna. She’s a friend from school,” Monique introduces me once her mom has turned the music off. “Anna, this is Penny, my mom.”

Penny steps forward, still cradling the mixing bowl. “It’s so lovely to meet you, this brat hardly ever brings anyone around.”

Jesus, she even sounds young. Is that a thing? I bet it’s a thing.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I smile and nod to the bowl. “What are you making?”

Penny looks down with a frown. “I don’t know yet. I like going with the flow, finding what works and just going for it. Sometimes it works out, sometimes we don’t leave bed for a few days.”

“Mom likes to bake,” Monique tells me. “If she could get away with it, we’d be eating pastries and cakes for breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

“She judges my eating choices, but she will go out and do a line on some idiots’ broken mirrors.” Her mom says this so dryly that I blink in shock.

Monique rolls her eyes and swipes her finger through whatever her mom’s mixing, cringing at whatever she tastes. “You mixed the salt and sugar again.”

While her mom curses and starts to re-gather the ingredients back up, Monique leads me down another colorful hallway to her bedroom. Which is more her style.

Red strip lights along the edges of the ceiling light up the room, showing the study table with a half-eaten bowl of mac and cheese, the clothes thrown around the floor, a four-poster bed with a wooden chest at the end and what looks like a hundred band posters covering the walls.

Surprisingly, her room smells like a meadow of daises and not like the feet that I’d imagined from its appearance.

“I don’t usually bring people here,” she explains, waving her hand around. Walking to the heavy-looking chest, she opens it and pulls out a small bag of weed. “You in?”

“Sure.” It’s not like I have any other plans... well, any plans that involve actually having fun. Liam’s party is the very definition of *not fun*.

When she jumps onto the bed to start rolling the weed, I join her and sit cross-legged.

I’ve gone over this a million times in my head, nearly cancelling half of those times. Carson acts like someone that regrets his decision, and I was half serious when I told him I forgave him last night. But I can’t just move on without doing anything, it isn’t me. Sure, I get why I was targeted, but understanding doesn’t mean that I’m *okay* with it. Carson Dorian will get a taste of the shit he put me through, even if my stomach feels uneasy at the idea of hurting him.

“So, have you thought about which one you’d be okay with?”

Mon looks up with a grin and winks at me. “Chlamydia. Jess had it once, and there were no symptoms. She didn’t even know until the guy she got it from told some other girl and word got back to her.”

When I brought up the idea of getting back at Carson, Monique jumped in with ideas to help. It isn’t that she hates him or anything, she just loves pranks and messing with people. I’d been a bit skeptical at first, worried that she’d tell him my plans, until she swapped out his strawberry smoothie to a mango, knowing that the taste of mangos made him sick. She had my trust right then, when we’d snuck off before he saw that it was her who did the swap.

“And it’ll work, right? Even though he uses condoms?”

A blush creeps up my neck as something unpleasant swirls in my stomach. I’ve done a good job keeping those pesky jealous feelings away from friendship with Monique. Apparently, talking about her sexual past with Carson is enough to bring them back up, though.

“He uses condoms, yes, but it’ll still freak him out.” She finishes rolling one joint and hands it to me before starting on another one. “Before you came, Jess threw a hissy fit because he wanted to call it quits with her, so she faked a pregnancy. It only lasted a few hours because he demanded she take a test, but ever since then, yeah, he’s been paranoid about faulty condoms.”

“If you’re not comfortable with this—” I start to tell her, only to be cut off when she covers my mouth.

“Those assholes at school don’t mean shit to me,” she says. “If this gets out and they think I actually have Chlamydia, then I’ll finally get to give

my pussy the vacation she deserves. And Carson will get over it, eventually. I'm not worried about that. I'm in this, Anna. The STD scare was my idea, remember?"

Her idea beat all of mine out of the park; burning his clothes, replacing the sugar with salt before he makes his coffee, dumping a bucket of glitter in his car.... Okay, that last one is still high on my list.

"I just don't want you to regret this."

She pulls out her phone with a devious smile. "Let's do this now so we can get baked. I've already been sober long enough."

Her eyes darken a bit towards the end and I have to wonder if that has something to do with her mom. I know there are plenty of people out there that look younger than they are, but her mom can't be any older than thirty.

"Carson, hey."

I hold my breath, silently praying that he won't hear me. This plan has to work. I need him to feel out of control, even for a minute. He has to feel what I felt with every rumor, with every stupid *prank*. He got my frustration without knowing it, now I want his.

"Oh, boo fucking hoo." When she rolls her eyes at me, I bite on the corner of my lip to hold in a laugh. "Look, I'm only calling because you deserve to know.... No.... Yeah, I heard.... Oh my god, shut up and listen to me... I haven't been feeling well so I went to the doctors.... No, I'm fine. Well, kind of... I got my results back this morning, and I have Chlamydia.... I know we did, but you never know... Okay.... I'm sorry... Sure thing, see ya."

"So? What did he say?"

She pauses for a few seconds, staring down at the blank screen on her phone. My heart beats wildly against my chest at her silence, ready to shake her for answers. If this has ruined whatever they have, I'll never forgive myself. Fucking shit, I should have gone with another plan.

Finally, she lifts her head up and smiles. "It worked! He was freaking the fuck out and is booking an appointment with the health clinic right now."

We high five in victory. With any luck, someone will notice Carson entering the Health Clinic, and he'll be able to enjoy how utterly fun rumors are.

"Thanks for helping with this, I really appreciate it."

After a few drags of our joints and a lot of giggling about her mom's baking fails, my head starts to feel light and my eyes protest against my decision to keep them open. We lay on our backs and that's when I realize the Spice Girls poster above her bed. Frowning, I point upwards.

"What the fuck is up with that?"

Mon starts laughing, throwing her leg over my thighs. "Don't tell me you don't like the Spice Girls. If you do, this friendship won't work out."

Laughing, I try to inhale the joint, only to end up choking. "It's out of." Cough. "Place."

"Haven't you noticed, doll?" She lifts up to tap me on my nose. "I'm out of place."

Chapter 26

Annabelle

Graduation feels like a million years away, yet right around the corner at the same time. Time is a fucking weird concept.

Valerie has been talking a lot more, just without any mention of Ezra or Weston. I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt. Instead, I try my best to be supportive without letting her know Gianna spilled those beans on her. She's not suspicious of my weird pep talks yet.

Ivy shuffles in her seat, turning to face Asher who has chosen the seat directly behind her.

"Sorry, I was going to ask to borrow a condom," she says. "Then I remembered Mason uses Extra Large, not Medium."

Much to her irritation, Asher grins and leans back, clasping his hands behind his back. "Okay."

I can feel her stiffen beside me as she prepares for another verbal attack. I pinch her thigh to get her attention.

"You'll get kicked out of class again," I warn.

Last week Asher had sat in the same seat as today and Ivy threw insults at him until our teacher kicked her out of class and gave her detention. Since I've been there, I've barely seen the two interact, mostly because Asher keeps his distance. The last couple of weeks, it seems that's he's bored of that now, and Ivy is all too happy to jump to the bait. I've been introduced to a whole new side of my friend that, quite frankly, is fucking terrifying.

"I don't care." She shrugs before turning back around. "Hey Asher, funny story, actually. I ran into Sienna the other day. Yeah, we had a good laugh about how you can't get any girl off. Maybe you could take some hints from Mason."

If it weren't for his fists clenching, I'd be sure that her words were doing nothing to him. She doesn't notice, though, because she keeps on going.

"When he came over after work yesterday, I came so hard I almost blacked out."

That's a damn lie, since she stayed with me on Friday night and then with Gianna on Saturday night; two drunks facetimeing two girls high off their asses had made for an entertaining talk about the universe, though. "I bet you don't even know how to make a girl come. No actually, I *know* you can't."

"Damn, guess I better keep practicing then," Asher grins, seemingly amused except the slight twitch of his nose. "Meg has been trying to get me to come and *study*."

"Go to hell," she spits.

Standing abruptly, she picks up her bag and rushes out of the classroom with Asher hot on her tail. I contemplate staying behind only for a second before getting up to follow them. Asher and Ivy around people are a lethal combination. I don't even want to think about how they'd be alone.

The hall is empty of students and raised voices when I walk out. Confused, I make a quick detour to throw my books in my locker along with what Ivy left on the desk.

There aren't many places I can think of to check for them, so I start off with the bathrooms. I doubt Ivy would have run into the men's, because nobody would subject their senses to that smell. A dog would turn its nose up to going in there. Once I've checked both bathrooms, and finally the locker room, I sigh with defeat. Hopefully, they aren't tearing into each other somewhere. I've become quite fond of Ivy, and it's no fun talking to someone that's cuffed to a table.

"They're in the car park with Gianna."

I pause when I step out into the hall, looking over my shoulder as Carson approaches me with his lips curled up in a dark smile.

"It's best to just give them their space." He comes to a stop behind me, leaning down to bury his nose in my hair.

Okay, that's a bit creepy. I'm weirdly into it.

"After you."

When I continue to stand there, staring up at him like he's a stranger, he puts his hand over mine, which is still on the door, and pushes, giving me a light shove inside. My stomach does a small flip, because apparently, I'm into being pushed around now. Who knew?

The door clicks shut behind me and that's when I finally come to my senses. Spinning on my heel, I let out a gasp as Carson steps up to me. He smells so damn good, like the ocean and sandalwood mixed together, with a

hint of his cologne.

“Get the hell out of my way.” My voice doesn’t hold the conviction I need to sound threatening. And why should it when I’m insanely turned on right now?

Carson tilts his head to the side and brings his hand up to drag his knuckles along my jaw. “I was never fucking with you when I said I was sorry. That was never me.”

Butterflies swarm my stomach, which only fuels my rage. I slap his hand away and take a step back. “You aren’t usually a little bitch that gets everyone else to do your dirty work? Good for fucking you.”

“I’ve been trying to make things right!” His voice hardens, losing the soft edge from a moment ago, and my chest tightens. “What the fuck is your problem, you crazy bitch?”

This is more than giving him blue balls. No, this is him genuinely hurt and pissed off about something—the former he’s trying to hide away, of course. The change from the sweet guy I’ve come to enjoy to the cursing jackass could only mean one thing—he knows I was behind the call from Monique. And he really isn’t happy. Well, too bad for him. I’ve been irritated for months.

“You just want to fuck me,” I scowl, shaking my head at him. “Don’t try and make this into something it isn’t.”

He drags a hand down his face and groans. “That isn’t the only reason, fucking hell. I hated what I was doing, what I was getting Jess to do. But you have to understand where I was coming from.”

“And where were you coming from, Carson? You thought your precious parents were fucking around on each other? Big deal, they probably are. It’s not like you would know since, from what I hear, they’re never around!”

Closing the distance, his hand wraps around my throat, and his grey eyes pierce into me. “Watch your fucking mouth. You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“You’re so pathetic, you know that?” Taunting him while he quite literally holds my life in his hand isn’t the best decision I’ve had in a while. “Your parents are going through something pretty damn huge, and you’re here whining and acting like a spoilt fucking brat.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he repeats, low and dark.

Bringing my hand up to cover his, I squeeze, challenging him to add some extra pressure. By this point, I can barely control my breathing and my nipples are so hard that the friction against my lace bra is starting to become painful.

“Sure I do. You were jealous. You were scared that your mom would have chosen my dad and then we’d all be the happy family you never got to experience. So you tried hurting me because you were jealous of my dad, of the attention you wanted and never got. You’re nothing but a spoiled. Little. Brat.”

His fingers finally start to apply pressure, and I bite my lip to hold in a moan as my pussy starts throbbing. Ah hell, if I’m going to have a new kink, I might as well embrace it.

Without even breaking a sweat, Carson spins me and slams my back against the door, pressing his body against me. Leaning in, he stops an inch away from my lips, our breaths mingling together as we both try and fail to control our breathing.

“Why do you have to make this so fucking difficult?” he grinds out, pressing his hips against me. “What the fuck do you want from me?”

I pretend to ponder for a moment, taking satisfaction in the feel of him rock hard against me. There’s some power in the knowledge that you can get a guy hard without even laying a finger on him. Right now that power is pounding through my blood, setting every nerve on fire and denying my lungs the oxygen they’re begging for.

“You can either fuck me or move out of the damn way so I can find someone up to the task,” I grin, raising a brow in a silent—or not so silent—challenge. The need to close the distance is all-consuming, but I manage to hold myself back.

Carson laughs quietly, shaking his head. To my disappointment, he releases his hold on my throat, only to grab onto my ponytail, twisting his fist through my hair and pulling harshly until my neck is completely exposed to him.

“You might hate me right now.” His teeth nip at my pulse, and I damn near jump out of my skin. “And that’s okay, because I know I deserve it. But make no mistake, if you allow another man to touch you, I’ll give the fucker an all-access pass to the ICU. Do you hear me?”

Now would be a perfect time to just surrender to everything coursing through my body, to let go and move on. But that road had always

bored me.

“You just reminded me to not tell you shit, thanks for that.”

My words seem to snap something inside of him, because with a hard tug, my panties off are ripped off and my hips are left stinging from the fabric burn.

“You aren’t walking the fuck away from me this time.” I shiver at the threat in his voice and wrap my arms around his neck when his hands reach down to grab my ass, lifting me up effortlessly. I guess the muscles are good for something.

With my skin burning and my pussy screaming for friction, I keep my legs straight, refusing to make this too easy for him. My reaction—or lack of—drags out a growl from deep in his chest and he pulls me back, only to slam me back against the door.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he hisses, squeezing my ass almost to the point of being painful. The tip of his finger brushes along my wet folds and that’s the only reason that I obey. “You are so fucking difficult.”

“Do you ever shut up?” I gasp when his lips attach to my throat once again, leaving open-mouthed kisses as he grinds against my core. “If you don’t fuck me now, I’ll come back to my senses and headbutt you.”

Cursing under his breath, he reaches between us to undo his pants. Leaning my head back against the door, I close my eyes and try to take deep breaths to calm my breathing. It feels like an hour has passed by the time I hear the tear of a condom wrapper and feel his cock press against me like a hot branding iron. Jesus, I don’t think I’ve ever felt this burnt up before.

Despite my squirming to get closer, Carson remains still, kissing along my neck and moving up to my jawline. After an eternity, I pull my hands through his silky soft hair and tug his face toward me, pressing my lips to his in a kiss that he immediately tries to dominate. Nipping his bottom lip earns me a sharp slap on the ass that has me gasping, which Carson takes as his chance to dive his tongue past my lips. The force alone almost has me coming, especially when he combines it by grabbing my breast and pinching my hard nipple through my shirt and bra. When I flick my tongue against his with a frustrated moan, he gives me what I’m craving and splits me in two with his cock, swallowing my cry.

I pull away, resting my head back against the door to breathe my way through the sudden sting and burn. And because I’m me, I can’t help but

smirk and say, "Is it in yet?"

Carson knows I'm being a bitch right now, considering his consideration to pause and give me a moment to adjust to his size. Jordan was big, above average, but this is monstrous.

Jesus.

Is he in my stomach? I'm pretty sure he is currently in my stomach right now, because with only one thrust I can feel the tell-tale signs of cramping. Nothing that some Advil will take away later.

"I don't know," he teases, an infuriating smirk playing at the corner of his lips. He pulls out almost all the way, only to thrust back in. "Is it in, *Annabelle?*"

Clearly this isn't something I'm going to win, and weirdly I'm okay with that. I just need this jerk to start fucking me already. The burn is still present, only now it's joined with the fire of every nerve ending being lit like fireworks on New Year's Eve.

"Oh my god," I gasp, trying to circle my hips. "You already know you have a big dick, now fuck me before gym finishes."

As if realizing where we are and that we're on a time limit, he finally starts to fuck me with hard, punishing thrusts that destroy every bit of me. If anyone were to walk past through the hall, there'd be no mistaking what we're doing in here as the sounds of slapping flesh, rough grunts and breathless screams fill the air. With one hand gripping my ass and the other in my hair, Carson holds nothing back.

I tug on his hair and smash my mouth to his to try and control the moans being dragged out of me. Our tongues meet in the softest caress and if I wasn't being fucked of all coherent thought, I'd laugh at how sweetly Carson kisses me while he impales me on his cock.

"Don't stop. Fuck, fuck, don't you dare stop," I moan, throwing my head back onto the door.

If I thought he was deep before, I was very wrong. I let out a squeal and grab onto his biceps when he drops me down at the same time he angles his hips, flashes of light blinding me as my muscles contract. I hadn't even realized I was so close to the cliff until he just pushed me off without any warning.

Searing hot tremors shoot up my spine and he covers my mouth with his hand, the scent of his soap sending me further. Waves after waves of heat rush through my blood, meeting at my pussy where I clench almost

painfully, feeling every hard ridge of his cock as he joins me, throbbing deep inside me.

“Jesus,” Carson growls, burying his face in my neck and breathing deep. “You’re gonna squeeze my dick off.”

All I can do is gasp as I try to regain control of my head and clear out the fuzziness that wants to follow my high.

Dropping me onto wobbly legs, Carson scoops up my thong before I can, tucking it into his pocket. I try to get a glimpse of the anaconda that had just torn me apart, but he’s already tucked his cock back in, surprisingly still hard, if the obvious bulge is any indication.

“So...” He pulls my hair tie out and fluffs my hair out, much to my confusion. My guard is rising once again, second guessing every move he makes. “We good now?”

Does he seriously think that all I needed was a good fuck to forgive and forget his bullshit behavior the past few months? I won’t lie. It was a good start, but I’m not an idiot. What if he’s found another reason to hate me and he’s just decided to play the long game?

Standing on my toes, I press a quick kiss to his jaw, unable to resist the urge as he stands looking flushed and adorable. “Not even close. Thanks for the orgasm, though.”

After adjusting my shirt, I turn and walk out, leaving him slack-jawed.

I could’ve gotten a ride, or even an Uber, but after my fantastic decision to let Carson fuck me in the locker room earlier, I needed the extra time alone and the bus is a good place to get lost in my thoughts.

Thinking with your hormones is never a good idea. I am currently a fantastic example of that. I’m supposed to get even with the guy, not spread my legs for him. That didn’t exactly scream, *hey watch your fucking back*.

I can feel him with every step I take and with every gust of wind that surrounds me in his scent. It’s not awful. I’ve found myself looking forward to the wind, because it reminds me I didn’t imagine what happened, that in one way he’s with me still.

Kicking up into a high swing, I put a pause on my thoughts when Valerie makes her way across the park; her face cautious and half-covered with an oversized hoodie. My heart clenches. This was never us. We grew up attached to the hip. When the hell did we stop running to each other?

I can't even put all the blame on her. She doesn't know what's going on with Carson. I don't even know what's going on there, but I've never kept anything from her. Even when she didn't want to always want to know, she knew everything that went on with Jordan.

"Who died?" I joke when she takes the swing next to me rather gloomy.

She laughs dryly, keeping the hood up. "Gianna told me you know, so we don't have to beat about the bush."

We swing through the air for a few minutes in silence. Tossing my head back, a smile takes over my face at the rush of exhilaration moving through my veins and the weightless feeling in my bones as I fly through the air. Nothing could beat this, the wind brushing through my hair like a gentle caress and the cold air freezing the tip of my nose.

Once my legs have started to cramp and my hair has knotted from being whipped through the air, I slow down to a stop and wait for Valerie to slow.

"I wouldn't have judged you," I tell her once we've both stopped.

Valerie snorts, turning her head to smile at me. "You so would have judged me. Annabelle McJudgy Dorian."

"Okay, first of all, ouch. Second of all, you aren't wrong. But I wouldn't have tried to stop you, I just want you to be happy."

"I know. I think I was just embarrassed. He cheated on me, and here I am trying to forgive him. It makes me a fucking hypocrite." She kicks at the sand with a huff.

"Because of Jordan?" The sadness in her voice is a painful reminder of why I never wanted her to go through this. I remember how hard it was every time I took Jordan back, knowing that I would deal with judgement everywhere I went.

She lifts her shoulder and pulls the hood back. "Yeah. I was always on your case about you leaving him, and now here I am. I was ashamed, I *am* ashamed. But I just... I can't turn off my feelings for him." She smiles sadly and leans back. "I wish it were that simple."

"What about Weston?" This is the one that hurts me more than her talking to Ezra. To hear that she was seeing someone else and couldn't even tell me.

Groaning, she closes her eyes and starts to swing again. "Weston... I don't know, Anna. We started to hang out after I broke up with Ez, and

that's all it was, I swear.”

“You never did anything?”

“Well...”

She halts to a stop and keeps her eyes on the ground, giving me my answer. “You slept with him, didn't you?”

“Only a few times. I thought it was just a rebound thing, but then it started to feel like it was more. I freaked out on him last weekend and haven't heard from him since. I'm so fucking lost right now.”

Her voice breaks at the end, the sound tearing at my heart. I know how it feels to be confused about your feelings with someone, because I'm still not ready to accept why my stomach flips every time Carson enters the room. I don't think I'll ever be. Denial is just too easy.

“We'll figure this out,” I say, even if I don't really believe the words myself. “You want to go get burgers while we figure out what to do?”

When she shoots me a sad smile and wipes under her eyes, I take her hand and squeeze.

After everything she's given me, I'd be an ass to not share something. Maybe I can just get away with telling her I fucked Carson. We don't have to get into feelings or anything.

We stand up to leave, and my phone goes off from where I'd left it on top of my bag. Kneeling carefully to avoid flashing anyone—since a certain somebody stole my panties—I grab my phone to read the message left by an unknown number, feeling the air leave my lungs.

Unknown: If you think I'm giving up, you're more insane than I thought.

Chapter 27

Carson

I can't get the feel of her out of my head. The way her lips felt, how soft her hair felt in my hand, the way her pulse hammered against my palm the tighter I gripped her throat. It's pretty fucked up and very unlike me that when I think about her, the first thing I think is how perfect she felt pressed against me, and not how tight and hot she was wrapped around my cock, squeezing the very life out of me. Her pussy was magical, yes, but there was so much more to it. It was everything I didn't know I was missing, like I've been locked in a windowless room and I'd just tasted fresh air for the first time.

I've been such an asshole, even now I can't seem to hold back from biting at the bait she throws at me; it's like the insults have become our foreplay. I just hope I can show Anna that I'm not the dick I've been trying to prove to her I was. Fucking her against the locker room door hadn't been a part of my plan.

Anna doesn't trust me, or believe me when I say I'm sorry, which is bloody fair considering. But she will. She has to. The past is my burden to regret. It isn't for her to stay locked in. I've never had any like this, this urge to reach out and hold on to her. She makes my heart skip beats and my mouth go dry simply by breathing in the same room as me.

Asher knocks me out of my head when he tosses the PS4 controller at my chest, grunting through a mouthful of his muffin and pointing to the tv screen.

"Or keep daydreaming," Weston remarks dryly. "I do love repeating missions. The repetitiveness is just *thrilling*."

Flipping him off, I return my focus to the game just in time to watch Asher blow my head off.

"I wasn't daydreaming, you dick," I bite out.

"Not anymore," Asher grins, turning to start beating into me on the screen as I respawn next to him.

I get him on the ground easily. "You motherfucker, we're on the

same side.”

Throughout the game, I struggle keeping up. It isn't the easiest thing to focus when my attention keeps going back to the blonde that I was inside of hours ago. Fuck, I wonder if I can sneak away early and find her.

“How have things been with your new baby sis?” Asher taunts as if he can read my mind.

Giving up on the game, I drop the controller down beside me and lean my head back on the couch. “Fine, just fine.”

“So long as you don't fuck her,” he laughs. “Jess is already pissed off. Imagine the bloodbath if she thought you were banging the girl you fucked her off for.”

Resisting the urge to cringe, I glance over at Weston to find him staring at his phone with a concentrated look on his face. There's my perfect distraction.

“What about you?” I ask Weston. “How're things with my dear sister?”

For a moment, I think he's going to dodge the question, but he surprises me when he lets out a groan and sits further back. “Don't say that. It's fucking weird. I don't want to think about the fact I've technically fucked *your sister*.”

I hardly want to even think about the fact that I *have* a sister. Anger bubbles through my blood and I'm quick to push it down. Now isn't the time for losing my shit.

“Wait! Wait, wait, hold the hell on.” Asher sits up straight, his eyes darting from Weston to me. “You've been banging Anna's BFF? And you fucking knew and didn't say anything?”

“Figured you already knew,” I say, restarting the mission we'd just failed. “It's not like they were any good at hiding it.”

That's bullshit. I'd had my assumptions, but if I hadn't seen them at the party, I never would have guessed. I don't know how Weston had even found the time to sneak around with Valerie. If he isn't with us, he's down at the docks or at home.

Asher runs a hand through his hair, shooting an accusing look at Weston. “And you what, have feelings for her or some shit? Is this what the moping has been about?”

Weston closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “I don't know, man. Maybe? She hasn't exactly given me a fucking chance to find

out.”

“Well, shit man.”

“Whatever. You fuckers want to go play pool? I’m over this game.”

Mrs Davis’s voice floats in from the doorway. “Sweetheart, Valerie is here to see you.”

Speak of the fucking devil.

Weston’s grandma shoots us a warm smile before untying her apron and disappearing down the hall while Weston jumps up so fast that he stumbles, making Asher laugh.

“Shut the hell up.” He tugs on his hair, throwing it up into a short pony. His grandma has been begging him to cut it for years with no success. “Stay here, both of you. *I mean it.*”

He almost runs in the direction of the front door, leaving Asher and me alone. We share a look, muting the game to try and overhear. He told us to stay here, that’s all we’re doing.

With Weston and his grandma living alone, they choose comfort over size, so there isn’t much distance between each room. It helps in situations like this one, where our only option is to eavesdrop. Which we don’t do often. Not at all.

“What are you doing here?” Weston’s voice floats through the quiet house.

Valerie’s voice is quiet as she replies, and we lean toward to listen. “Wes, please. I swear I can explain.”

“There’s no need. I saw you together in town. Kind of spoke for itself.”

“It isn’t what you think,” she begs.

“Of course it is,” Weston shouts. “Why are you even here? You proved to yourself that you can fuck someone else. You got even. Congratulations.”

Asher mouths something that looks like *the fuck* and I nod in agreement. Weston made the situation sound causal, and this sounds anything but casual. I missed out on so much when I was losing my mind trying to be someone I’m not.

“I didn’t want you to find out from Carson.”

I shrug when Asher gives me a questioning look. There’s nothing I know about Valerie. We haven’t exactly been staying up to paint each other’s nails. The only reason I’ve been making any effort with her is to get on

Anna's good side.

"What the fuck would I find out from him? I can't imagine him being someone you're already spilling your secrets to."

"No, but Anna knows."

Shit.... Fuck, fuck, fuck. I was not ready for this to be exposed yet. I was hoping to have some more time with Anna before anyone finding out. Of course she'd run off to tell her best friend, though.

"And? Anna isn't exactly his biggest fan."

Oh, but she was having no trouble screaming out my name. I push those thoughts down to prevent my dick from saluting Anna's memory. This is about to get really awkward. My hard dick doesn't need to add to that.

"They're sleeping together, so I just assumed it was a matter of time. But anyway, I need to say this before I lose my nerve. When you saw us, we were only talking, I swear. But..."

"*What the fuck?*" Asher blows up, throwing us under the bus for listening and cutting off whatever Valerie was saying.

Weston says something I can no longer hear and a minute later he storms into the living room, his fist clenched.

"This is a new fucking low, even for you! What the hell were you thinking?"

Alright, I can acknowledge this looks bad.

"It isn't like that," I groan. "And don't come at me. What the hell was all that?"

"Oh, hell no." Asher points a finger at me, taking Weston's side. "Don't turn this on him. He can answer to his shit later. You fucked Anna? Why?"

"Is this some shit against her father?"

"I will kick your ass if you're doing this to hurt her."

Now is not the time I want to walk down that path. I'm racking myself with guilt every damn day over my actions. Everything just looked so convincing. How was I supposed to assume they weren't having an affair? My mother never mentioned Roman. Then again, she was never one for talking about the past. I guess now I know why. Anna was just a means to piss Roman off. I hated lowering myself to that level, but everything piled up until some messed up part of me thought it was a great idea. I'm not at all proud of what I'd done.

"Fuck you," I growl. "You know I'm done with that shit."

“Then why?” Asher throws his hands up in frustration.

“Because I like her,” I yell, jumping up to get in his face. “I fucking like her, alright? I hated what I did. It made me fucking sick every time I told Jess what to do. Is that what you wanted to hear, huh? That I’m an asshole? That I’m a fucking unforgiveable dick? That I don’t deserve her? Because I know all that already. So back the fuck off.”

Asher pauses, his fists clenched at his side and his eyes hard, like he’s seriously considering punching me. I’ll welcome it if he does. It’s been a long time coming.

“What about Jessica?” Weston breaks the silence.

Cracking my neck to ease the tension, I keep my eyes locked on Asher as I answer Weston. “What about her? I stopped fucking her months ago.”

The last time was actually one month after Anna moved into the house. I might have messed around with Monique up until that party on the lake, but I cooled shit off with Jess the second my eyes started to linger on Anna longer than I’d have liked. Fuck, I felt sick after being with Jess, knowing that she was the one I’d been using as a puppet to torment Anna.

Asher raises a brow like he’s trying to call me on my shit, but he keeps his mouth shut. For once, Weston is the one to speak up.

“You two looked pretty fucking cosy last week out in the parking lot,” he snaps. “We like Anna, if this is some bullshit—”

“It’s not,” Asher defends me, surprising both me and Weston. “Although I’m also confused about the Jess shit. She’s fucking trouble, man.”

I drag my hand over my face with a sigh. “Trust me, I know it didn’t look good. But that was nothing. She was throwing a fucking tantrum about leaving Anna alone, so I threatened to go to Michael and her parents about the shit she does.”

For someone with so few brain cells, you’d think she would be smart enough to avoid party drugs. Apparently not, though, since cocaine and ecstasy are two of her best friends. She’s a bigger cokehead than Mon, she just hides it better. Sometimes it’s hard to believe that Jess was the one to get Monique into the drug scene just from looking on from the outside. The last thing Jess wants is for her extracurricular activities to get back to her boyfriend and uptight parents.

“She’s still on that shit?” Asher frowns, concern seeping into his voice.

“Her life is too bland to ever stop,” I say.

“Fucking hell. Just be careful. She’s been obsessed with you since middle school. She won’t take this Anna stuff laying down.”

That’s what I’m afraid of.

“Want to go to Felix’s and get drunk?” Weston asks, cutting through the growing tension in the air. “He just put an air hockey table down in the basement.”

“Fuck yes,” Asher and I say at the same time. I crack a smile as he laughs, pulling me into a headlock.

“I love you man.” He lets me go when I jab his ribs, but not before kissing me on the top of the head. “Even now that you’ve got all those gross feelings.”

Laughing, I pull away and aim a light punch at his abs. “Fuck off.”

Walking into my room a little past midnight, I can’t say I’m surprised to find all my shirts scattered along my floor. It gives me a flashback to when I’d done the same to Anna, except I hadn’t cut up her clothes. I just stole all her panties.

I don’t bother to hide the grin when I gather up my shirts, finding every single one with uneven rips. This must have taken her ages to do. I’m impressed.

Some shirts have *small dick* written in black marker, and that only makes me laugh. I saw the flash of discomfort when I first slid into her. It made me feel like an ass for not preparing her properly. I know I’m longer and thicker than average, so it was a dick move to just fuck her against the door like I was an animal. This comment is just amusing as hell, because she knows how wrong of a statement it is.

After throwing everything into a garbage bag, I barge into Anna’s room, pleased to find the door unlocked. And even more pleased to find her laying on her back, her cheeks flushed and her hand down the front of her jean shorts.

I was coming to poke the bear and maybe demand that she join me as I’m forced to go buy a new wardrobe, but the sudden tightening of my pants is an issue I’d much rather sort out first.

“Fuck!” she screams, her hand jerking out of her shorts. “What the hell? Ever heard of knocking, you jackass?”

Leaning my shoulder against the doorway and crossing my arms,

my lips curve up into a smirk as my eyes drag down the length of her. The memory of her clinging to me hits like a fucking truck as my cock fights against the zipper of my jeans.

“You can leave now,” she snaps. My dick twitches at the sassy tone in her voice.

“Who were you thinking about?”

Her cheeks flush a deeper pink, confirming my suspicion. She was totally imagining me. Pushing myself off the doorframe, I take a step further inside and kick the door shut. Her nipples harden against the thin shirt and her thighs press together. She can act like she doesn’t want me all she wants, but her body doesn’t lie.

“Funny, I don’t remember sending an invitation,” she bites out, trying to keep the fire in her voice. Her eyes fall to my pants, though, where I don’t even bother to hide my erection.

How was it only today—or, technically, yesterday since it’s now midnight—that I was inside of her? I can still feel her pressed against me as if I only just broke away now. My stomach flips as I stalk to the bed, taking in her smooth skin and stopping on a thick scar by her ankle. Even marked, she’s fucking beautiful.

“I’ve always preferred just crashing the party anyway.” Raising a brow, I stop at the end of the bed and wait for her to say no. Because as much as I want her right now, I know that I’d walk the fuck out of this room if she didn’t actually want this. I may have been an asshole to her, but I’d never cross that line.

Instead of replying with something snarky, the skies open up and she parts her thighs in a silent invitation, her eyes slowly dragging down the length of my chest. It’s just a damn look, and yet my skin heats from the desire in her stare. How could I ever want someone else again with this perfect creature in front of me?

Lifting my knee onto the bed, I take my time moving up. We were rushed our first time, letting our deepest desires speak for us. I didn’t have any time to worship her the way I’ve been desperate to.

Her breath comes out on the softest sigh when I press my lips to her ankle, kissing the small scar like I can erase whatever bad memory brought it onto her skin. When she squirms, my cock tries to rush me. This is about her, not me. And I don’t know if she’ll ever give me this chance again, so I’m taking full advantage of everything she’s offering me right now.

I press soft kisses up her leg, moving past her shorts. Her skin is so fucking soft that I'd be happy to just rub my face along her skin like a dog, which I somehow refrain from doing. Instead, I focus on the exposed flesh between her shirt and shorts, peppering kisses along her hipbones and dipping my tongue into her belly button. Her sighs are so simple, yet the most amazing sound to my ears.

Just as I press my lips to her ribs, a laugh bubbles out of her. My heart does a weird flip thing, so I kiss her again in the same point. This time she wiggles, trying to escape me. I grab hold of her hips and nip the flesh, my soul fucking soaring when she giggles below me.

I was wrong before. Her sighs were sweet, but this? Her laugh? Knowing that I'm the reason behind it has me feeling like a king standing on top of a mountain. Nothing tops this feeling, nothing ever will.

"Stop it." She giggles when I continue kissing along her ribs. "You're killing my lady boner."

Lifting my head, any response dies on my tongue. Her eyes are dark and wild, her full bottom lip is squashed under her teeth, and her cheeks are such a stunning pink. Guilt starts to claw it's up my throat, threatening to kill my own boner. Now isn't the time to get stuck in the past. Ignoring the darkness trying to creep over me, I move up and mold my mouth to hers.

A soft moan leaves her when my tongue caresses the inside of her lip, her arms coming to wrap around my neck as I settle between her thighs.

God, I don't deserve this girl. She is too good, too fucking pure for my filthy hands to be on her. But I don't stop, I *can't* stop. My heart would probably give up on me if I try to walk away from Anna. I'd rather chew off my own arm than leave this room right now.

Her tongue brushes against my own, causing my brain to short circuit and my hips to grind between her thighs, almost like my cock has a mind of his own and is desperate for any type of friction. My kiss turns rough and desperate as I try to mold myself to her, fusing us together.

Her small hands tug on my hair, dragging a low growl from somewhere deep in my throat as the sharp sting lights me up. I feel as if I'm drowning and Anna is my only source of oxygen as I kiss her with a frantic edge.

My hands caress down her sides, avoiding the spot I now know is ticklish. Now isn't the time for a giggle fit, as stunning as the sound is. When I clench the bottom of her shirt in my hands, she wraps her warm thighs

around my hips and arches her back up, urging me to continue.

My cock is throbbing when we split apart for the second it takes to tear her shirt off, then I'm back on her like a starved animal. I can't get enough of her. I don't think I ever will, if I'm being honest here.

Her breasts press to my chest and I make a mental promise to spend extra time getting to know each one personally because, *fucking heaven of all things perfection*. Her bare tits pressing to my chest have me convinced that I've died and gone to heaven. It's the only sane answer, I'm afraid.

"I'm not even mad about the shirts," I mumble against her lips, my heart pounding when I feel her mouth curve into a smile. "You can ruin everything and I'll still kneel to you."

We rush to take my shirt off—I'd prefer not to ruin my last undamaged shirt—and she's quick to drag her nails down my back until she reaches my ass, where she squeezes and pushes in an attempt to push me harder against her covered pussy. I let out a hiss when I feel how blinding hot she is, even through her jean shorts and my own pants. I could lay like this forever, with her curled around me like she doesn't want to let go.

"Will you just fuck me already?" she moans when I arch my hips against her, rubbing the full length of my cock against her pussy. "God, it should be illegal how good this feels."

Rolling my hips against her one last time, I'm about to pull away to give her exactly what she wants when the worst possible thing happens.

"Anna." Three soft knocks fall on the door. "Your dad is here. He's by the dock waiting for you and asked if you could hurry."

Anna surprises me by dropping her head back to the pillow and letting out a string of curses. I manage to catch *cockblocker*, and that one has me laughing into her neck.

"It's not funny," she sulks.

It doesn't escape my notice that she hasn't let me go, and hope starts to light up my chest. Maybe I haven't completely fucked this up.

"You're right." I rise on my forearms and stare down at her, memorizing every soft feature. "It's hilarious."

That's a damn lie. I'm going to walk my aching balls into a cold shower and cry over Decker's fantastic timing. I can't even bring it in me to wonder if his sudden appearance has something to do with my parents and Seth. I'm too focused on the small crease between her eyebrows and the way her full lips press into a hard line.

We stay like that for what feels like an eternity. Something flickers in Anna's eyes, but it's gone too fast for me to analyze it. I want to tell her to come to my room when her dad leaves. I want to tell her how sick I've felt hurting her. I want everything, I realize with a start.

And it's with that last staggering thought that I force myself to peel away from Anna, ignoring the flash of disappointment across her face. I have to prove to her I'm not this guy, that I'm not someone who just wants to fuck her. I have to prove that I want more with her, that I'm wanting to give her something that I've never given to another soul before.

My heart.

Chapter 28

Annabelle

My Dad stands on the dock, staring out at the dark lake with his hands tucked into his pockets. He doesn't react to my approach, but I know he can hear me.

My heart is still pounding against my chest and the chill in the air does nothing to extinguish the fire in my blood. Now that I'm thinking clearly, I could really hit myself for how close I let Carson get tonight. How fucking stupid can I be? He can't be trusted. It was bad enough that I let him fuck me at *school*. It's just so hard to have a clear head around him.

"Hey Dad." I wrap my arms around him and squeeze as tight as I can, taking the moment to breathe in his scent of stale cigarettes and gunpowder in an effort to wipe Carson from my head. *I wish it worked*. "What are you doing here so late?"

He wraps me up, easing the tension from my muscles at being so darn close to the lake. I could easily fall in right now and be dinosaur food.

"I'm passing through town and I had news about Seth. Thought delivering it in person was a pretty good excuse to see my daughter." He places a kiss on the top of my head. "Is Carson home?"

His name is like a bucket of ice on my newfound relaxation.

"He's in his room, I think," I say, a bit too high pitched. "I'll text him to come out."

No way in hell am I about to volunteer to go get him. I don't trust myself nearly enough right now to be alone with him in his room, and getting my brains fucked out isn't a smart idea with my dad downstairs. Witnessing a murder isn't how I want to end my night.

Me: Come out to the dock?

Carson's reply comes through a second later and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself grinning.

Carson: So that's your kink, huh? Public sex? Okay, I can get behind this.

Me: You're so disgusting.

Carson: Baby, you can ease up a little on the dirty talk, I'm already hard.

A small part of me worries that he's serious and will come down saying some bullshit that will get his ass beat. The quicker we get this over with, the quicker I can finish what I started earlier... alone. Except with new memories of Carson to touch myself to.

"How's Slater?" I ask while we wait for Carson.

"Moody," Dad grunts. "So basically the same as always."

"I'd be moody living with you, too."

He jabs a finger into my ribs. "Brat."

I let out a squeal when I rock too close to the grimy water and Dad hurriedly grabs my bicep, pulling me against him with a laugh. Of course he'd find my fear amusing. Great parenting. Carson's voice cuts through the cold air when I open my mouth to complain about Dad's meeting place.

"Can this be quick? I have somewhere to be."

My heart skips a few too many beats at the sound of voice, and god, I really hope my dad doesn't notice the slight hitch to my breath. I do not need those questions.

Slowly, I turn to face the guy that I was about to cross a pretty big line with....again. Dressed in a pair of black sweats and a white shirt with the tips of his hair damp, it's clear he just got out of a shower. No doubt a cold one, judging from the weapon I'd felt between my legs not that long ago.

His narrowed eyes turn on me, as grey and dark as the ocean under the stars. By an outside perspective, he probably looks pissed off by my mere existence. They didn't feel the desperation in his touch, the brutal force behind his kiss. The last thing Carson Dorian feels towards me right now is hatred. My dad, on the other hand...

"Works for me," Dad replies, facing Carson. "I'll cut right to it, since it's so late. Slater went back over the accounts, and he found two we weren't aware of, and froze them. Now I'm here to warn you, because Seth is bound to realize this soon and he won't be happy. Stay the fuck out of his way, the both of you. If he shows up when Henry isn't here, call me. Carson, you have my number, please use it."

Carson nods, his eyes darting between me and my dad. I mentally cross my fingers that my dad doesn't notice the slight shift in the air when his eyes linger on mine for a second too long.

"I also have some pretty big news. It took some connections, but eventually we managed to track down the hit. It was a Miss Monica Jamison from Portland, and you have my word that she won't be a problem anymore."

The snicker leaves me before I can do anything to stop it. Even Carson's lips twitch as he successfully holds back his own laugh.

"What is so funny about this?" Dad's stern tone sobers me up a bit.

"What kind of hitman is called *Monica Jamison*?"

Carson finally grins, sending my pulse wild. "Was she bored of running her little bakery on the corner?"

Dad shakes his head in exasperation. "Of course you find this amusing. Never mind the fact that the woman was a fucking hired killer."

The use of *was* sends a cold chill down my spine that I quickly shake off. Nope, now isn't the time to open my mind to the many things my dad does. This is good news. There is no longer anyone—that we know of—that's actively trying to murder Carson's parents. Maybe now he can stop walking around with the weight of a house on his shoulders.

"I was at least expecting some huge dude or something," Carson shrugs. "How harmful could she have really been?"

"This isn't a movie," I roll my eyes.

"Fucking feels like one."

"Ah, this is nothing." The way my dad waves his hand like this is a regular night stirs something uneasy in my stomach. "You just need to know that it's been taken care of, which also gives another reason for Seth to be on the warpath. You're both safe here. You don't need to worry. I've already spoken to Henry, so he is aware of everything that's happening. Now I better head off. I'm already running behind. I'll see you for your birthday, honey. Love you."

I squeeze my arms tight around his bulky waist, ignoring the way my skin burns under Carson's stare. "Love you, too. Be safe."

I expected to feel different. I don't know why, it sounds stupid now.

I'm finally eighteen. An adult. An adult unable to legally drink, but

like that's ever stopped me. It sure isn't going to stop me tonight.

Valerie rolls behind me, wrapping her arm around my waist and pulling me tight against her. "You're officially older than me, you old bitch. Happy Birthday, babe."

"I've always been older than you, Val," I laugh.

As is our tradition, Valerie came over yesterday afternoon for our annual birthday sleepover. We ate our weight in pizza, drunk enough milkshakes to throw up and watched re-runs of Charmed. It's been our thing ever since her dad was arrested; her grandparents aren't big on celebrations and my parents were too busy with their careers to put much effort into my birthdays.

"Oh, shut up and go back to sleep. I'm not ready to get up," she grumbles, burying her face in my hair.

"You can either get up and get out now or watch me celebrate my birthday with an orgasm," I tell her, only half serious.

Orgasms curtesy of my blue vibrating friend are the best way to start the day, but I wouldn't be pulling him out with Valerie next to me. I do have some boundaries, and getting off in front of my best friend is one I'm firm on.

"Fuck off," she laughs loudly and pokes my ribs. "You win. I'm gonna go downstairs and fill up now for a night of getting blacked out. Have fun rubbing one out."

She presses a quick kiss to my temple before rolling out of bed, throwing on a pair of my shorts and walking out, leaving the door wide open behind her.

Fucking bitch.

After a quick look at my phone, I shoot up from bed and race into the bathroom. I'd assumed we slept in after staying up till four in the morning. I didn't expect to only have forty minutes until I meet my parents for lunch.

There goes my morning orgasm.

The shower is quicker than I would have liked. I had to try and fit in washing my hair and blow-drying, neither of which I can rush.

Val's bag is gone from the room, which tells me she must have seen the time and is off in the other bathroom getting ready. Both my parents were all too happy when I asked if Val could join us today. I need the buffer if this lunch turns into a bloodbath. They probably thought the same.

Sitting on the end of my bed is a small box with a black ribbon tied into a perfect bow.

Confused, I approach the box as if it's a bomb. Val gave me her gift when she came last night and she's one for seeing the look on your face when you open her presents, so there's no way this could be her.

Still wrapped up in my towel, I sit on the end of the bed and lift the box onto my lap, slowly untying the ribbon. I can smell the faintest spice of cologne, sending a shockwave to my system.

It's enough to make me give a slight hysterical laugh. There's no way.

Opening the lid, a gasp leaves my lips. Sitting on a plush white cushion is a necklace with a beautiful blood red gemstone. The sparkling silver chain is broken by the gem as it shines up out of the box, stunning me speechless.

"Red looks good on you."

Startled, I look up to meet grey eyes. I need to focus on my surroundings better, especially after Dad's warning about Seth. The last thing I want is to find myself alone with him again.

"This is from you?" I inwardly cringe at the softness in my voice.

His eyes are locked on the knot holding my towel together, and a shiver moves down my spine, spurring my actions. Since my dad interrupted us, we haven't had a chance to talk about what almost happened. We've barely had a chance to talk at all. Now that I'm standing here naked, with Carson's heated stare travelling the length of my body, there isn't much talking I want to do.

The door is closed, and I don't take even a second to care if it's locked before I'm tugging the knot free, allowing the towel to fall to my feet.

"Can you help me put it on?" I ask, my voice merely a breath.

His reply is a low groan deep in his throat, then he's stepping forward, wrapping his hand around my neck to tug my body against his. He swallows my whimper with his mouth, tightening his hold and using his other hand to take the box and drop it back onto the bed.

When his tongue strokes along my bottom lip, I don't hesitate to open. He can take everything from me right now. There's nothing sweet about our kiss. It's just as intense as it was last time, like we're both trying to burn the other.

"Nothing is stopping me from fucking you into that mattress," he

growls into my mouth, releasing his grip on my throat to tangle his fingers through my hair.

“You’re a lot of talk, Dorian,” I breathe, digging my nails into his bicep to keep him pressed against me.

Jerking me back by my hair so that my eyes lock onto the ceiling, he brings his hand to my throbbing pussy, dragging his middle finger up my wet slit. My eyes grow heavy as the pounding between my thighs grows to an almost unbearable level.

“That smart mouth of yours will get you into trouble,” he whispers darkly, dragging his tongue up my throat and nipping my jaw.

Just as a moan leaves my throat, he delivers a sharp slap to my pussy, soothing the sting by rolling his palm against my clit. I’m pretty sure I almost came, but I’ll never admit that out loud. The responding cry probably gave me away, though.

With a shove I don’t see coming, I’m suddenly on the bed with a fully-clothed Carson climbing between my open thighs.

“You better be quick, I have plans.” I mock yawn and stretch out.

Curling his hand around my throat once again, a throaty gasp leaves me at the shock of heat that shoots through my veins. There’s no malice in his eyes, just pure desperation and heat.

“I’ll be quick this once, only because I don’t want your friend to fucking cockblock me. But I promise you, Annabelle Decker, I will find you tonight and when I do, I’ll fuck you till the sun rises.”

My body shivers at his words as I wrap my legs around his waist and raise my pelvis to press against the bulge in his pants. The sharp sting from his zipper is a welcome relief to the throbbing and pooling wetness happening down there.

“If you don’t hurry and fuck me now, I’ll re-introduce your balls to my knee.”

“So demanding,” he grins, biting on the sensitive flesh below my ear.

Sick of the teasing, and with enough sense to know we don’t have long, I take his face in my hands and smash my lips to his in a bruising kiss that I’ll be feeling all through lunch. Reluctantly dropping my hands from his stubble-lined jaw, I reach between our bodies and work on frantically unzipping him as our tongues fight for dominance. When I finally reach in through the gap, I wrap my hand around his thick length. Or at least, I try to.

Pulling back with a pained groan, Carson holds himself above me by resting his elbows on either side of my head. The move stretches his shirt over his biceps, and I barely hold in the urge to drag my tongue over the small bulging veins.

Eighteen-year-olds should not look like this, it's tortuous.

"Condoms, they're in my room." Despite the obvious frustration in his voice, he doesn't stop my hand from stroking his cock, squeezing at the base and collecting the pre-cum at the tip with my thumb. He thrusts into my fist on every upward stroke, dropping his face into the crook of my neck with a tortured groan.

"I have an IUD," I tell him shakily, only half-aware of what I'm saying. "And I was tested. I'm clean."

He lifts his head suddenly, staring down at me in disbelief. "Are you sure? I mean, I'm clean, too. I got tested recently, and I haven't been with anything since..."

He cuts himself off and I swallow down my questions for another time. Since when? What did he mean by that? I know he's telling the truth about getting tested, and while that raises a small slither of guilt, I manage to push it down. Not much came from that rumour. He squashed it down straight away, and apparently he never slept around as much as I had assumed. I was more surprised by the fact he wasn't a manwhore than I was about his STD scare not making the rounds through the hall.

"Just get in me already, Carson," I snap, releasing my hold on his dick. "Or I'll tell Jordan his invitation for tonight got lost."

With a growl I can feel vibrate through his chest he plunges into me with one hard stroke, covering my scream with his hand.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

Thank god he's self-aware enough to pause for a moment, waiting for the sting to fade away from the sudden intrusion. He licks a path up my jaw and I gasp out a hoarse moan. Every touch from him has the power to drive me crazy.

"If I see him anywhere near you again, I'll re arrange his fucking face." He sucks down on my neck, no doubt leaving behind a mark. "Then I'll fuck you right in front of him, so that he can see that this pussy is mine now."

With his hand still clasped down around my mouth, he pulls out until all that's left inside me is the tip, then thrusts back in with a vengeance.

Like he is suddenly determined to ruin any chance I have of walking properly today.

“You. Are. Mine.” He slams into me with every word, so deep that I can practically feel him in my throat.

My cries are muffled by his palm, the sound working to heighten the pleasure lighting up every nerve in my body. He continues to whisper filthy things in my ear, his voice shaking with his own need, his hips slamming against me at a speed that dances along the line of fucking amazing and painful. My legs shake around his hips and my hands grip onto the sheets by my head as I try to keep myself from slamming my head into the headboard.

“I’ll fuck you so hard that you forget how he ever fucking felt,” he hisses, biting a tender spot on my throat and soothing the throb with his tongue.

I can’t wait to explain that sudden bruise to Valarie.

“You’re fucking ruining me.”

I’m already so close that when he sits back without breaking his stride and brings his free hand onto my clit, pinching and drawing hard circles, my orgasm slams into me like a freight train. A fire is set off inside me, burning me from the inside out as stars dance around my vision, threatening to pull me under to enjoy the heat pulsing through my entire body.

I’m brought back into reality by a couple of gentle slaps across my cheek.

“Don’t pass out on me now, Decker.”

Blinking my eyes open—when did they close?—I make out Carson’s blurry face. He looks so damn good. His cheeks are flushed and his forehead is shiny with a layer of sweat.

Honestly, how the hell does he make *sweating* look hot as hell?

“Did you just fucking slap me?” I rasp, realizing that his hand is no longer pressed to my mouth.

Carson grins, ignoring my question to lean down and kiss me.

My heart jumps into my throat at the simple move. There’s no heat behind it, no anger, no fight for power. Just a soft kiss.

“You’ve got a lunch to get to,” he smiles, his face lit up in a way I haven’t seen before. “But I’d recommend cleaning up first.”

Our current situation dawns on me. *Urg.* I’ve never gone without a

condom before. What's that saying?

What comes up must come down.

Dammit, I don't have time for another shower. What time is it? Am I late?

"Shit, get off me. Valerie—"

I'm cut off when the door swings open, revealing my shell-shocked best friend.

Lovely.

Chapter 29

Annabelle

Lunch was painful.

The whole day was painful actually.

After an embarrassing penguin walk to the bathroom to clean up—who knew that ditching condoms made the aftermath so uncomfortable—I’d done a horrid job of pretending that nothing had happened. Which didn’t work in my favor, considering that Valerie had quite literally walked in with Carson still *inside of me*. Telling her he slipped only worked to piss her off more.

At least I’ve successfully managed to not be alone with her. Sure, she hadn’t been subtle in the looks she threw my way during lunch, but at least I haven’t gotten the verbal bashing I’m bracing myself for.

Ivy lines up a row of tequila shots and cuts up a few limes while I lean against Gianna.

The party has been in full force for the past hour and I’m only on my second drink, entertaining a very light buzz. This is nowhere near as awful as I was expecting. In my defense, with the way Ivy kept talking, I was expecting clowns and cotton candy machines.

“Where’s Valerie?” Ivy asks as she grabs the saltshaker. “Is she doing these, too?”

“Nope.” I shake my head, in no hurry to find her for the first time in my life. Does that make me weak? Maybe... okay, yes it does.

Gianna pulls back to frown down at me. “Is everything okay? Did you two fight or something? I haven’t seen her since we got here.”

“She’s probably with Ezra,” I say.

When Val asked about inviting Ezra tonight, my first response was to say no and slap some sense into her. Until I remembered all the bullshit she put up with when I kept messing around with Jordan. I ended up agreeing that it was a good idea he came. Despite the fantasy of cutting his balls off I kept playing in my head.

“Ezra’s here? Well shit,” Gianna says.

“What?”

“Asher walked in earlier without Weston. Valerie must have warned him she’d be with Ezra or something, since there is rarely a party that Weston doesn’t show up to.”

Ivy gags at the mention of Asher. I remind her of her promise earlier to be on her best behavior. It’s my party. The last thing I need tonight is Ivy and Asher starting a fight. They’re notorious for pushing each other’s buttons. I have enough drama of my own to worry about their shit being brought here.

“Relax, I’ll be good. Pinky swear.” She smiles innocently and pours two lines of salt on her wrist.

Rolling my eyes at her, I follow Gianna as we take turns to lick the line of salt from Ivy’s wrists and take the shot.

The burn isn’t entirely pleasant, but it’ll do. The last thing I want to be tonight is sober. Henry has managed to be home every day by the time we’re back from school, with the threat of Seth leaving us all on edge. This is the first time in what feels like years that all adults have left us alone; my mom and Henry choosing to take the opportunity for a romantic weekend away. I’d be a liar if I said I wasn’t nervous as I waved them off this afternoon. Now would be the perfect time for Seth to try something if he wanted to.

“So, are we dancing or what?” Gianna bounces, shaking her head. “I have energy to burn off.”

“Will you be alright here?” I ask Ivy. It was her idea to stay at the bar and keep an eye on things, and I couldn’t exactly argue with her, not when she threw things like drink spiking in my face.

She laughs, nodding to the open space that has been transferred into a dancefloor. “You two go have fun. Mason is on his way over here. He’ll keep me company.”

Gianna tugs on my hand and blows a kiss to Ivy. “Love you, babe.”

“Go, go.” She shoo’s us away just as Mason reaches her, wrapping his arms around her waist and spinning her in a circle.

“So are they back together or what?” Gianna asks once we reach the dancing drunks grinding on each other. I hardly know any of them. Ivy and Gianna were put in charge of the guest list, since I’ve taken no steps in getting to know anyone outside of my little friend group.

I follow her gaze to find Val and Ezra leaning against the wall,

standing close together. As far as I know, they're only friends. Then again, she didn't exactly jump to tell me when she started talking to him, so I can't be sure.

"I have no idea," I shrug, feeling the tequila-induced fire start to spread through my blood.

She grabs my hands and starts to bounce around with a smile that could rival the sun. "Let's just leave them all to their boy dramas tonight and have fun!"

I knew the silence was too good to last. Valerie isn't one to just drop things. I should have known better and just got it over with.

Gianna got bored with dancing two songs in, which didn't work out for me, because the second we moved out of the crowd, Val was pushing me into the laundry room, locking all three of us in.

"This is kind of kinky," Gianna grins. "Didn't think girls were your thing, babe."

Val rolls her eyes, giving Gianna a light shove. "Shut up, you hornbag."

"Can't we do this later?" I groan. The buzz from our shots earlier are finally starting to wear off, and I'd much rather be having this particular conversation while plastered.

"No, we're doing this now." Val pokes me in the chest, cornering me against the washing machine.

"This reminds me of a video I once watched," Gianna muses, leaning back against the door. "Anna, stick your head in the machine, please. I wanna see something."

Her comments cut through whatever tension is radiating through Val as she laughs. "Isn't that more popular on hetero porn?"

"I like to mix it up sometimes," she winks. "I may not get off by it, but the plots are entertaining."

"See, I have to agree. Hetero porn's only good for their top tier acting," I chime in, hoping to turn the attention away from me.

Gianna shoots me a wink. "You like girl on girl porn, huh?"

I smirk and boost myself on top of the washing machine. "It does the job in getting me off. Who wants to watch a guy getting his dick sucked?"

"I can show you how to get off even faster," she flirts, her lips twitching as amusement laces her eyes.

Valerie finally breaks us up, coming to stand in front of me. “You two are ridiculous. You.” She pokes my chest again. “We’re doing this now. What the fuck was that this morning?”

“Oooh, what happened this morning?” Gianna bounces up to stand beside Valerie. Her shots are still running strong, lucky bitch.

“Nothing,” I say at the same moment Valerie blurts out, “She fucked Carson.”

Val shoots me a look and I shrug nonchalantly. I would’ve eventually told Gianna and Ivy. Just not in a laundry room while we’ve all been drinking.

“Me too!” Gianna laughs, holding her hand up.

Okay, she might be drunker than I thought.

Clearly sensing the sudden confusion, she waves her hands around the air. “We were fifteen, both virgins, and I was curious about being with a guy. It wasn’t the worst thing I’d done, but it was crazy weird. Anyway, it was over in one minute, then we went and ate our weight in sundaes. No biggie.”

Jealousy—much to my surprise—swirls around in my stomach. This is Gianna, my very lesbian friend. I have no reason to be jealous, especially since I didn’t approach Carson as a virgin myself. And it’s not like I haven’t been aware of Jessica and Monique. I’m even friends with Monique now. But god, the thought of his hands caressing Gianna the same way they touched me this morning is enough to make me sick.

“*No biggie*,” Valerie mouths, her lips quirking up.

Gianna starts to whistle like she hasn’t dropped a bomb on us all. Too shocked by that confession, we pack it away for another time. Unfortunately, that puts me back in the firing range.

“Look, things just happened this morning, and I don’t want to talk about it. It was just sex anyway. *No biggie*.”

Val stares at me for longer than I’m comfortable with, trying to look for something I’m not ready to see myself yet. “You promised, Anna.”

“I know.” There were too many promises. I was bound to break one. Don’t fall for him, don’t sleep with him again, don’t seek revenge for the past. Blah blah.

“You won’t do it again?”

Lying has never been our thing, and yet I nod. I smile and nod like I’m not waiting for the next time I’m underneath Carson... or on top of him.

Gianna throws her arms up in a dramatic stretch. “Let’s go do some shots, the room is coming back into focus and I don’t like it.”

Once we all agree to ignore what happened with Carson for the night, we make our way back to the bar, where Ivy is glowering at Asher.

“There’s the birthday girl!” Asher throws an arm around me, pulling me into his side and kissing the top of my head. “How are you still looking sober? It’s your birthday. That’s practically illegal, ya’ know?”

Since Asher is around the house practically every day, we’ve gotten to be pretty good friends. Weston still keeps a bit of a distance, which I suspect is because of Val. It has been pleasantly surprising to find how much I’ve enjoyed hanging out with them, even when their favorite games involve jump scares and gore.

“God, what was that?” I rasp, my throat on fire from whatever shot Asher just handed me.

Ivy laughs. “Half vodka, half tequila. I had an idea.”

“Don’t have any more,” I wince, taking a drink from Asher’s whiskey and coke. “Monique was supposed to be here by now, have you seen—”

My words die off when my eyes drift over to the dancefloor. Finding Jessica wrapped around Carson, her arms hanging around his neck and his hands gripping her hips. Her lips press to his cheek and I turn my head as bile rises in my throat, encouraged by the pit of fire in my stomach.

If I thought what I felt earlier was jealousy, boy, was I wrong. That had nothing on this sickening feeling spreading through me like poison. Seeing his hands on her, her lips on his skin, has my heart falling out of my butt. That’s the only way I can describe the sudden coldness in my chest and the weightless, sinking feeling now weighing me down.

I should have known this shit was a game to him. He’s still holding onto his grudge, even knowing how wrong he was.

“Hey.” Asher bumps his hip into me. “She’s over there.”

Shaking my head to clear away the haze covering my vision, I look where he’s pointing and find Monique standing with Alex.

“I’ll be back,” I say, ignoring the look of pity on Asher’s face.

Monique and Alex both turn with a smile when I approach, each taking turns to kiss me on the cheek. Usually the affection would warm me, now I just feel cold. Numb and stupid.

I feel fucking stupid.

“You were totally pre-drinking, weren’t you?” I ask, crinkling my nose at the strong alcohol fumes coming from Alex.

“Rule one—never come to a party sober,” Alex slurs, pulling out a couple of mini vodka bottles, handing me one. “Come on, birthday girl, catch up with me.”

The harsh burn is a welcoming relief from the hallow feeling in my chest.

“You okay?” Mon asks, her eyes—bright blue tonight—narrow on me slightly. She wraps her arm around Alex’s waist when he sways slightly.

“I’m great.” I aim for a smile, which feels more like a grimace.

Alex winks, or at least tries to. It looks more like a blink. “Got your eye on anyone? I can be your wingman.”

“You can barely get yourself laid, and you have a boyfriend,” Monique jokes, tugging on Alex’s hair.

He scoffs, smacking a loud kiss on her cheek. “Do I have a boyfriend, though? Do I *really*?”

“Yeah, he’s the one that’ll be spanking your ass when he finds you passed out on his doorstep later,” Monique laughs.

“Come dance with me.” A shiver races up my spine as his breath brushes over my neck, and his hands to *my* hips, pulling me back into him. Much to Monique’s amusement and Alex’s shock.

My heart comes back to me with brutal force, slamming against my chest in protest. “Go back to Jessica, Carson. Oh, and maybe wear a condom this time. You don’t want another Chlamydia scare.”

Monique’s eyes widen on me in shock before darting over my shoulder, her face twisting in guilt.

Instead of letting go like I expected, his fingers tighten on my hips. “Do you really want that? You want me to go back to take Jess upstairs?”

“Yep.” My tone is curt, my anger running clear.

His lips move dangerously close to my ear. “You wouldn’t be jealous now, would you?”

Not quite ready for that fight, I decide to poke him back. My stomach is still hanging by my feet at the picture of him standing with Jessica in his arms. If he wants to try and get a reaction from me, I’ll make sure I get one from him first.

Alex disappears with a mock salute, mumbling about finding Ivy and swimming in a pool of alcohol. Monique stays, arching a perfectly

shaped brow at Carson.

“I’m actually waiting for Jordan,” I lie. “I figured it was a good day to stroll down memory lane. Apparently I wasn’t the only one with that idea.”

Monique laughs loudly. “Fuck, I’m not getting involved in this one. Find me later, babe, I have something for you.”

“Did you think I was fucking joking this morning?” he growls, spinning me to face him. “Is he coming here, Annabelle? The. Truth.”

His eyes darken, pushing me further along in my lie. He has no right to be jealous, not when he just had Jessica wrapped around him.

“Yeah, he is.”

My heart stutters in my chest when his lips curve up into a smirk. “No, he isn’t.” He taps my nose. “Your nose twitches when you lie. Did you know that?”

“You’re lying,” I say, folding my arms across my chest to keep from touching him.

“Nah, that’s you,” he winks.

“Fine, he isn’t coming. But I’m sure he’ll be right over when I send him a text.” Pulling my phone out, I make quick work to pull up Jordan’s number and hit call.

Do I actually plan on inviting him? Hell no.

“Anna? Hey, I was –”

My phone is snatched from my hand before I can blink. “Fucking push me, Anna. I. Dare. You.”

Some of the numbness disappears, making room for the desire heating my veins. With alcohol fuelled confidence, I step forward and drag my tongue along Carson’s sharp jawline, coming to stop at his ear.

“You might have the bigger cock, but Jordan was a lot better with his tongue. The things he can do.” I end with a moan, pushing my breasts into his heaving chest.

“I swear to fucking God, Anna,” he growls.

I let out a squeal when all of a sudden I’m upside down, my only view being Carson’s toned ass. Not a bad view to have.

“And don’t think I didn’t know it was you behind that Chlamydia shit. You’ll be paying for that one.” A sharp sting follows the slap on my ass, and for a split second, I worry about what everyone is thinking.

Those worries disappear exactly five minutes later when Carson makes it his mission to give me as many orgasms as possible, with nothing

except his tongue.

I managed to count five before falling asleep midway through my own birthday party.

Chapter 30

Annabelle

When three knocks echo through the room, we freeze. Mid-thrust. Mid-kiss.

Remaining connected with neither one of us seeking any distance, we laugh quietly, our lips muffling the sound between us.

“Anna? I just wanted to check that you were feeling better,” Henry calls through the door.

Like the damn devil he is, Carson grinds against me as soon as I start to answer, swallowing my moan by tangling my tongue with his. I narrow my eyes and pull my head back, breaking that connection.

“Do you want me to call the principal and have your work emailed over today?” Henry calls, unknowing of what’s going on.

“Yes, please!” I yell out, silently praying that he leaves.

“Alright, get some rest. I’ve gone and picked up some fresh bagels if you’re up for eating, they’re just in the kitchen.”

“I have something you can eat,” Carson whispers, nipping my earlobe and resuming his slow thrusts.

He’s lucky that Henry’s footsteps have faded off, or I’d be finishing off by myself in the bathroom. Getting busted fucking his nephew isn’t how I want to start my Monday. Or any day, for that matter.

“You’re such an asshole,” I groan, clawing my nails into his defined back, loving the feel of his flexed muscles as they bunch up.

He lifts his head to shoot me a grin before dipping to reunite our separated lips as he plunges into me with newfound energy, ditching the lazy morning sex we’d been participating in before our interruption.

Any thought of being walked in on leaves when Carson pulls out suddenly, turning me onto my stomach and impaling me before I can catch my breath. I press my face into the pillow, drowning out my moans and cries. The guy is too big to be in this position. I can feel him *everywhere*.

Fire lights up my veins and warmth moves down my spine as I surrender to the bliss overtaking my entire body. His thrusts are hard and

slow, imprinting himself into me in a way I know I won't be able to remove.

"Fuck," he gasps, his hands moving from my hips to squeeze my ass. "You're so perfect."

Surprisingly, his words do more than the thick cock plunging into me, and my body erupts into a mind-numbing orgasm. Stars dance between my eyes and I vaguely make out Carson groaning behind me, his grip tightening to an almost painful level.

He collapses on top of me, brushing my hair off to the side and peppering kisses along the back of my neck. A giggle escapes me when he passes a ticklish spot, and he returns to it.

My heart gives a tug when he lets out a breathless laugh, finally rolling off me and pulling me into the position of *little spoon*.

Agreeing to this truce might just be the best thing I've done yet.

"Let me know when you get home," I tell Val, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

She tugs on the end of my braid. "I will. And be careful. You may be willing to let the past go for some great dick, but I'm not. Stay away from him."

Rolling my eyes, I push her towards her car. "Yes mom, I'll make sure my legs are sealed shut."

She hums, kissing me again before running down the path to her car, waving before she hops in.

When her car has disappeared, Carson opens the front door, leaning against the frame with his arms folded over his chest and a smug smile on his face. I scowl as I take in his loose basketball shorts and sweating, naked chest.

"Do you take steroids or something?" I snap.

He arches a brow in silent question.

I wave my hand toward his body. "No eighteen-year-old is that jacked up. Spill, what do you take?"

Taking deliberate steps toward me, he holds my stare. "You think I'm jacked? Well, damn, that's one way to stroke my ego. Want to hear another way?"

"I'd rather swallow shards of glass," I retort.

A dark smile replaces the smirk, and I already know what's about to come out of his mouth.

“You looked pretty happy to be swallowing something else last night.”

I’d managed to avoid him successfully yesterday. I’d woken up with him gone and spent the day reconnecting with Valerie after Ezra had left. Although my luck ran out the second Val fell asleep, when Carson literally carried me into his bedroom to finish what he had started the night before.

And yes, the night may have ended with his dick shoved down my throat. Which I may have been all too willing for.

“Lapse of judgement,” I shrug. “But seriously, the steroids? How often do you take them? Do you need a fake ID or do they just look at you and assume you’re thirty?”

“Thirty?” he scoffs, shaking his head and laying his hand over his chest. “Oh baby, you wound me.”

His teasing sets me on edge. He’s been trying to prove that he is done fucking with me. I can see it and I can acknowledge it, but it’s still hard to completely trust it. Especially since he hasn’t explained why Jessica was draped all over him at my party.

“Whatever. I have things to do.”

“Want to grab lunch with me?” His question shocks me. We’ve messed around, sure, but going out? Just the two of us? That’s completely new. “Don’t overthink it, just say yes.”

“Do you plan on poisoning me?”

Carson laughs, raking a hand through his hair. “Not in public. But I was planning to ask you for a truce.” He must see the hesitation on my face because he hurries to continue. “I get that I deserve everything you’ve thrown my way. I won’t deny that, but I like being around you. And I’d rather be around you without my shit getting destroyed or being accused of taking steroids.”

His request isn’t unwelcome. In fact, I’m almost surprised by how fast my heart races at the idea of letting go of this need for revenge, this burden of getting back at him. I don’t know how he managed everything for so long. I’m exhausted already and I’ve barely done anything. Could it really be this simple?

Holding my shaky hand out, I offer him a smile. “Truce.”

Ignoring my hand, his hands reach up to cradle my face as he presses his lips to mine. Right there in front of the house. He kisses me, and I swear I come alive under his touch.

“There’s shampoo in my eyes! Ow, ow, fuck, shit.” I push Carson away, quickly moving under the water to wash the shampoo out of my eyes.

Crap, this really burns.

I *told* him I should wash my hair out, but he apparently couldn’t wait an extra thirty seconds before attacking me against the shower wall.

When I start to become convinced that my eyes will forever burn, a soft washcloth moves over my eyes, washing away all shampoo suds. Blinking my eyes open, a dazed smile spreads across my face when I find Carson moving the wet washcloth over the rest of my face with such a warm look on his face that I sigh happily.

“Turn around, I’ll rinse your hair,” he says, his voice rougher than it had been a minute ago.

Narrowing my eyes on him, I poke him in the chest. “No funny business.”

Ducking his head, he presses a soft, lingering kiss to my lips. “No funny business.”

The sexual tension that had been suffocating us moments away fades away into something else, something tender, something foreign. Carson’s fingers massage over my scalp, washing my hair with the softest touch, like he’s afraid that I’ll shatter.

“Have you ever colored your hair?” he asks suddenly, reaching across me for the conditioner.

“No,” I laugh. “Why are you asking?”

I quickly turn to show him how much conditioner I need. I might find it sweet that he wants to do this, but I need a lot more than a small dab of conditioner. My chest grows warm when he leans in to kiss me quickly before I can turn back around. One thing I’ve learnt about Carson is that the guy loves to kiss. He takes every opportunity he can to kiss me, and I can’t bring myself to say I hate it.

“You have different shades of blonde in your hair,” he answers, lathering up my hair. “Jessica had them once, but she paid hundreds for it, and it didn’t look this nice.”

My body automatically tenses at the mention of her name. It’s stupid. We aren’t together, we’re just fucking. The jealousy coursing through my veins at the image of Carson touching Jessica’s hair is poisonous. I don’t want it.

“Don’t do that,” Carson whispers against my hair, pressing a hard

kiss to the back of my head. He must have rinsed my hair while I was busy fighting off the green-eyed monster. “She has no place here between us.”

“You’re the one bringing her up, not me,” I snap.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me back against his hard chest and even harder dick. “She means nothing to me, she never did.”

Unable to help myself, I snort. “Yeah, whatever.”

When the hell did this asshole get under my skin this much? How did I go from hating him to not wanting to even think of someone else touching him? He isn’t mine. We’re barely even friends.

“Can we just drop it?” I lean my head back against him and surrender to his hold.

His chest moves against my back as he takes a few deep breaths. “Nope. No deal. Let’s go.”

With a slap to my ass, he steps out and wraps a towel around his waist, arching a brow when I continue to stand under the water, dragging my eyes down the full-length of his impressive body.

“Where are we going?” I ask hesitantly, trying to catch up to the sudden mood change.

Carson winks, turning and leaving me with no other option than to follow him.

Two hours and two episodes of Hoarders later, we’re wrapped around each other, kissing and memorizing every dip, muscle and curve in each other’s bodies. We’ve talked about every little thing, shared the most pointless, yet meaningful childhood memories. Mine all involve Valerie and my parents while Carson’s memories involve... Asher and Weston. His parents have made an appearance twice, and both times ended with me apologizing and Carson warning me not to.

“I think I was only eight. I was with Weston almost every day, so my parents never put any thought into it. The nanny picked me up, made sure I did all my homework, then went home when I went to Weston’s. My parents never knew that. They assumed she stayed until I was in bed. It wasn’t until one night, Weston’s mom was in the hospital having Lavender, his little sister, that I had to stay home. The nanny disappeared like usual, probably assuming I’d be going next door, and so I tried cooking mac n cheese on my own. I would have gotten it right, too... If it wasn’t for the

small, *tiny* fire that happened seconds before my mother walked in.”

I cut him off with a laugh, imagining the horror he must have felt, and that his mom would have felt. “Why didn’t you just order a pizza or something? If your cooking was anything like those pancakes, I’m surprised you didn’t blow the house up.”

“I’m an amazing cook. I’m just not good with pancakes or mac n cheese,” he smiles and taps my nose. “My mother was so pissed, her whole face went bright red. She fired the nanny and hired a chef that night. Then she and my father flew out to Milan for a month while I was stuck home with the chef and a tyrant for a new nanny. So I would probably say that’s my most unluckiest moment.”

“Neither of my parents could cook very well, so I wouldn’t call having a professional chef on call unlucky.” I laugh, nestling my face into his chest and kissing his nipple.

“I would’ve taken shitty food over absent parents.” He grabs my finger and kisses the pad of my finger, sending a rush of warmth between my thighs. “And don’t even think about apologizing for my boring childhood again, or I swear I’ll bend you over my knee.”

I nudge his foot with mine playfully. “*Sorry.*”

With a laugh, he grabs me around the waist, throwing me over his lap and attacking my ribs until I’m squirming and begging for mercy.

“Say I’m the best you’ve ever had and I’ll stop,” he says.

“You’re the worst. I fake it every time,” I gasp.

Getting my wish, he stops his assault to move me so that I’m straddling him, my bare pussy nudging against his hardness. We decided clothes were a barrier we didn’t want after our shower, something I’m happy about right now.

With a devious grin, I circle my hips, grinding down and watching his eyes darken. His hands slide over my hips, coming to a stop on my ass where he squeezes.

“You up for faking it again?” He smirks, sitting into an effortless crunch position to capture a hard nipple into his mouth, tugging the sensitive bud between his teeth.

Biting on my lip, I clutch the back of his head, holding him against me as he attacks my nipple with rough swipes of his tongue. Heat builds quickly in my stomach.

“I kind of hate you, ya know,” I groan when he bites down on my

other nipple.

I can feel his smile against my breast, driving me crazy. He slaps my ass hard. “I kind of hate you, too. Now shut up and ride my cock.”

Chapter 31

Carson

I'm self-aware enough to know that I don't deserve this. I've been a jerk. I put on a mask I wasn't comfortable wearing, all because I was too overcome with frustration and a desire to get back at someone that I believed tore my family apart. Knowing that I'm not good enough for Anna isn't enough to stop me from taking whatever she gives me, though.

She has been everything I could've dreamed of. From the tender moments I get when she's half asleep and drawing patterns over my chest to the threats I get about her biting my dick off when I use the last of the milk. I'm actually surprised I let her near my dick with how often she threatens bodily harm.

"Sushi or pizza?" Anna asks.

Henry and Sydney are spending their night taste testing for their wedding menu, leaving us on our own, which is no longer a rare thing. Roman has told us that even though Seth hasn't been found, we still have to be on guard. The whole thing is a bit over the top. Frankly, I'd love for Seth to show up here when I'm home alone. There'd be no love lost when I beat the shit out of him. Fuck, he deserves it.

"That's a weird as hell combination." I scrunch my nose at both offers. "And we had sushi yesterday for lunch."

Where I found out that Anna hates seafood, but will happily eat seaweed on its own and by the pound.

"Well, do you have any suggestions?" She pulls a pair of tight jeans over her soft thighs and I shamelessly brush my hand over my hardening dick. "And if you say my pussy, I will shove the heel of my stilettos down your throat."

"Damn, if we're on the topic of shoving something down throats." I give myself a lazy stroke, as if my words weren't clear enough. "Take your pants off."

She rolls her eyes, managing to look pissed off and fucking adorable at the same time. It's a look I've learnt she can pull off quite well,

and often when I'm involved. "You're the one that said you wanted to go out and eat."

That was when she was covered up under the blanket and I was in a post-orgasmic bliss. Clearly, my priorities have changed.

"I'd much rather *eat in*," I wink.

"Get your ass up or I'll lock my door tonight," she threatens, pointing a finger in my direction.

"I sure hope you'll be locking it," I tease, finally moving to sit up. "I'd hate for your mom to walk in when I'm balls deep in your tight pussy."

"Oh my god," she groans, snatching up a shirt from the pile of clothes on her desk and disappearing into the bathroom. "Go get dressed, Carson."

With a high I seem to only get around her now, I leave her room to go in search of something to wear.

Being on the receiving end of Anna's smile, being the reason for her laugh, for her giggle, is unlike any feeling I've ever known. It's a drug that I never want to escape. It sends a rush of heat through my veins. It makes my heart beat so fast that I can hear a marching band in my ears.

How the fuck could I have ever wanted to hurt her?

How was I touching someone else when she in sleeping in the room next to mine?

How was I so goddamn stupid to think that the reason for my racing heart was frustration and anger when now it feels like quite the opposite?

Rushing through the process of showering, I throw on a pair of torn jeans and a band shirt I rarely wear. Usually, I would put more effort into my clothes, but I'm in a hurry to get back to Anna.

When I make it back to her room, all oxygen leaves my lungs and I stand in her doorway. She stands in front of her closet, using the mirror to apply lipstick. Her hair is thrown into a high pony, and all she's wearing are a pair of skinny jeans and a cropped sweater. She looks relaxed, and yet so fucking beautiful that I feel a deep ache settle in my chest. Yeah, I definitely don't deserve her.

"Got a staring problem?" She tries to bite back a grin and fails miserably, her eyes lighting up as she looks over her shoulder. When her smile turns into a laugh, I arch a brow in confusion. "I thought you hated Jordan?"

Staring down at myself, I try to figure out what she's talking about. All while burying down a ball of jealousy that rises within me. I don't ever want Anna looking at me and thinking of that fuck. I don't want her ever thinking about him again. I'd even prefer for his name to never touch her lips.

"Ripped jeans and band tees are sort of his thing," she says, nodding to my outfit. "It looks hot, though."

The few unfortunate encounters I had with him come to mind, and dammit, she's right. Looks like I'll be burning these clothes.

"That's just hurtful," I scowl, turning to go and find something else.

"At least I'm not dressing like any of your ex's," she calls out after me, amusement ringing clear in her voice as she goes on to laugh about a lack of clothing.

I refrain from telling her that technically; I haven't had any ex's. She doesn't need that conversation just yet. It might make her too aware of whatever this is growing between us. Because even though she thinks this is nothing more than casual sex, I've already decided that I'll never be letting her go. She'll forgive me for everything I've done—for real, this time—and then she'll fall for me. Easy stuff.

Right?

Much to my disappointment, we ended up on pizza.

My vote had been for burgers and fries, until I discovered that when she pouts and smiles at the same time, I'll agree to do anything she wants. That had been a slightly unsettling revelation.

Once we've gotten our pizza, I drive us up a small cliff that overlooks the entire lake. Not many people know it exists since you have to drive off-road a bit. I only found it one night when I got lost after a grueling talk about colleges from my father... when I was sixteen.

"This is beautiful," Anna smiles, walking to the edge with caution. I resist the pull in my muscles to grab her hand and yank her back. "And we're too high for anything to reach us."

I'm struck with such an intense feeling of wonder as I watch her eyes shine from the reflection of the water below that my hands tremble by my sides.

"You're beautiful," I say.

"Do you have an evil twin or something?" She finally walks away

from the edge, coming to lean against the car beside me. “I keep waiting for you to murder me.”

Regret and shame quickly fill me at her words, despite the teasing humor I can hear.

“Was I really that bad?” I ask her hesitantly. “I was a dick, but....*fuck.*”

I know that I didn’t do much myself, but everything that Jess and her little posse did had all been orchestrated by me. I thought I was doing the smart thing, keeping myself safe and under the radar from Decker’s wrath, and using a shield that I knew would have been safe. It was all pointless, though. I made sure Anna knew I was behind everything with every little comment I made to her

Anna rips me from my thoughts by reaching over to lace her fingers through mine and squeezing gently. God, her touch is so warm. So soft. So unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before.

“You had a few neat tricks up your sleeve, but no, I’ve seen a lot worse.” She tries to smile, but it doesn’t warm her cheeks.

A knot forms in my stomach. “That isn’t exactly reassuring when your dad is in a gang.”

This time when she smiles, her cheeks fill with pink and her eyes shine bright. “Jessica mentioned my *gangster daddy* on my first day. I’m guessing you told her to say that one?”

Even though the question isn’t funny, I find it impossible to hold in a laugh at her high-pitched impersonation of Jess. She reaches over to pinch me in the side, putting a fast pause to my laughter.

Despite her aggressive attack on my ribs, she looks so full of joy that it causes my heart to stuffer. Her perfect, full lips tilt into the sweetest grin and her eyes narrow playfully. Staring down at her, listening to the now-familiar marching band in my ears, I don’t try and resist the pull I feel to lean down and give her a quick kiss, lingering my lips on her for a second longer than I intended.

“Carson,” she breathes against my lips, her breath sweet and addicting. I press another soft kiss to her mouth, unable and unwilling to stop myself.

Soon enough, I have her lifted into my arms, pressing quick kisses to her face as she giggles and squirms against me, fighting to get down.

“I asked you a question,” she giggles.

After I'm satisfied enough that her scent is burned into me, I drop her back to her feet, spinning her to face the view of the lake and wrapping my arms around her waist to prevent her from moving back to the cliff's edge.

"I told Jess what to say, yes. But you don't have to worry, she didn't believe the gangster thing. She thought I was just being nasty," I confess, dropping my face into her face to try and hide from the regret bubbling up inside me.

If Henry knew of half the shift I'd done, he would be so ashamed of me. And I'd deserve it all.

"I get it, you know," Anna sighs, relaxing back into me and lacing her fingers through mine where they rest on her stomach. My chest clenches and burns at the same time, creating a mix of emotions that I push down for another time.

"I don't agree with how you went about it, obviously. But I understand why you did it."

Her understanding doesn't give me any relief. It does quite the opposite. Because I don't deserve her understanding. She's so pure, so innocent—to an extent, of course—and I tried to ruin that.

My voice gets stuck in my throat as we stand there in silence, overlooking the lake.

"I really am sorry about your parents, though," she says suddenly, breaking through the silence.

This time I have no trouble finding my voice. "What are you sorry about?"

Anna turns in my arms, bringing her hand up to trace her thumb over my bottom lip. Her touch leaves behind a fire. "Everything. You deserved so much better growing up. You deserved better than being dropped off with your uncle and having to deal with your missing parents. They shouldn't have done what they'd done."

Emotions that I can't place move through my entire body, flooding me with both warmth and coldness.

I've done my best to avoid even thinking of my parents and Seth, trying to fill my free time with memorizing everything I can about Anna while I have the chance.

My parents left me behind, knowing the lengths that Seth had been attempting, the lengths he was planning to go to. They knew that my life was

at risk, too, and yet they did nothing to assure my safety. Since we'd talked with Roman, I went and sat down with Henry and we talked for hours. He swore to me he had no idea about my mother and Seth, and I believed him with no hesitation. Growing up, Henry had always been more of a parent to me than both of my actual parents. It also helps his case that Seth's mere existence pisses him off; something we both have in common.

"Do you want to go swimming?" I change the subject as the air around me suddenly thickens and my eyes sting with the growing betrayal of my parents' disappearance.

Anna steps out of my arms, her eyes widening in fear. "In the lake?"

The way her voice raises a few octaves higher eases the tension that had been pulling me under, and I find myself laughing. "Are you afraid of the lake? You are aware you live in a house *on* the lake, right?"

Groaning, she steps forward again and drops her head to my chest. "Please don't remind me."

"Why are you scared of the lake? I know you can swim, I've seen you in the pool." While I stood at my bedroom window jerking off... a story I'll be keeping to myself.

"Yeah, in *pools* I can swim. And in pools I'm safe."

Thinking back on it, I don't think I've actually seen her swimming in the lake. I've seen her out on the dock with her friends, but never in the water. It's not like the weather has prevented it, either.

"You're safe in the lake, too, Anna."

"You say it's safe, but you can't *know* that. Knowing my luck, the day I decide to try it out is when I'll be murdered by the damn water dinosaur." She sounds so stressed over this that it only makes me laugh harder. "Stop laughing at me! Alligators are dangerous creatures and guess what, Carson? *They live in lakes!*"

"Okay." I take a deep breath and bite the inside of my cheek. "I'm sorry, but oh my god, you can't be serious. Alligators don't live around in *these* lakes. It's completely safe."

"Did you know that they once found an alligator that weighed over a *thousand pounds*? You try and imagine a giant monster that weighs that much *chasing* you!"

"Who are they?"

She throws her hands up. "I don't know, the people that try out that

type of stuff. And you're missing the point. The point being, that alligators are dangerous killing machines."

"Nah, they're not that bad," I wink, enjoying the panicked way she talks fast. It's insanely adorable.

Anna shakes her head, stubborn as hell. "Alligators are that bad, and I have the scar to prove it."

To back up her statement, she moves away, creating a cold space on my chest where she'd been pressed against, and lifts the bottom of her jeans to show off the small scar on her ankle.

"When I was six, a friend from school had this reptile party where someone brings these evil, murderous creatures, and one of the damn baby alligators bit down on my ankle like I was the main course. And that was a baby! Imagine what one of those grown-ass bastards would do. This scar is probably their target mark or something."

I say nothing as she continues to ramble on about her scar and fear of alligators. Her cheeks flush and her ponytail swings against the back of her neck as she shakes her head. And it's in this very moment that I realize how utterly fucked I am.

Chapter 32

Carson

The bubble we've found ourselves in is burst the second we walk downstairs the next morning to find Henry and Sydney sitting at the kitchen island.

Anna removes her hand from mine as if I've burned her, and the rejection I feel from it stings.

Sydney looks up with a warm smile and Anna tenses beside me. It automatically sets me on edge and I find myself stepping closer to Anna's side. She's still waiting for me to stab her in the back, and I'm doing everything I can to show her I'm genuine, that I'm trying to make up for my past. Showing her I'm on her side, no questions asked, is just one small thing I can do for her.

"Mom," Anna greets with a slight edge to her voice. "I thought you were on day shifts this month."

"I have a meeting with the real estate agent. Apparently the tenants that moved into the cottage want out of their lease early." Sydney waves her hand through the air and sips the coffee Henry slides over to her.

Whenever the cottage they moved out of from Doverhill is mentioned, Anna begs her mother to let her move in there. It's never bothered me that much until now. She's eighteen. What if Sydney agrees? Anna would move away, and I haven't convinced her to give me a proper chance yet. Not to mention she'd be close to Jordan again. Unease tightens my stomach at the idea of her leaving.

"How did your tasting go?" I ask. The cottage isn't a topic I think I can handle just yet, not until I have more time with Anna.

"Henry hated everything," Sydney sighs mournfully.

"Well, no, hold on," Henry chuckles, smiling fondly at his fiancée. "I loved the dessert."

When he finishes this off with a wink, Anna and Sydney both groan.

"Don't be so crass, Henry," Sydney scolds him, swatting him

lightly while he just laughs wholeheartedly.

“Me? Crass? Why, I never.” He holds a hand over his chest dramatically.

Anna joins me at the fridge, pulling out the cream cheese for her bagel. “Do you mind giving me a ride to school? Ivy’s gonna be late.”

We’ve already discussed this. In light of our amazing truce, Anna now has to ride with me. She wasn’t too bothered by it, while I was fucking ecstatic that she agreed. It might only be a ten-minute drive, but that’s ten extra minutes I get to be alone with her every morning and afternoon.

“That is the deal,” I grin, nudging her with my hip.

“It’s nice to see you two finally getting along,” Henry comments.

A soft blush covers Anna’s cheeks, and I have no doubt that she’s remembering just how well we’ve been *getting along*. Especially this morning, when we *got along* over the bathroom sink.

“What can I say? I’m all mature and shit now.” Anna shrugs and lathers her bagel with a disgusting amount of cream cheese. Maybe I should give her a mint before I kiss her again.

Sydney gives her a disapproving look. “I wouldn’t go that far, Annabelle. Or have you not seen the downstairs bathroom yet?”

Henry reaches over and covers Sydney’s hand with his own. “We knew she was throwing a party, Syd, give her a break. One broken mirror is nothing compared to the messes I made growing up.”

Shit.

We spent that morning cleaning everything we could, but none of us must have gotten into one of the bathrooms. In our defense, who the hell puts a bathroom in through the laundry room?

Sydney purses her lips, entering into a heated stare-off with Anna as she demolishes her bagel with aggressive bites.

Pulling out my phone, I pull up a message from Asher and quickly reply. It isn’t good manners to disappear without a word... just ask my parents.

Asher: Where the fuck were you yesterday? You missed an epic fight between Jayden and Milo.

Me: I wouldn’t call anything Jayden does epic.

Asher: Jayden found his girlfriend sucking Milo off under the bleachers. And don’t dodge my fucking question! Where were you?

Me: When did you turn into a little old gossip? And I was busy. I'll fill your nosy ass in later.

Using this as the perfect excuse to pull Anna away, I tell her that Asher needs to talk to me, so we have to hurry up and leave.

“We need to talk later, Anna,” Sydney says. “So straight home after school, please.”

Anna grumbles a response and accepts a pitied smile from Henry before following me out to the garage. As soon as the door closes behind us, I'm pressing her against it and sliding my hand up the back of her thigh to cup her ass.

“Are you fucking insane?” Anna whispers, attempting to push me back. “They could come in here any second, get off me.”

I squeeze her bare ass, both severely irritated that she wears such short skirts with tiny thongs and also incredibly turned on that I have such easy access to her right now.

“How quiet do you think you can be?” I softly graze my teeth along her neck, feeling her pulse spike. The mint is all but forgotten, as is my dislike for cream cheese, when I press a quick and hard kiss to her lips.

“Carson,” she protests, even as she winds her arms around my neck. “We really shouldn't.”

“Tell me to stop then.” It doesn't take much to dip my hand down and trace a finger through her wetness. She shudders against me. “Tell me you don't want to walk into that school with my cum dripping down your thighs.”

When she lets out a low groan and drops her bag to the ground, I smile into her neck triumphantly. Despite having her only thirty minutes ago, my cock is trying to tear through my pants.

“Make it quick, Dorian. I have places to be.”

Quick is usually something I'd struggle with, or at least need a lot of foreplay for, but right now it's probably all I'm capable of. And I can't even find it in me to feel embarrassed. I just need inside her. More than I need oxygen at this point.

She helps me to unzip and I let out a hiss when her small hand wraps around my aching dick with a hard squeeze. Pulling her hand off me, I lift her up against the door and move her panties to the side before plunging into her with no warning.

“Fuck,” she gasps, burying her face into my neck to muffle the sounds spilling from her mouth.

My brain just about gives up on me as a million different sensations drown me. I’ve lost count of the amount of times I’ve been in her, yet every time seems to chip away at every defense I have. Her pussy clenches tight around me and I have to pause before I lose it like a fucking virgin.

“Oh god, Carson, we don’t have time for this crap.” She tries to roll her hips, forcing me deeper into her. I quickly think of my grandmother and her godawful bright purple lipstick to chase away the heat lingering at the base of my spine. And it does the trick. At least long enough for me to get Anna off.

Bringing one hand between us, I circle my thumb over her clit and thrust up with every bit of energy I can bring, pushing down my own overwhelming need to come.

When her moans start to grow louder, she pulls away from my neck and slams her mouth to mine, tangling her tongue with me. I’ve always hated cream cheese, but tasting it on her tongue has me fucking obsessed. Her kiss is the equivalent of spinning around blindfolded, then walking in a straight line, and I love it. I crave it.

Just as I’m about to lose the battle on holding my orgasm back, Anna pulls back to slam her head against the door, biting down on her lip hard enough to draw out a small drop of blood. Her pussy tightens on me almost painfully and when I explode, I lean forward to trace my tongue over her bottom lip, soothing the spot where she’s hurt yourself.

Blood has never been my thing. I’ve never been turned on by it, or felt the undeniable urge to have it on my tongue. But with Anna I can’t get enough. I want my tongue on every bit of her. I want everything she has to offer.

And red has never fucking looked better on anyone else.

“This is different.” Asher raises his brows when we approach the table he’s at with Weston. “I’m guessing this is why you ditched us yesterday.”

Anna tries and fails to remove her hand from me. She’s mine and I’m not wasting a damn minute in letting every fucker here know it. She can yell at me about it later.

“It wasn’t exactly a hard decision to make,” I say, sitting opposite Weston and pulling Anna down onto my lap. When she tries to move off me,

I band my arm around her waist and hold her tight against me.

“Fifty, fuckface.” Asher holds his hand out to Weston, who slaps a few notes into his waiting palm, cursing under his breath.

Anna narrows her eyes on them. “Are you serious? What the hell did you bet on?”

“Asher was betting on Carson showing you off. I was betting on him keeping this thing a secret,” Weston confesses, confidentially holding Anna’s stare. “I may not have been at your party, which I apologize for, by the way, but you better believe everyone saw Carson carry you off, caveman style.”

Rolling my eyes, I flip Weston off. Of course he’d been the one to doubt me. He’s been in a mood ever since Valerie started fucking around with her ex again.

“You could have at least added me in.”

Asher winks at Anna and I swear I can practically feel my skin turn green. “What would you have bet on?”

She looks over her shoulder and smiles, stealing all the air from my lungs. “That I’d have killed him by the end of the week.”

Weston’s lips purse as he holds in a laugh, while Asher’s laughter burst out of him. “Fuck, you’re amazing.”

“The week isn’t over yet,” Weston jokes.

Through the laughter shaking through Anna, I begin to notice the tension tightening her stomach. Feeling on edge myself, I look around the near empty field and find Jess walking toward us with Mia close behind her.

“Oh Jesus,” Asher groans, dropping his forehead to the table. “If you don’t get rid of her, I’m calling the priest. Her time on earth has come to an end. It’s time for her to go back home.”

Weston hides his snicker in his fist, immersing himself into his phone. It’s pretty typical behavior for him whenever Jess is around. Except now, his eyebrows crease and his mouth tilts to a scowl.

Asher notices first. “Hey dude, you all good?”

He stands abruptly. “Fucking peachy.”

When he storms off, Anna leans back to brush her lips against my ear. “Valerie posted a photo with Ezra this morning, an obvious ‘*he slept over*’ one.”

Asher must have heard because he lets out a low curse. I refrain from speaking my thoughts, knowing that they’d only upset Anna. Valerie

may technically be my half-sister—proven by a fast-tracked DNA test—but I wouldn't call us close at all. She's more of a sister to Anna than she is to me, and after the way she's strung Weston along, I have no interest in building any sort of relationship with her. I wish she would just stay away from him.

"We'll have to deal with that later," Asher mummurs. "Demon bitch is gaining on us."

"Get original, Asher," Jess sneers, coming to a stop behind Asher. He dramatically shivers. "I just had to come see this with my own eyes. When you said you were working on a bigger plan, I couldn't have guessed this. Good one, babe."

Of course she'd imply that this is some long-game prank in front of Anna. Unfortunately for me, that's also the very thing that Anna is worried about.

"Hey Jess," Asher smiles sweetly, refusing to turn and look at her. "Is it true if I make eye contact with you, I'll turn to stone?"

"Turn around and find out," she snaps.

For a second, I'm annoyed that he's encouraging Jess to stay, until I notice Anna is no longer tight with tension. It ignites a small dash of hope in me. There's a chance she doesn't believe the shit Jess is spewing.

"What do you want Jess?" I ask in a bored tone.

Mia glances around us, looking as if she'd rather be anywhere else. Those two have the most confusing friendship. "Jess, we're going to be late."

"Oh shut up," Jess grinds out. "Carson, babe, can we talk? In private."

"I don't think so," I reply, maintaining my bored expression when inside I'm anything but bored and calm. "I'm pretty comfortable here." To show what I mean, I thrust my hips up, bouncing Anna on my lap slightly.

"This is all an act, you know that, right?" Jess turns her snarl to Anna. I think about jumping in, then I remember that this is Anna. If anyone can stand up to Jess, it's her. "He told me all about it during your party, how he's just using you, how he'll throw you away like dirt. You can't seriously believe this is real, even *you* can't be that stupid."

Anna's back straightens, and she angles her body to face me with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "Didn't feel all that fake when he fucked me against the garage door before coming here."

Asher lets out a booming laugh, slamming his fist into the table. Mia's eyes widen in shock and Jess... well, she looks downright murderous.

To add insult to injury, Anna cradles my face in her hands and brings her mouth down in a rough and possessive kiss.

Logically, I know that she's only doing this to piss Jess off, to show her she hasn't won this round. I know she wouldn't have done with unmotivated, and yet my heart refuses to listen. It forms a parade while my stomach preforms the circus acts.

I can faintly hear Jess whining before the blissful sound of her steps fade into the distance, and I make a quick mental note to throw another threat her way. There's no way I'll allow her to fuck this up for me.

"Get a room." Asher kicks my leg under the table.

"Rooms are overrated." Anna pulls back, and instead of moving off me like I expect, she nestles closer and rests her head on my shoulder.

If my heart wasn't already on board, this would have won the bastard over.

Chapter 33

Annabelle

One Month Later

To say things have changed would be the understatement of the century.

I'd had my first big fight with Valerie a few weeks back. I wasn't happy that she took Ezra back, and she wasn't happy when she found out that things between Carson and me had become something more than *just sex*. We didn't speak for a whole week, which is the longest we'd ever gone without talking. We'd made up when Gianna acted as the middleman and told us to grow the fuck up.

I'm still not entirely happy about her choice, nor will I ever see Ezra as a friend again, but I'll admit that I enjoy seeing her happy.

The other thing that has taken a complete turn is that I have a boyfriend.

That's right. The asshole that tried to break me down and accused my dad of fucking around with his mother and breaking his family apart is now my boyfriend. He doesn't know it yet, because I only refer to him as such in my head. That's not to say I'm some obsessed freak; he's been the one to bring up the *official title* since exactly one week after my birthday.

I've got to give it to the guy. He's done good on convincing me to give him a shot. There have been a lot of orgasms and a lot of food. The two fastest ways into my heart.

Wait... wait no. Not heart, no. He is most definitely *not* in my heart. That's crazy talk.

Jessica has also kept her distance. Carson swears she won't cause any trouble, that he took care of it. But I can't stop my stomach from dipping every time I get stuck on it. What if there was some truth to what she said? Carson won't tell me what he did to get her to back off, and I can't help but wonder...

Carson drops beside me, draping an arm over my shoulders and pulling me against his side. This has become our new routine. Mom and Henry have their date night every Friday, and we take advantage of the empty

house by ordering take-out and watching a movie in our own version of a date night.

Tonight was Carson's movie choice, so I'm forced to sit through Ghostbusters. It is not a favorite so far.

"What's on your mind, peanut?" he asks, nuzzling his nose into my hair. His nose is buried in my hair more often than a rockstar's nose is buried in white powder.

"Oh god, don't ever call me that again," I laugh.

He bops me on the nose and kisses me softly. The kissing is one thing that hasn't changed, he still takes every single chance he can. Even if it means interrupting me while I'm in the shower to kiss me before going out with Asher and Weston. I won't tell him how much I love it.

Honestly, I don't know what I was expecting when I finally agreed to date Carson, but this wasn't it. He's charming, playful, kind, a completely different person from the one I'd come to know. I'd be lying to myself if I said I didn't miss the asshole at least a little bit; he made for some entertaining arguments.

"Talk to me."

We've done a pretty job of avoiding the heavier topics, like what'll happen when we graduate, when will we stop hiding from our families, when are we going to stop believing that Jessica has just moved on. Tonight is not the night I want to open up any of those doors.

"I was just wondering how soon into this movie I'll fall asleep," I joke, nestling into his side. "Or how offended you'd be if I start playing Tetris on my phone."

"Oh come on." He chuckles, stretching his legs out. God, he has really nice legs. "We're not even thirty minutes in. It gets better. Have some trust in me."

Trust.

It's a funny word, really. Do I trust Carson? In a way, yes... But completely, I don't think I do. I like him more than a little, and I love spending time with him, but I can't help the small pull in the pit of my stomach that is just waiting for all of this to fall apart. Maybe it's my history with Carson, maybe it's my pathetic excuse of a relationship with Jordan. I don't know, I just know that I can't shake the feeling that something's coming.

"Did you still wanna go out with Valerie and Ezra tomorrow

night?”

We’ve attempted one double date so far, and that was with Asher and some girl from another school. She was more focused on texting her friends and Asher was more interested in getting a reaction from Ivy, since the café he chose for us happened to be the one she worked at.

“That depends,” Carson sighs dramatically. “Do I need to prepare an alibi for when you lean over the table and stab Ezra?”

Laughing, I pinch his thigh. “I can be nice for a couple of hours.”

Rubbing his hand over his thigh, he mock scowls at me. “Could’ve fooled me. *Ouch.*”

“Oh please, coming from you? I’m an angel.”

I can feel the exact moment that his guilt from the past starts to cast a dark shadow over him. His arm loosens, and the mood starts quickly starts to take a turn into dark and moody.

“Hey, I’m just kidding.” I kiss his pec, breathing in the lingering smell of his ocean-scented soap.

“No. You’re right. I was a fucking asshole and there’s no excuse. I don’t deserve you.”

Moving around to straddle his lap, I bury my face into his neck. My stomach tightens when I feel his shiver, still surprised that I can make him react like that. His arms band around me and hold me tight. “Nobody deserves me. I’m amazing. But come on now, you need to stop apologizing....” Taking a deep breath, I prepare myself to bring up one of the deeper topics we avoid. “Any news from your parents?”

My dad has stopped by a couple of times to keep us updated on Seth. As far as they know, he’s moving from hotel to hotel, working from his computer, which has an IP blocker, preventing Slater from finding his exact location. There hasn’t been any new mention of a *hitman*—there has to be a better word for them, honestly—and zero attempts to steal from Carson’s dad’s accounts. I’m sure that’s all a temporary thing. Seth doesn’t strike me as the type of loser to sit around.

The news—or lack thereof—of Seth hadn’t been that surprising, but what *had* been surprising was Carson’s mom passing him a message through my dad.

We are alive. We are safe. As are you. Stay away from Avery. I refuse to have caught up around the kind of business he conducts. Stay with

Henry, focus on your studies and apply for colleges. This is not your problem to worry about, Carson.

That was the first night I'd spent away from Carson. Asher and Weston picked him up, and he showed up the next afternoon with a killer hangover, refusing to talk about his parents. That was over a week ago now. Dad told us he gave Carson's new number to his mom and that she might be calling him. It's been radio silence since.

"What do you think?" he chuckles humorlessly, tracing small patterns over my back. "If they'd just left me at home, I wouldn't have thought anything of their disappearance. It would've just been the norm. How fucked up is that?"

To try and ease some of the tightness through his body, I press kisses along his throat, lightly nipping over his pulse. It never fails to give him goosebumps.

"Very," I whisper, pressing another kiss below his ear.

His hands move down to cup my ass. "I had good friends, at least, so it's not like I was always alone."

He doesn't often shy away from the topic of his childhood. This isn't like those times, though. His body is tense, his voice hard. It's a good thing that I have the perfect thing to divert the subject away from his parents. Something I've been sitting on for a while now.

"So...." Leaning back, my lips curve into a grin and I arch a brow. "Let's talk about our first times."

Carson lets out a groan, dropping his head back on the couch. "I was waiting for this to come up."

Laughing, I brush my hand through his silky hair. "She told me it wasn't very memorable, anyway."

"Of fucking course she did." He laughs and shakes his head, the worry lines between his brows now disappearing. "In my defense, I think that just came down to what I was working with. I was judged before we even got to it."

"I don't know. I might have to agree with her."

He laughs loudly. "That's fucking harsh, damn. Way to go straight for the jugular."

"I have had much better, I must say," I tease, wiggling my ass back into his hands as they tighten.

“I guess I have to up my game.” His eyes narrow and he slaps my ass once, hard enough to warn me against mentioning anything of my past. Nothing gets him bothered as much as mentioning Jordan; done at the right time and it equals to the best angry sex I’ve ever had. I swear in those times, he pictures Jordan in the room to help him in his mission to split me in two.

Shrugging, I pretend to study my nails and act nonchalant. “I mean, if you must. I don’t think my opinion will change.”

I let out a squeal, followed by a giggle, when Carson throws me off him and onto the couch, pulling my shirt up to nestle his face between my breasts.

Valerie’s eyes narrow on me slightly over the table and I smile innocently.

“I haven’t seen her around, no,” Ezra answers, looking incredibly uncomfortable. As he should. “And I stopped going to those parties, they got boring.”

“Oh, because you stopped taking girls to the bathrooms?” My voice is snarky. I’m well aware.

Carson squeezes my thigh, a silent warning that I happily ignore.

“The only girl I ever took to a bathroom slipped on a tile and needed stitches,” Ezra replies effortlessly. “No need to remind you, though, since you’re the one who picked us up from the hospital.”

My eyes shift to the small scar just below Valerie’s hairline as she raises a brow and the corner of her lips tilt up into a smug smirk. I shake my head at her in amusement. Ezra’s always been quick on his feet with comebacks; it was one of the things I’d first liked about him.

“So Ezra, do you play any sports?” Carson asks, taking the conversation away from me. Ezra shoots a look, his eyes shining with regret before turning to give his attention to Carson.

While those two off to discuss which is better, football or hockey, Val kicks me under the table and angles her head toward the bathrooms. Taking her not-so-subtle hint, I brush a kiss on Carson’s cheek and excuse myself, following Valerie with my head slightly hung like I’m about to face the firing squad.

Once we reach the bathroom, she checks the stalls are empty, then turns to me with her arms crossed over her chest and a deep frown between her brows. I always used to call this her *disappointed mom look*. It hasn’t

changed.

“You have got to lay off. He feels bad enough about what happened, and you aren’t helping things.”

“As he should.” I cross my arms over my chest, mirroring her. “You hated it whenever I took Jordan back and were vocal about your feelings. What’s the difference? I’m just looking out for you.”

“I at least said what I had to behind his back.” She throws her hands up. The anger rolling off her isn’t what’s bothering me and creating the spilt through the chest. It’s the glimpse of hurt that flashes through her eyes that she hurriedly covers up. “I love him, Anna. Call me an idiot for taking him back, but I’m asking you to keep it to yourself. If he happens to fuck up again, then by all means, say I told you so.”

“I’d never say that,” I deadpan.

That’s a lie, and she knows it. I’ve said that exact same thing to her a hundred times. It’s one of my favorite things to say. I love being right. Dropping the frown, she visibly relaxes and laughs and I join in, relieved that the slice through my chest is now healing back up.

“Things won’t be the same between us three again. That’s not something I can promise you. But I will do my best to be nicer.”

“Good. And you aren’t one to talk, anyway.” Pointing a finger at me, she takes the opportunity to use the toilet while I stay by the sinks and wait. “You promised not to fall for the guy you couldn’t stand a few months ago. Now you’re all in love and shit. So if you’re gonna judge, then look in the mirror McJudgey.”

“I am not in love with him,” I scoff, fiddling with the paper towel dispenser. “You’re being delusional.”

Even as the words leave me, I felt a sharp sting. Almost like my body knew I was lying before I did.

“As if.” She finishes up and comes out to wash her hands. “The guy looks at you like you single-handily hung the mood, it’s actually pretty cute. I think we might have underestimated that one.”

“Carson looks at me like he can’t wait to get me alone,” I retort stubbornly.

“Oh yeah, that too.”

Laughing, we walk back out to join our guys who have moved onto video game topics. Talk about a snooze-fest.

Carson drapes his arm around my waist and pulls me close, using

his other hand to eat. The act is so small, so insignificant, yet it causes my heart to pound against my chest, trying to escape. Probably to run far from the swirl of emotions suffocating me. Valerie's words refuse to leave me, and I find myself in a stare-off with Carson, noticing for the first time that his eyes smile. I'm not sure if that's a thing, but it's the only way I can describe how he looks at me. It brings something to life in me.

"You okay?" he whispers, kissing me, quick yet so soft.

Queue my heart slamming back into my chest. "I'm perfect." I kiss him back, relishing in his scent and the faint taste of ranch from his fries.

The rest of the night goes a lot smoother. I keep my judgey comments to myself and observe the way that Ezra fawns over every little thing Val does, allowing myself to slip back into a sense of nostalgia. Just for tonight.

Chapter 34

Annabelle

I understand why brides go out and try on a million and one dresses, but why the hell do bridesmaids have to? I spent four hours—four long, agonizing hours—with my mom and her three best friends, my aunt Evelyn and aunt Nora, trying on dress after dress. If I ever see another pink frilly dress again, I will most definitely projectile vomit everywhere. It's a given.

Finally, we all agreed on a navy blue silk dress. It wasn't my favorite, but it was good enough, and by that point, I was ready to rip my hair out. I would've agreed to a potato sack.

Mom dropped me off at the house because I was firmly against hanging with *the girls* and having dinner. Even if they would've snuck me wine. Not worth it.

When I walk inside, I take a detour to the garage to check for Henry's car. Today is the day he's also dragging his groomsmen out for their torture session. Carson was lucky enough to escape because he has enough suits to last him a lifetime. He said he wasn't about to add another. I let out a sigh of relief when I find the garage empty.

Since my boyfriend's car was out the front, I make quick work in stripping out of my clothes for hopefully the last time today, and to avoid any awkwardness, I even make the time to throw them in the laundry hamper.

Nothing screams embarrassing quite like your mom coming home to find your bra thrown over the back of the couch. I've lived that nightmare. I'm not eager for a repeat.

The house is quiet as I walk up the stairs, almost *too* quiet.

My door is still locked from when I ran out this morning and left Carson in my bed with his bare ass on display, so I head for the door next to mine with the light shining through the open gap. When I push open the door, I'm greeted by a cold as fuck empty room. Maybe I should have at least kept my bra on because I am pretty sure if I approach any mirrors right now, the glass will shatter.

If I wanted to freeze my tits off, I'd go swimming in the lake.

A laugh bubbles out at the mere thought of getting into that death

trap. No, thank you, I'd rather jump out of a plane without a parachute.

"If you're a murderer, can I recommend waiting just ten minutes for me to finish up before you kill me? I'd like to look presentable at my funeral." Carson's teasing voice drifts from his bathroom, and I skip my way across the room, ignoring the goosebumps spreading over my body.

Carson stands in front of the bathroom sink, his face covered in shaving cream. When I pause in the doorway, he does a double take, taking in my nakedness with a suggestive smirk.

"I sure hope Asher wasn't still in the room." My face drops and he laughs. "I'm kidding, but fuck, the look on your face."

He puts the razor down and approaches me slowly, still shaking with laughter. "You're such a dick."

The closer he gets, the more obvious his intentions become. His face is still covered, so when he reaches me, he takes hold of my face and places a wet kiss on my mouth, smearing me with shaving cream in the process.

I let out of shriek, trying to push him off him, which only works to get him laughing harder. His hands fall to my waist, pressing me against him as he buries his messy face into my neck.

It's a good thing I was already planning to shower.

"You're a fucking asshole," I laugh, shoving him back with no success.

"Oh shit!" Carson gasps dramatically, stepping back. "I'm so sorry. I forgot."

Ignoring his bullshit, I walk over to where his razor is and hop my ass onto the cold vanity, picking the razor up and waving it in front of me. "I want to try."

His obvious caution is downright adorable. No way would I say that to his face, though. He gets quite offended when adorable is used in any way to describe him.

"I used to shave my dad's face," I reassure him, leaving out the part that I only did it once when I was six.

Arching a brow, he steps between my open thighs and slaps his large hands on me, caressing the inside of my thighs with his thumbs. Damn, he must want me to slice his face open with a distraction like that. "Go on then, barber Anna."

"Stop doing that," I warn him, wrapping my ankles over his butt to

press him closer. The action is instantly regretted when he grinds his hard, jean-clad dick against my aching pussy.

Better hurry this along.

“How was your day, dear?” Carson asks in a formal tone that has me snickering and almost losing my grip as I run a clean line over his jaw.

“Oh, it was fine,” I replied in an equally formal tone. “I tried on so many dresses with the ladies, but I had to cancel on supper as I would have much preferred to be fucked into my mattress.”

He splutters at my response, dropping his head to my bare breasts and shaking in laughter. I break, too, throwing my head back and laughing. I’ve had such a long day that it feels good to just unwind and relax.

My stomach flips in circles when Carson is the first to regain control, turning his head slightly to suck a hard nipple into my mouth. My laughter is quickly replaced by a cry as I clutch the back of Carson’s head, not even caring that he’s covering me once again in shaving cream.

“*Fuck*,” I gasp when he bites down softly. It still amazes me how gentle he can be.

“I should burn all your clothes,” he groans, moving to my other breast and swirling his tongue around the cold and sensitive bud.

“I don’t think my mom and Henry would approve.”

His hands move up my thighs until they’re resting on my hips. He uses his grip to push me onto the edge of the counter, where he grinds against me. The zipper of his jeans creates an unbearable friction.

He must have been planning on the shower, too, because his shirt is already sitting by the clothes hamper... not *in* it... but *beside* the hamper. Why are men like this?

I take advantage of his shirtless state and bring my hands to his stomach, tracing along the abs that are too damn defined. A shiver racks through his body when I move down to the top of his jeans, working on the button and zipper with hurried movements.

Any other time, I would be all for the foreplay. Now is not one of those times. He abandons my breasts to help me with his jeans, pulling them down and kicking them *towards* the hamper.

Maybe I should hold out until he puts his fucking clothes away properly.

“God, you drive me insane,” Carson groans, positioning himself at my entrance and plunging inside without a breath of hesitation.

A scream tears through my throat that I muffle by burying my face into Carson's neck as he stretches me open, burning me inside and out. He doesn't give me a moment to adjust to his size, too overcome with the same need that's pulsing through my blood. He keeps one hand tight on my hip and uses the other to lift my thigh over his bent forearm, opening me further and allowing him to get unbearably deep.

My ass slides along the vanity countertop as he hammers into me at such a fast pace that my core is already lighting up, and my nerves begin to spark without any attention to my clit. Curling my arms around his neck to hold on, I throw my head back and let out hoarse moans as Carson thrusts into me relentlessly.

I should definitely find more opportunities to walk around naked.

Caron makes an awful attempt at cooking Gnocchi while I sit at the island laughing. He is so determined to get it right that I can't bring myself to tell him to give up. Even though I may have already ordered Chinese.

"Eighth time is the charm, right?" I grin.

He flips me off over his shoulder. "I'd like to fucking see you try; this shit is hard. And this is only my fifth time, smartass."

"It's only hard because you think you're too good for instructions," I remind him with an arched brow, even though he can't see me.

He mumbles something about great cooks not needing recipes, which only makes me laugh harder. Carson is not what I'd call a great cook, far from it, actually. I'd even go as far to say that prisoners don't deserve to be subjected to his cooking.

"Do you care what movie I pick?" I aim for changing the subject away from whatever he is doing at the stove.

"That depends, what genre are you thinking?"

"Romance," I tease.

The only reaction that gets is a chuckle. "You wouldn't do that to Gianna."

That I'd do it to him goes unsaid. I've done it before, just to see if he was willing to sit through a Hallmark romance for me. Surprisingly, he got more into it than I did.

"Yeah, you got me. I'm thinking a comedy, I just haven't chosen yet." Comedy is the safest option, since Alex and I hate action, and Gianna

hates romance. Carson would watch anything, even if he won't admit it aloud; our new thing together has been RuPaul's Drag Race.

The front door opening cuts through the silence. With Seth still hiding away in a hole somewhere, we've finally started to be left alone again—much to my dad's annoyance—so long as we leave the doors and windows locked. What Henry and my mom don't know is that we rarely do so, because Carson's determined to trap Seth. Safe? Not at all, but you try reasoning with Carson.

"The gay squad has arrived," Gianna calls out.

"That's not a thing," Alex says.

They walk into the kitchen in arguing. Gianna shoves Alex, who scowls at her in return.

"Babe, please tell Alex that The Gay Squad is an awesome name." Gianna steps forward and dumps the bag of Chinese on the island. "Ryan thinks it's great."

"Ryan also owns shampoo, conditioner and body wash in one bottle," Alex retorts, carrying the drinks over.

"Hey!" Carson turns, covered in flour and frowning at the bags of take out. "I thought I was cooking dinner."

I shrug innocently. "You look so pretty."

He turns to begin cleaning the mess he made. "Damn fucking right I look pretty."

Gianna moves to help Carson clean while Alex starts to sort out the food with me. It isn't often we get to hang out with Alex, because he's either with Mason or Alex, so when he is free, we take advantage with either a movie night or a night of card games and drinking. Usually, Ivy joins in the party, but she's blown us off for a date tonight.

"Can we move back to the important topic at hand here?" Gianna asks, throwing Carson's failed creations in the trash.

"The Gay Squad isn't a cool name," Carson tells her. She punches him in the arm, and he dramatically cries out.

"Not that. Even though you're a damn liar; it's a great name." She waves her hand. "I'm talking about Ryan using a 3-in-1 bodywash."

Chapter 35

Annabelle

Ivy and Gianna flip through the textbook, complaining about a quiz neither of them have studied for. Any other time I'd have felt bad for them, but I happen to know that the reason behind this rush is because they were both at a frat party scooping out Lakeside U.

"Was it at least worth it?" I grin in amusement.

Gianna grunts, glancing up. "Not even a little bit. There was one girl, but she was only after a threesome with her guy, and I've done the sausage thing. It wasn't for me."

"Sausage thing? Ew." Ivy scrunches her nose up.

"My exact thought." She winks before laying resting her head on the table with a pain-filled groan.

Ivy shuts the textbook with a muttered curse and faces me. "So, was your sausage party worth missing out on an awesome party?"

I'd chosen the wrong moment to have a drink, because I choke on the soda, trying to hold in a laugh. I should have known better than to assume they wouldn't mention my last-minute cancelation. In my defence, I was not getting dicked down. I was at my dad's dog sitting Franklin. Was Carson there? Yes. But when we happened to walk in on Slater loading shotguns, he swore to keep his hands off me. I was lucky to get a quick kiss before he went to sleep... in the fucking guest bedroom.

"You know damn well I was at my dad's." I shake my head, tossing my empty sandwich wrapper at her. "And no, I don't regret missing out on watching sweaty college guys try to outdrink each other."

Gianna shrugs. "That part was actually quite entertaining. We saw two fights, one *totally* straight guy make out with his bro, and an ambulance took someone away for suspected alcohol poisoning. It was pretty wild."

"Oh my god," I say, both impressed and appalled. Truth be told, it kind of sounds like the parties I used to go to before moving here. Minus the cops showing up and everyone running down the street.

Ivy reads a message on her phone and lets out a defeated sigh. "My

parents are back on my case about college.”

“You’ve decided on Lakeside U, though. What’s the problem?” Gianna asks, twisting the cap on her Gatorade.

“Lakeside U isn’t Brown.” Ivy purses her lips in agitation. “They aren’t quite accepting my choice yet. Mom keeps saying that I need to tour the place, but no thanks. I have no interest in repeating their footsteps. They already have another kid for that. Why the hell do I have to join?”

“Exactly,” Gianna says around a mouthful of food. I kick her foot, and she flips me off, waiting until she swallows before continuing. “And besides, we won’t be at Brown. That’s really the main issue here.”

“Yes,” she says dryly. “Because that truly is the worst part.”

Gianna laughs, nudging me with her shoulder. “Have you decided what you’re doing?”

And isn’t that the million-dollar question.

The topic has come up a bit with Carson. He has his acceptance to Lakeside U, and I’m still wanting to take a year after school to travel with Valerie. Before leaving Doverhill, we’d both worked as waitresses, dogwalkers and lifeguards to save enough money to fund our trip, so it isn’t a dream I’m quite ready to give up on. College has never been something I’ve given much thought to. Up until the coming year, I wasn’t even sure if I wanted to go at all.

“Not yet.” I spin my bottle of coke around to keep my hands occupied. “I’m planning to backpack after graduation.”

Ivy lets out a shocked laugh and Gianna sits up straighter, smiling wide. I look between them, confused.

“Are you serious?” Gianna leans forward, her hangover forgotten.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You and Valerie, yeah? You’d be going with her?”

Ivy picks at her food, shaking at her. “I can’t believe you’re both ditching me. Fucking bitches, I swear.”

“That’s what I’m doing! Do you have it all planned out? I do, I’m starting in Barcelona. we should all go together. Oh my god, this is so exciting, I’d been prepared to just go solo the whole year.”

Her excitement is contagious because I can feel my skin buzzing. “Uh, hell yes! We haven’t booked anything yet, but Barcelona is on our list, anyway. Valerie is staying next weekend, we’ll mention it then, but I can’t imagine her being against the idea.”

“And Carson’s fine with you leaving for a year? We’ve barely been able to pry you away from him for one hour.” Ivy arches one brow, her words working as a bucket over water over the buzz we’re working on.

“We’ve talked a little about it,” I admit sheepishly. “It usually ends in one of us being mad, and the other dropping the topic.”

“And you’re the one dropping the topic, I’m assuming?” Gianna asked.

I shrug, taking a drink to avoid answering. I’m sure they can see the guilt on my face, anyway.

Ivy smiles sadly. “I didn’t mean to upset you by asking.”

“No, no, I’m not upset. You’re right, I’m the one that cuts the conversation off when he gets upset. It’s just... he’s always known that college after graduation was his thing, you know? And until recently, I didn’t even know what I was doing beyond travelling. He wants me to wait until after college, but I’ve been wanting this since I was fourteen. I got my first afterschool job on my fifteenth birthday with Valerie, just to save up. He just doesn’t understand it, that’s all.”

“Screw him,” Gianna says, pushing me out of the guilt that’s wanting to swallow me whole.

The worst part of our arguments is that I understand where Carson’s coming from. He doesn’t want to spend a year apart and then graduate college a year before I do. I get it, I do, because I’m already sick at the thought of getting on the plane and leaving him for a whole year.

“I think she already is.” Ivy rolls her eyes, making us all laugh.

When my phone buzzes in my pocket, I excuse myself and make my way out into the hall, throwing my trash away as I go. Carson is spending his lunch at the gym with Asher and Weston, so it wouldn’t be him trying to call me. The gym is one of the few places where he completely zones out; it’s actually pretty hot to watch.

Surprise washes over me when Jordan’s name flashes across my screen.

“Jordan?” *Obviously, Annabelle.*

“Hey, uh. Look, I know you’re with that guy, and I just wanna be clear that I’m not calling to fuck with that or anything,” Jordan answers, stumbling over his words.

The wariness in his tone sets me on alert. Jordan is probably the most confident person I know. It unsettles me to hear him as anything but.

“Why are you calling?”

“Right, right, yeah.” There’s a pause and before I check to see if he’s hung up, he speaks again. “Do you remember the last time I saw you?”

It’s a bit hard to forget, as much as I’ve tried. He dropped that fucking sex tape in my lap and then I didn’t hear from him again. I just assumed he took care of it.

“Yeah, I remember. What about it?”

As he starts to talk, the phone is snatched from my hand and a hard, sweaty body presses to my back. “Get in that fucking room.”

Considering the only room in this part of the hall is the supply closet, I walk into the dark room with zero hesitation, my stomach clenched with desire and anger when the door clicks shut behind me, cloaking us in darkness.

“Do that often?” Carson’s lips hover over my neck, eliciting goosebumps over my arms. “Sneak away from your friends and call your fucking ex?”

Despite the threatening growl in his voice, my body reacts to his instantly. My nipples tighten against the lace bra—the first and last day I ever wear one. This fucking hurts—and my pussy throbs, begging for friction.

“And if I have? You had no goddamn right to just hang up on him like that, you bloody unsufferable caveman.”

What the hell am I doing? I shouldn’t be provoking him, I should be telling him that Jordan had something to say, and this was the first I’d heard from him since the party where Carson gave me enough orgasms to have me passing out. Except I don’t. I stroke his jealous side, encouraging it. He damn well deserves it after that shit.

“Oh, I’m so fucking sorry.” His hands grip my hips, holding me against me so I can feel the bulge pressing against my back. “That I don’t want my girlfriend sneaking around, talking to her piece of shit ex.”

“You don’t even know why I was talking to him, you ass.” I let out a hiss when his teeth dig into the soft spot below my ear, and a moan is dragged out of me when his tongue sweeps over the sting.

“Hands forward and hold on tight.”

My hands easily find the shelf and I grip the edge, enjoying the bite of pain as the metal digs into my palms. It works to cool down my burning flesh enough that when Carson lifts my skirt over my hips and slaps my ass, the heat from my blood all gathers to the burn now spreading across my ass.

“If I ever see you talking to him again, I’ll tie you to my bed and never let you leave.” He rips my panties down to my thighs, preventing me from spreading my legs. I hadn’t realized how much I’d wanted to do just that until I couldn’t. “Fuck, I’m almost tempted to video you taking my cock and send it to him. But this is mine. Mine to look at. Mine to touch. Mine to *fuck*.” He finished by plunging himself into me, stretching me to my limit, enough that beneath the blinding pleasure is a dull burn.

His hand quickly covers my mouth, muffling my scream. He doesn’t give me a moment to adjust as he usually does, instead he allows his jealousy to fuel him as he fucks me so hard that his hips slap against my ass and his fingers dig into my hip tight enough to leave finger-shaped bruises behind.

I’m not complaining, which is obvious enough by the choked moans muffled by his hand. Our sex life is one thing that I’ll never complain about. Carson never fails to fuck me hard enough that I always wake up with a pleasant ache between my thighs, even when he tries to make things slow and sweet.

“If you make a fucking noise, I’ll stop and you’ll suck my cock instead.”

When he moves his hand away from my mouth, I angle my face to press my mouth into my bicep. It takes about a second before I feel the sharp sting against my ass, followed by three more straight after. At this point, my entire body is tense, ready to implode at any moment.

“Fuck,” Carson grunts, slowing his thrusts, while continuing to fuck me hard enough to rattle the shelves I’m holding onto.

His hand comes around to my clit, slapping me with enough of a sting that my body tenses and I let out a scream that’s muffled by my arm. Heat floods my entire body, drowning me in a feeling of utter bliss. With a low growl, Carson latches onto the side of my neck as he stills, emptying himself in me for what feels like an eternity.

We stay like that for a few moments, trying to catch our breath. Eventually, Carson pulls my panties back up my thighs and spins me around to press a soft kiss to my lips, a complete change from the way he’d just fucked me senseless.

“I should make you jealous more often,” I tease, dragging my fingers through his wet hair. If he were anyone else, I’d be grossed out by the sweaty hair, but I’ve found that there isn’t much about Carson that grosses

me out.

He grips my wrist and kisses my palm, his eyes narrowing on me in warning. “Don’t you dare.”

“I need to call him back,” I tell him, raising a challenging brow. “He had something to tell me.”

He narrows his eyes on me, and I can almost see his mind working. “I don’t like it, but fine. Just don’t be fucking sneaky about it. I don’t trust the guy.”

Looping my arms around his neck, I press my lips to his, trying to put everything I’m feeling and refuse to say into the kiss. He hums and gropes my ass.

After getting my phone back and finding a message from Jordan to call him back, we go our separate ways. I’ll wait until tonight to call Jordan back. At least that way I can flip the conversation to work in my favor.

What good are ex’s if they don’t work as foreplay for some rough sex?

The music is almost deafening. Carson leads us to the opposite end of the DJ set up, where Asher and Weston are sitting with Alex, Ryan and Mason.

Alex jumps up to hug me, while Gianna nudges a scowling Ivy and moves to sit next to Weston, grabbing his beer and taking a drink. I don’t understand how she drinks the stuff willingly.

“This is a group I never thought I’d see again,” Mason comments, throwing a wink at Ivy. “Hey hot stuff.”

“You’re going swimming in that?” Weston asks, trailing his eyes down my body, raising his brows at my outfit choice.

I’d ditched Gianna’s suggestion of shorts and a bikini top this time around, settling for jeans and a plain shirt. It might be hot, but at least it gets the message across; I am not going anywhere near the fucking water. It’s enough that I’m back at the lake at all.

“I’m not going swimming at all,” I tell him, joining Carson beside Asher, who leans over to give me a one-armed hug.

Weston boo’s me, earning an elbow jab from Gianna. “You can’t even swim, leave her the fuck alone.”

A laugh bubbles out before I can stop it. Weston glares at me and pinches Gianna’s leg.

Time passes quickly after that. Ivy sticks by Mason’s side the

whole time, speaking in hushed tones. Carson and Asher get stuck into Asher's latest girl drama while I share and listen to embarrassing childhood stories with Gianna and Weston.

"Projectile vomit, it was so gross," Weston laughs, bumping his shoulder into Gianna, who blanches.

"I'm having the worst flashbacks right now," she shivers dramatically. "To this very day, I cannot even *look* at peas. There were just so many."

"I had a stomach bug, you jackasses. Find something else to talk about," Ivy shouts, flipping us off.

"Are we talking about the time Asher dared Ivy to eat that entire bowl of peas and she threw up in the pool?" Carson joins.

He hasn't left my side, keeping his hand resting on my thigh. The gesture has had me free falling the entire time, especially when every now and then he'd squeeze and lean over to kiss whatever he could reach. How the hell did I ever look at this man and feel anything but adoration?

"Oh my god, will you shut up!" Ivy stands and pulls Mason up. "We're going to get a drink. You can all sit and enjoy your walk down memory lane. I don't want any part of it."

"Now there's a surprise," Asher mutters quietly. Well, not too quietly.

"Hey Ash," Ivy smiles sweetly. *Too* sweetly. "Jump off a fucking cliff."

"Ivy!" Gianna looks appalled, staring up at her, slack jawed.

Ivy continues to glare at Asher for a minute, almost daring him to respond, before taking Mason's hand and walking off in the direction of the pounding music.

Unfortunately, the tension doesn't leave with her. If anything, it only intensifies when Jessica approaches our little group, a proud smile on her face. God, I've never disliked someone this much. It's like poison coursing through my blood.

Carson's hand tightens on my thigh as my stomach dips. Something isn't right. I can feel it in the way Carson tenses, in the way my heart sinks to the floor.

Our bodies are funny like that. They can pick up on things that we don't even know yet. They warn us, try to protect us. I wish I'd listened to this warning.

“Baby,” Jessica beams, coming to a stop in front of us. It’s probably the first time I’ve ever seen her completely alone. “We did it. You can finally stop this now.” She waves her hand towards me dismissively. “I know you’ve been suffering, but this really was your best idea yet.”

“What the fuck are—” His words are cut short when my phone buzzes in my pocket.

Pulling it out, I’m confused to see a message from Jordan simply saying **I’m sorry**, and a notification that I’ve been tagged in a post from Jessica. Tagged with Carson.

Without even opening the post, I know. I can’t explain how I do. It’s just one of those weird things. I just *know*.

So when I open the post and I’m greeted by a video that I’ve tried hard to convince myself had disappeared, I shouldn’t have been surprised.

Chapter 36

Carson

“*Let me explain, Anna.*”

I never thought that I could feel physically sick from someone else’s expression, but fuck, my stomach twists painfully at the pain in Anna’s eyes.

What is she thinking?

The video continues to play on her phone, her quiet moans filling the silent space. She stares down, her mouth parted in shock and unshed tears filling her eyes. We all sit in shock, waiting. Waiting for what? I have no idea. My entire world spins, and I can’t do anything to stop it.

Eventually, Asher is the first to break. He reaches across me and hits the button to lock Anna’s phone, shutting off the sound and image and bathing us all in silence.

I feel fucking sick. Jess is still standing there, looking like the cat that just got the cream. And it’s that image that makes me snap. I know Anna has had doubts, even though she hasn’t said anything. I know that right now, she’s processing Jess’s words, trying to find the truth in them.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I growl.

Jess flinches at my tone, but continues to hold her head high. “Don’t play dumb, baby. You came to me a couple of weeks ago and told me you wanted me to find the video. I know you wanted to wait an extra week, but I was just too excited.”

Fucking liar. Why can’t she go off and bother her boyfriend?

“How did you know about the video?” My voice is pure venom, and to her credit, Jess appears unaffected.

“You told me about it. When *she* was at her father’s, and you asked me to spend the night with you.”

That was two weeks ago. How the hell does Jess know about that? I was supposed to go with her that night, but Henry needed someone to stay home because the security system was being updated. Anna went to her dad’s alone. She didn’t want to; I convinced her.

Shit, this looks bad.

“You’re fucking lying,” I shout, causing Anna to wince beside me.

That small movement brings me back to reality, where Jess doesn’t mean shit and I need to get Anna to listen to me, to know that I had nothing to do with this. That’s all I can focus on right now.

“Hey.” I take her hand, relieved when she doesn’t pull away. “Let’s get out of here, please. This is not what it sounds like. She’s fucking lying, I promise you.”

Anna stands and moves her hand away, taking a bit of my fucking soul when she does. This has all gone to shit. It’s all over. I’ve lost Anna before I ever really had her, and I can only blame myself.

Nobody follows as I walk along the lake with Anna close behind me. The thundering bass of the music and the lights dim the further we go, enveloping us in silence and the glow of the moon. I come to a stop where I’m sure nobody will interrupt us.

“Obviously things are over now,” she whispers, her voice coming out so broken that it tears a hole out of my heart.

How could she ever believe that I would have done something like this? I’ve spent the last month doing everything possible to earn her trust, to earn her heart.

“Please don’t do this,” I beg shamelessly. “I had no idea what Jess was planning. I don’t even know how she got that fucking video. You told me Jordan had it, maybe he did something.”

Judging from the fire in her eyes, I can guess that that was not the right thing to say. Which only pisses me off. I remember the day she told me about the video as if it was yesterday. We were lying in bed watching some movie we weren’t paying attention to. I’d been scratching her stomach because she loves it and she was playing with my hair as we talked. I told her embarrassing stories from my pre-teen years, and she confessed to unknowingly starring in a sex tape. I had lost my shit and threatened to find the guy. She calmed me down and promised it was taken care of, and that she didn’t want anyone to know. She also swore that Jordan was the only other person to know.

Fucking hell, this really does not look good for me.

“Do not do that,” she hisses. “I may have had my issues with Jordan, but he would *never* do something like this. You, on the other hand, have a fucking reputation for pulling this shit.”

“I didn’t fucking do this!” I don’t even care that I’m shouting now, that my desperation is ringing loud. I can’t lose her.

“Then how the fuck did Jessica know?” she screams, finally snapping the control she’d been holding onto. “Two people knew, Carson: you and Jordan. And Jordan sure as fuck wouldn’t do this. That leaves you.”

Logically, I can see where she’s coming from. I’ve had a partial nude of her posted over the school and I’d thrown every pair of her panties around; both things I felt fucking sick doing. Why wouldn’t this be any different? Why *should* she trust me? It sure doesn’t help my fucking case when Jess is there spilling a bunch of bullshit.

“What can I do to show you I’m telling you the truth?”

Her eyes drill into me, and I welcome the burn as a distraction from the splintering in my chest. Is this what it feels like to lose everything? Like I’m drowning yet burning to the ground at the same time?

“How am I supposed to trust you?” Her voice has dropped back down to a whisper, and I suspect it’s to try and cover the subtle tremble I can hear. “You hated me, Carson. You tried to make my life a living hell. When am I supposed to believe that all changed into something more?”

“Probably the same time it changed for you.”

She can’t honestly think that I never noticed. That her eyes lost some of that fire and her voice became softer toward me. She started really seeing *me* before we even got together, whether she wants to admit that or not. I’ve also heard her calling me her boyfriend to Valerie, despite her insistence to me she didn’t want to rush labels.

“No.” Anna shakes her head, taking a step back.

Panicking, I charge forward and pull her into my arms, holding tight as she sags against me, silent sobs racking through her body. If I was ever capable of crying, it would be at this moment. The feeling of finality is like a crushing weight on my chest, making it almost impossible to breathe.

“Please. Please don’t leave me.” Three words sit on the tip of my tongue, begging to come out. Now isn’t the time, though. I’ll beg. I’ll do anything to keep her, but those words have no place in a moment as somber as this.

“I have to go. I have to deal with this.” Still, she doesn’t move away.

I continue holding her until her breath steadies and she’s no longer crying. I’m sure she can hear how hard my heart is beating as it desperately

tries to leave me, too. Why the fuck not? I can't even blame the organ for wanting to attach to Anna as she steps out of my arms and turns to walk away.

"I'll make up for this," I promise. "I won't give up on us, Anna."

"I already have..."

With that last stab to my heart, she walks back to the party, leaving me standing above my stomach and heart as they lay bleeding at my feet.

"You should probably sleep. Take it from me, talking about heavy shit when drunk is a fucking disaster." Asher makes a grab for my arm, and I jerk myself back, avoiding him.

Fuck him. Fuck Weston, too. They can't stop me from fixing this. I have to fix it. When did I sleep alone last? I can't remember. I don't sleep alone anymore.

I can't fucking do it.

"Anna?" I call out, stumbling up the final steps. Where did all these extra steps come from?

"Carson, come on," Weston tries. "We're all tired. It's been a fucked up night. Let's just sleep on this. You can talk to her tomorrow."

"She hates me," I practically fucking whimper.

She hated me when she first came. Or at least strongly disliked me. That didn't really bother me, because she didn't know me and I made sure I earned her distrust. This time is different. I've been *trying*. I've done whatever I could to show her I'm serious, that I wouldn't hurt her, yet here I am, calling out to an empty fucking house.

Weston and Asher stop at the top of the stairs, whispering amongst themselves. They can gossip all they want, I don't care. With the burning fuel of alcohol encouraging my steps, I swing the door of Anna's bedroom wide open.

Then I'm struck in the chest with a knife. Or a bullet. Whichever one hurts more.

Her closet doors are open, the emptiness inside hitting me like a ton of bricks. Her laptop is gone, along with the star projector that she falls asleep to. I always hated that thing. Stupid artificial stars.

While I was drowning my pain in alcohol, she was here... packing... leaving me. She's really gone.

Hunching over, I let out an agonized groan. How the hell can

someone leaving hurt this much? I barely felt a damn twitch in my chest when my parents never showed back up, yet this is like someone has a rusted knife and is just jackhammering it into my chest. I feel nauseous, and it isn't from the alcohol.

"Gianna said she's with Ivy." Asher's voice drifts through a fog. "She just needs time, man. That was a pretty fucked up thing that happened tonight."

"Illegal." I croak through the tightening in my throat. "What Jess did is fucking illegal."

I can almost feel the excitement exploding through Asher. He knows I won't let this go, that Jess won't walk away so easily. Her parents may have a lot of pull in this city, but not as much as mine. She'll pay for this. I've moved past sharing her little habits to her parents. She wanted my attention, well now she fucking has it.

"I'm happy to pay Jess a visit tonight," Asher grins wickedly.

"And do what? You don't even like to fucking kill spiders," Weston says dryly, wrapping his arm around my waist to help me stand upright. "I say we all call it a night. Anna's with Ivy and Gianna. They'll look after her. Then tomorrow, we'll figure out what to do about Jess."

The thought of going to bed without Anna sends another rush of that sinking nausea through my stomach, and I almost heave. I don't think I can sleep without her. I won't have her hair tickling my face no matter how many times I move it away. I won't hear her soft snores and non-coherent mumbles. I won't have her softness and warmth pulling me into a peaceful sleep. It'll just be....cold.

"I should call her again," I say, mostly to myself. She wasn't answering earlier, she might now. Maybe she can't sleep, either.

Asher voices his disagreement under his breath and Weston lets me go. Neither stops me as I stumble to Anna's bed and fall to my back, breathing in her scent. After she showers, she soaks her skin in caramel lotion, because she has a ridiculous fear of her skin becoming so dry that she looks scaly. I laughed and made fun of her when she told me, now here I am wishing like hell that she'd at least left the lotion, because fuck, I'd bathe in it right now just to keep some part of her around me.

Weston disappears out of the room and Asher comes to lay beside me. I pause for a second, settling the bubbling jealousy that he's on Anna's bed. It's stupid to want to push him onto the floor, since he sees Anna as

more of a sister than anything else. He's just trying to be a good friend and stop me from doing something stupid.

Which makes total sense. If they weren't keeping watch, I'd already be in an uber on the way to Ivy's house. Fuck, I'd sleep on her front porch until Anna came home with me.

Whipping my phone out, my heart freezes when I see Anna's name. Just one message. One message to my seven.

Anna: Please don't make this harder than it has to be. It's over, Carson, stop calling me.

"She just needs breathing room," Asher whispers.

Breathing room? What the hell even is breathing? If breathing means shards of ice attacking my chest, my lungs grasping my air I don't want to give, and my stomach clenching to blinding pain, then I don't care if I ever breathe again.

"I can't sleep alone."

It's the last thing I remember saying. And before the darkness pulls me under, I feel a warm body pull me close.

Warm... but not soft.

Not Anna.

Chapter 37

Annabelle

I roll over, feeling as if rocks are falling onto my head.

Why do people drink so much? It isn't like it magically gets rid of your problems. Even while I'd been taking shot after shot with Gianna last night, my heart was still reminding me of its existence with every painful beat. Drinking did nothing to help last night, it's only made everything this morning feel a million times worse. A few months ago, I would have jumped at this as my chance to go back with my dad again, to leave Carson behind. Now, it feels like my worst nightmare.

Thankfully, Ivy left a bottle of water beside the bed with a couple of Advil, so I hurriedly take the tiny pills and drink half the bottle to get rid of the uncomfortable dry mouth.

It doesn't work.

The events of last night play through my mind as I lay back and stare at the ceiling. Jessica's smug smile, that stupid video, the hurt in Carson's eyes. I know I should have listened to him last night and at least entertained the idea that he really had no idea, but fuck... That tape is something that not even Valerie had known about. Jordan and Carson are the only two, and Jordan has no reason to spread it.

How could I have been so stupid to let my guard down? I shouldn't have pushed that video out of my mind. I should have known it hadn't just disappeared like I'd hoped.

The soft knock that comes sounds more like a brick being smashed against a metal door. Ivy pokes her head in, her smile full of caution and worry. I'm about to ask her what's going on when the door is pushed open further and my ex walks in.

Well, my other ex. Since I guess Carson just fits into that category.

A sharp pain in my chest distracts me from Jordan. It almost feels like a betrayal to be with him right now, which is just ridiculous.

"I tried warning you," Jordan says, breaking through the tension filled silence. "That's why I called. I would have come sooner, but your

guard only just released your location this morning. I'm so sorry."

It doesn't take a genius to realize the *guard* he's talking about is Valerie.

"Do you want me to stay?" Ivy asks, remaining by the door.

Even though forcing the words from my throat hurts like a thousand small pins, I reassure her she can go. I'm sure she's only ever heard bad things from Valerie about Jordan, but he was never a bad friend. That's not where we went wrong.

Jordan kicks off his shoes and lays beside me, dragging me to lay across his chest. There's nothing intimate in the gesture as I snuggle against his chest and breathe in his familiar scent. Tears prick behind my eyes.

Carson would probably have a stroke if he could see me right now. His jealousy towards Jordan had always been something I thought was hot, mostly because I'd never had it before. Underneath the heartache and the drums in my head, I want to rub this in Carson's face, to get him to feel even a touch of the pain I'm drowning in right now. To feel a bit of the jealousy I had last night when Jessica wouldn't shut her fucking mouth.

I wonder if he's with her right now.

"Your friend told me this isn't about the video getting out," Jordan says, tracing patterns along my spine in the way he knows calms me down. "I'm sorry it didn't work out with you two."

"It was fake," I grumble, mentally begging myself to fall back asleep. I don't want to deal with this right now.

"Nah. I saw the way that guy looked at you, and there was nothing fake about it. Sometimes shit just happens."

Talking about Carson is the last thing I want to do. A few tears escape, falling onto Jordan's chest. It's a good thing his shirt is black, I guess.

"How'd you know what was gonna happen anyway?" I ask, redirecting the conversation away from my heartbreak. I need to lick those wounds on my own.

"I was clearing out my emails, because I get so much junk in there, you know." Some people enjoy spring cleaning. Jordan enjoys cleaning his phone storage every few months. I've never understood it. "And I saw this email that I apparently sent out. I didn't recognize the name or anything, and there was no message in it... just a file. A file that I'd deleted the day after that party. A file that was sent out around the same time when your guy beat the shit out of me."

My heart gets stuck in my throat. “What was the name? In the email?”

“Jessica Malin, but I don’t even know a fucking Jessica,” he tells me. “All I can think of is that someone swiped my phone at that party and sent the email while I was distracted.”

No.

Carson wasn’t jealous, he was distracting Jordan while Jessica grabbed his phone. But wait... he didn’t know about the video at that time. Unless Jessica overheard and told him, in which case, he is a damn good actor, because he acted oblivious when I actually told him about it.

Fuck. I really am stupid. I was starting to find a small amount of hope that he wasn’t lying to me last night, that he didn’t have any idea about Jessica publishing it. All of that just flew straight out of the window.

“I just want to go back to sleep,” I say sadly. “Can you stay?”

It’s probably the worst thing to ask right now, yet I can’t find it in me to take my words back. My world is falling apart around me, and I just need something familiar.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

When his arms tighten around me and he presses a kiss to the top of my head, I allow myself to let go of everything and just sleep all my problems away.

“Fucking hell, you still sleep like the dead.” A rough hand covers my mouth at the same time my nose is pinched shut.

I wake up spluttering for oxygen. Jordan stands next to the bed with Valerie by his side, arms crossed over her chest and a scowl on her face.

“What the fuck, you assholes,” I gasp, rolling onto my stomach. “Let me sleep.”

“You’ve slept the whole day away, and your dad is downstairs. He’s fucking pissed, too.”

Confusion washes away the tiredness as I reach over to grab my phone off the side table. Shit. It’s already five in the afternoon. I really had slept through the entire day. At least now all I have is the crack in my heart giving me trouble since the marching band has left my head.

Fifteen missed calls from my dad. I clear my notifications from Carson before I’m tempted to open those messages, even though my heart loudly protests to my impressive self-control.

“Why’s he mad?” I ask, my voice groggy from too much sleep.

“Do you not remember what happened last night? Which, by the way, a little heads up on the intro into the porn industry would’ve been nice.”

Of course, my hopes that I’d woken up to everything having disappeared isn’t a reality. Life isn’t that kind to me.

“It’s not like she had a say in that video being filmed or posted,” Jordan snaps at Valerie, earning a look that makes him slightly back down.

“So he knew?” She turns her unimpressed look on me. “He fucking knew, and I didn’t? What the fucking fuck, Annabelle.”

“Ooh, that’s a lot of fucks,” I joke weakly.

She unfolds her arms only to rest her hands on her hips in her disappointed mom stand. “Well yeah, they’re needed. But weirdly enough, that isn’t why your dad is pissed. I mean, he isn’t bloody happy, but there’s something else going on there.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll go face the firing squad.”

“You’re so dramatic,” Jordan says almost wistfully before leaving me alone with Val.

Sitting up, I finish the water beside me and stretch. I was hoping to have a bit more time before facing my dad, but I also know that Slater is the only one with the talent to get rid of this tape.

“I’m assuming you haven’t talked to Carson?” Val asks suddenly.

Jesus, just his name is enough for the knife lodged in my heart to wiggle in more. How the hell am I meant to go back into that house?

“Observant, aren’t you?” I reply dryly, rubbing my closed fist over my chest, hoping to ease just some of the pain.

“Cut the shit, Anna.” She remains standing, her face still hard. “Do you honestly, one hundred percent, believe that he did this? Is there no doubt in your mind? Think about what you’re doing, because I have never seen you as happy as you were when you were with him.”

“Picking your brother’s side, huh,” I bite back, instantly regretting my tone when she flinches.

Making a stab at her situation is a low move, and I hate myself for going there. She doesn’t like to acknowledge Carson as her brother, and I can’t blame her for that. She still feels abandoned and unwanted, despite being raised by a loving dad and her doting grandparents.

“Your dad’s downstairs. We’ll be out the back to give you two some privacy.” When she turns to leave, guilt pierces me again.

“I love you,” I say to her retreating back.

“Damn right you do.” She looks over her shoulder and winks, and a breath of relief whooshes out of me. At least that’s one relationship I don’t have to worry about, no matter how much of an ass I am.

Downstairs in Ivy’s family room, my dad paces between the couch and the window, his brows scrunched and his lips tight. His expression has me wringing the bottom of my shirt; a shirt I stole from Carson’s room when I was packing up last night.

“Hey daddy,” I say quietly, hoping like hell the innocent act eases some of the anger I can feel jumping off him in waves.

It doesn’t.

“Don’t you ‘daddy’ me, kid. You’ve had me up the whole fucking night worried sick. I’ve tried calling you and Carson only to get both your voicemails! You’re lucky you’re eighteen now because I’d bloody lock you in a tower!” he yells, his hands moving frantically.

“It’s just a video, Dad,” I reassure him, trying to not back down. My dad does not raise his voice to me, so being on the receiving end of his anger is bringing my nausea and headache back in full force. “And I didn’t know he was filming it or that it was gonna be posted, I swear.”

His eyes narrow on me while his jaw softens the smallest amount. “I’m not here about the video, Annabelle. While I am fucking pissed off that happened at all, that wasn’t what had me worried about your sudden radio silence. Slater is already working on getting it taken down. Thankfully, you were underage so whoever posted it will be facing charges without us needing to step in.”

Confusion and unease fill me. “Then why are you so mad?”

Taking a deep breath, he flops onto the couch and runs a hand through his hair. “Seth was seen in town yesterday, leaving one of the smaller banks. He would have realized that he’s been blocked from every account, including the smaller ones he’d been stealing from. He’s pissed off and Sophia thinks he’ll try to make a move on you.”

“Me? Why?” Fear creates a sickening balance with the confusion, causing the nausea to grow until I’m sure I’m about to throw up. “I barely know Seth, and I don’t know anything about Carson’s family business.”

Dad cringes. “We suspect he’s been staying close by, which means that he knows how close you’ve gotten to Carson. If he hurts you, he’ll think that Carson will jump to your rescue and get himself hurt in the process. And

despite what the kid thinks, his parents would do anything for him.”

“Seth wants to use me to get to Carson?” If Carson did help Jessica, why would he try to help me? He’d probably be relieved if Seth gets rid of me.

“We believe so, yes, hence why I was freaking out when you disappeared the night he made a reappearance.”

There’s that guilt again. “I’m sorry, Dad.”

“I just need you to be safe while I take care of this. But that means you need to stay away from Carson. If Seth is watching, we can lead him to believe you’ve stopped seeing each other.”

Oh Dad, there won’t be any need to pretend here, I bitterly think to myself.

Chapter 38

Carson

I don't think I've ever had a week drag on as long as this past week has. Instead of eight days, it's feeling more like eight years.

After realizing that my number has been blocked, I tried calling everyone I could think of. Ivy and Gianna swear they don't know where Anna is, and Alex cursed me out and hung up before I could say anything. Surprisingly, the only person aside from Asher and Weston that are on my side happens to be my elusive half-sister.

Our relationship is practically non-existent, but we swore that our common ground would always be with Anna, something I'm now grateful for since Valerie is my only link to getting Anna to see how fucked up this whole situation is.

"She still won't say anything," Valerie tells me over the phone.

Every day I've been calling her for any update I can get on Anna and how she's doing. The only thing she won't tell me is where she is, which is something we always end up fighting over. She tells me that Anna needs time. I tell her that time will only make her doubts grow. I don't need Anna doubting every fucking moment we had together, thinking that I was playing some game with her.

"What about Jordan? The video came from his phone; wouldn't he know who originally sent it?"

From what Valerie has told me, Roman is trying to find out who filmed the sex video and Anna is keeping quiet. They already know that Jess is the one to post it, but I told them I'd be dealing with her. Valerie was quick to tell me I was a fucking idiot, because in Anna's eyes, it made me look guilty.

"Jordan isn't stupid. He knows what'll happen to the guy, and he doesn't want to hurt Anna."

"Is he still hanging around?" My voice comes out harsher than intended, but fuck, when I first found out that Jordan has been there comforting Anna, I wanted to drive there and throw him through a wall until

Valerie told me they were both well over each other. I still don't like it, but at least my stomach doesn't burn with jealousy anymore.

Well, it does. It just isn't as fierce as it once was.

"Nah," Valerie laughs, taking amusement in my helplessness. She's eased into the bitch role of a sister easily enough. "He's in Tennessee for the school break, so you don't have to worry about him snatching up your girl. Although, I did hear her moaning on the phone last night. That wasn't you?"

"Not funny," I growl.

Valerie laughs. "More like hilarious. But she's eating more and sleeping less, so that's a bonus. I'd say give her another week, then try and see her."

One week.

One week later and I'm finally face to face with Annabelle Decker.

If you'd told me months ago that I'd be standing here, with my heart bleeding at my feet and ready to beg Anna to come back home, I would have laughed myself into an early death.

While I found this woman hot as sin from the moment I laid my eyes on her, it took longer for me to fall for her. Not that I had much choice. She barged her way into my heart and made a damn home in there. I'm not about to let her leave so easily, especially over something that I had no part in.

Right now, with bags under her eyes, her hair tied into a messy bun and wearing a baggy shirt with a ketchup stain, she's never looked so beautiful. I'm attracted to every side of Anna. The side of her that makes me laugh, that makes me want to throw her against the nearest wall and fuck her, and the side that makes me want to tuck her against my chest and hold her for hours.

"Come home," I blurt out, seemingly forgetting the whole speech I kept practicing on the drive over.

Her green eyes shine with tears that she won't let fall. "Carson."

Fuck, I hadn't prepared myself for the effect her voice would have on me. It takes everything I have to stay strong and not let myself fall to my knees. When did I get so weak for this girl?

"I know I was an asshole to you at first, but you have to know that things changed. I am still filled with guilt over how things started between us. The last thing I'd ever want to do is hurt you again. And to release a fucking

sex tape? Do you really believe that I'd stoop that low?"

She casts her eyes down and her bottom lip starts to shake until she bites down on it. Usually, that move would send a rush of blood to my dick. Now it's like she has a knife and is carving out my heart.

"I think you should go," she whispers.

I take a gamble and step forward, clasp her face with my hands and forcing her to make eye contact with me. Only when I do that, my blood turns to ice. Tears fall from her eyes, staining her pale cheeks.

"I didn't know what Jess was planning. I didn't know she had that video." She winces, and I brush her tears away with my thumbs. "I need you to believe me. I need you to trust me because I am falling apart without you. I lo –"

"No," she sobs. "Don't say it. Don't fucking lie to me."

"Anna." How could she not see that my world revolves around her? "Tell me what to do."

"It's too late." Her voice cracks as she shakes her head and steps back.

My hands fall to my side. It's been two weeks, and she still believes that I had something to do with that video being leaked. I'd had some hope that she'd spent the last two weeks realizing that what we had was real, but right now she's taking that hope and squashing it under her foot.

There's only one more thing I can think to do, and I really fucking hope it helps. Because I wasn't lying to her, I am falling apart without her. If this doesn't work, I really don't know what I'll do.

"I'll fix this," I promise.

Anna shakes her head, not bothering to hold in her tears. The clear vulnerability is like a stab to my stomach. "Please just go."

Despite the strong urge to stay and argue this, I reluctantly turn and leave. I don't stop when Valerie calls out to me or when Roman's dog, Franklin, comes bounding down the hall with his tongue out. I just need air. I need to drive and let my mind clear, even if it's only for an hour.

Only my hope to disappear is gone when I find Roman leaning up against my car.

I brace myself, preparing for either a verbal bashing for hurting his daughter or his fist.

It's quite funny, actually. This all begun because I wanted to achieve this very thing; hurting Anna to the point of her father stepping in

and wondering where he went wrong in protecting his only child.

Only it wasn't me that succeeded in breaking her. Not really.

When I approach Roman, his eyes are glued on me. And not in the, *I'm going to kill you*, way, more in the, *you're an idiot*, way. I can't disagree with him. I should know known Jess would do something, but I let my guard down.

"How'd that go?" he asks, folding his arms across his chest.

His tone sounds more curious than pissed off, so I answer honestly. "She still doesn't trust me, which I get."

"I'm surprised she trusted you enough to date you," he scoffs, surprising the hell out of me. He must see the shock on my face, because he chuckles. "It wasn't Anna that made you wait the extra week. She didn't even know you were coming. I needed the week to calm down, or we'd be having a very different conversation right now."

Shit. I should have known Anna would have told her dad everything. She doesn't owe me anything. She was probably hoping her dad would've buried me and then she could move on without me trying to hold on. Damn, he still could murder me. Nobody aside from Valerie knew I was coming here today.

"Chill, kid," he laughs, easing me somewhat. "If I actually wanted you dead, you wouldn't have lasted the week. Although when Val told me everything, I did entertain the idea."

"I wish I could take it all back," I say honestly. "There are so many things I'd do differently if I could go back."

Roman stands straight, putting his hand on my shoulder and shaking me lightly. "While I hate what happened, I do understand the motive. You were confused and hurting. I just wish you'd opened up to someone. Hell, even Henry could've set you straight."

I stand there silent, feeling like a fucking child. I'm not entirely sure why I didn't confront Henry. It's not like I thought he would have lied. This all could have been avoided.

"Anyway, this isn't what I wanted to talk about. Val has told me how much you care for Anna, and I've seen myself how much she cares for you, and that's all I can really want for her. As long as you're aware that I know some very creative ways to kill a man....and hide a body."

Don't show fear to the biker threatening your life. "I'd spend the rest of my life making her happy if she'd let me. I love her."

His face falters silently before he composes himself. “Well, moving on. I know the last time we spoke, I told you about Seth being around.”

Ah Seth. This might be the only reason I have been able to stay away from Anna for as long as I have. The day after our break-up, Roman called to tell me they believe Seth is going to try to get to Anna in a way to get me. It’s a smart fucking plan, because I’d give myself up to protect her without a moment’s hesitation. Seth knows his stuff.

“You’ve seen him?” I ask, inching for a fight.

“He went by your house yesterday, asking Sydney where you were. Apparently, he was looking to plan a bachelor party with you for Henry. By the time Sydney called me, he’d already left town.”

A bachelor party? He has to be kidding. He could have gone with something more believable, like an asteroid was heading for earth. The idea of him doing anything to help Henry is downright laughable.

“I’ve been staying with a friend,” I tell him, unsure what else to say.

It gives me an unsettled feeling, knowing that Seth is looking for me. He’s always been a major ass and outcast in the family, but it wasn’t until recently that I realized just how unstable he truly is. Because what else screams unstable like trying to have your brother and sister-in-law murdered so that you could take their multi-billion-dollar business.

“Good,” Roman says. “It’s obvious that Seth doesn’t know where they live if he hasn’t made any appearances there, so keep staying with them. If that isn’t an option, I can find somewhere for you. We have a guy close to your age you could stay with.”

He must be talking about Mike. Anna told me he’s the youngest, after she told me the story of losing her virginity to him. Yeah, not a guy I want to roommate with.

“I’ll be fine, but thanks.”

Roman slaps my back. “We’re gonna get him, kid.”

Even with the fear in my stomach, I realize Seth isn’t my major problem right now. Because the fear has nothing on the hollow feeling in my chest. My parents’ absence no longer stings the same as it once did, and my mother’s betrayal doesn’t hurt. All those things mean nothing compared to the ache and longing I have for the girl I’m walking away from right now.

With a forced smile and nod, I get in my car and call Asher.

Chapter 39

Annabelle

Valerie wraps her arms around me, resting her chin on my shoulder. Any other time, I'd fall back into her and soak in the comfort. But my face is still burning from his touch and my heart is still falling to the pit of my stomach.

I pride myself on my self-control but being so close to Carson was some bullshit test that I barely passed. If he'd stayed for even one second longer, I would have cracked. I would have jumped into his arms and refused to let go.

"For what it's worth, I believe him," Val says, pressing a kiss to the side of my head. "He looks like a fucking mess. You don't look that way if you're guilty. Hell, not even Ezra looked that awful when he was trying to get me back, and he was guilty."

"He's upset because he got caught," I sigh. Yesterday, I would have said that with total conviction. Now, I'm not so sure.

What if Jessica did all this on her own? What if I pushed Carson away for something that wasn't his fault? If his goal for coming here was to create doubt, then he fucking succeeded, and I have no idea what to do with that.

It's no secret I've fallen in love with Carson, at least to me. Maybe that's why this has hurt more than anything else I've ever experienced; like my blood is constantly filled with ice and my stomach now lives down in my ankles. I spent the short amount of time we had together waiting for the other shoe to drop. That when something did happen, I automatically assumed that Carson was behind it. I didn't take even a minute to think about everything he's done to try and convince me he wasn't the same person, that he wouldn't hurt me.

He walked me to every class, even if it meant he was late to his own. If anyone made a judgey comment—which still occasionally happens after the whole panty mess—Carson would stand up for me. Before that night on the lake, I couldn't have remembered the last night I slept alone. He was always there.

“Kayley’s throwing a party tonight. You up for going? Everyone’s been missing you.”

“I promised Ivy I would spend the night with her,” I say.

Valerie squeezes me once more before stepping back. I turn to face her, my eyes falling to the necklace on her neck. I’m pretty sure it came from Weston, because Ezra has never been the jewelry buying type of guy, but whenever I bring up Weston, Val clamps up and refuses to talk.

“I might stay the weekend with her.” I pull my hair out of my bun. It’s oily as hell and in desperate need of washing. “I think I just need a break. Is that cool?”

Her lips purse in disappointment. “You can’t keep running, Anna. When was the last time you even looked at your phone?”

Nine days.

I’m nowhere near ready to face the messages I know are currently piling up. I turned it off after a lapse in control nine days ago, when I went through and read every message from Carson. New and old. I cried myself to sleep that night.

“I’ll look today then. Happy now? You can report back that I’m reading his stupid messages.” Okay, biting her head off isn’t cool. Especially not when she flinches and looks down with guilt casting a shadow on her face.

Seriously, though, did she honestly not realize that I’d click onto her feeding information to Carson? She’d ask the weirdest questions and then jump onto her phone, telling me she’s just messaging Ezra. It’s not like I’m all that angry about it. I’m just disappointed that she’s gone behind my back.

“Is it really so hard to believe that Jessica did all this to break you up? You said yourself that she’s a crazy bitch. There might be some truth to it.”

“I don’t want to talk about this right now,” I groan, walking to my closet to pick out clothes for my stay with Ivy. I haven’t told Valerie—or anyone—about the sex tape coming from Jessica’s email. I’m still processing that myself.

“You never want to talk, Anna!” Val yells, frustrating ringing clear in her voice. “You won’t tell anyone what that asshole’s name is in the video. You won’t hear Carson out, at least not really. You’re just trying to shut down, and it’s so irritating to watch. That guy fucking loves you, and you’re the only one who can’t see it.”

“Stop,” I warn, refusing to turn and face her.

“No. I believe Carson, and I know deep down, you do, too, otherwise you would’ve kicked him out the second you saw him.”

As I feel the traitorous tears start to spill over, I drop the clothes I’ve managed to pick up and storm into the bathroom, locking the door behind me. Arguing with Valerie is the last thing I want to do, but this is something I need to just ignore. At least for the next two days.

My phone slides under the door and I almost crack a smile before realizing what’s waiting for me on there. My heart thuds painfully.

“I’m gonna go, but just promise me something?”

“What?”

“He’s calling tonight. Please answer. Just trust me on this.” She taps on the door lightly, saying goodbye. I’m grateful that even when we’re in a disagreement, she knows when to back off and give me the space I need.

Taking a deep breath to brace myself, I lift the phone and start to read the message thread she’s pulled up.

Carson: This is fucking shit.

Carson: I hate that I understand why you believed her. I wish I could take it all back.

Carson: I’m sorry, baby. And I’m not apologizing because I helped Jess. I’m apologizing because you still had doubts about us, and I’m the only one to blame for that.

Carson: I was trying to find facts to prove alligators aren’t that harmless, but I’m totally on your side now. I’ll never take you to a lake again.

Carson: Remember when I complained about you getting into bed after washing your hair because it got the pillow all wet? Turns out I can no longer sleep with a dry pillow.

Asher: Want me to punch him for you?

Alex: I vote on revenge sex—find his dad and fuck him.

Gianna: I miss you, babes.

Carson: I love you.

That last text knocks the wind out of me. I sit on the floor against the door, crying tears that should’ve dried up days ago.

It's what he tried saying to my face, and this right here is the exact reason I stopped him. Everything is blurring now. My doubt grows stronger and my heart fails to find a steady rhythm.

It feels as though I'm the only one on the *don't believe Carson* train. Hell, even my dad and Jordan have moved onto Team Carson. Jordan, who now believes that Carson's reaction at the party was genuine and not a distraction ploy, and my dad, who is biased since he's bff's with the guy's fucking mother.

Screw this. I need more time to wrap my head around everything. With a frustrated sob, I shut my phone back off and bang my head back against the door.

We sit outside a café on the outskirts of town, sipping our caramel lattes. I've been with Ivy for a day already, and I'm not much closer to figuring out my shit yet.

I barely got any sleep last night, thinking back on every memory since moving to Lakeside. Carson has been a douchebag since day one of meeting him, and yet aside from a few nasty words that I all too willingly took part in, he never stood by and watched what Jessica was doing. I know he claimed it was because he never wanted my dad to know he was pulling the strings behind it all, but what if there was more to it? I'd seen the flashes of guilt and regret when I'd come home pissed or looking for a fight after Jessica and her friends pulled some shit.

Maybe, just maybe, he is telling the truth. Maybe he hated what he was doing, even if at the time he didn't really understand why. In a way, he's still just a kid, feeling abandoned and betrayed by his own parents. Feeling betrayed can make you do some crazy shit, I should know; I was a massive bitch when I dated Jordan.

"They've kept the name, by the way," Ivy smiles, nodding to her phone where our group chat is pulled up.

"Alex caved?" I feel a flicker of amusement, but that's the extent of it. Carson took every bit of light I was capable of.

Ivy hums, tearing open her third sugar packet and pouring it into her drink.

Since Gianna came up with the name, *the gay squad*, Alex has been fighting against it. I guess he finally gave into her. Not that I can blame him, Gianna can be very persuasive.

“She says that it’s gonna be global,” Ivy laughs, reading the new message that’s popped up.

“I guess it’ll be a good way to meet people. You won’t have to wonder if someone’s gay or not.” This is how the weekend has been going. We’ve been talking about everything except Carson and that video; Ivy referred to them as that scratchy blanket you try to ignore at your grandmothers until it’s literally thrown on you.

Before I left my dad’s, Slater had succeeded in removing the video from all platforms. It helps that I was underage, because they could play the threat of child pornography if they faced any problems. It’s one less thing I have to worry about.

“Oh god. Don’t mention that to her, she’ll probably try to form some giant orgy.”

“That sounds pretty good,” I joke. “Maybe I’ll join in.”

Ivy shakes her head in amusement and we continue to sit in silence.

Movement from across the street catches my eye. It’s a small hotel, nothing too special. For the past half an hour we’ve been sitting here, and nobody has walked in or out.

Until now.

I was put under strict orders to stay with Ivy and keep my phone on me at all times. Dad mentioned Seth showed up at home looking for Carson before disappearing again.

The guy is a fucking worm. He keeps popping up and disappearing into thin air without leaving a trace.

Now here he is. Looking over his shoulder and sneaking into the otherwise deserted hotel.

My heart slams against my chest in both fear and adrenaline. I don’t think he knows I’m here, because this street is so quiet that I would’ve noticed him lurking around.

This guy is unhinged. He hired a fucking hitman, for Christ’s sake! He wants to hurt me and use me as bait to get to Carson. He has nothing against murder, obviously, so what if he tried to kill Carson? We’re only ten minutes away from Lakeside. He could’ve bypassed the hitman and decided to take matters into his own hand.

It’s with the image of Seth attacking Carson that has me standing. Fear is pushed back as anger starts to take over.

Who the fuck does this guy think he is?

“I need you to call my dad. Tell him I’m taking care of it myself.”

“Anna, what the hell? Look, I know that’s Carson’s uncle, but he isn’t a good guy,” Ivy worries, grabbing onto my wrist. “Let’s get out of here, come on.”

Now isn’t the time to question the panic in her voice and the tremble in her hands, so I file that away for later. I have to put an end to this. I have to keep Carson safe and get his parents back.

Pulling out my phone, I ignore Ivy begging me to stay and cross the street after Seth.

“I really hope this isn’t a butt dial. Did you listen to the file?” Carson’s wary voice causes my steps to falter.

“Don’t talk, okay?” My voice comes out surprisingly strong, even though I’m freaking out on the inside. “I’m going to confront Seth, and I need you to listen. I’ll make sure I get a confession.”

“Baby, what the fuck?” Carson shouts. “Don’t you dare. Where are you? I’m getting in the car right now, do not go near him.”

“I have an app on my phone that records phone calls, so I can record him talking and stay on the phone at the same time. Just don’t hang up, okay? I’m about to go in, so stay quiet.”

The only thing I hear is his car starting. He would know I’m with Ivy because of Val, so I probably only have fifteen minutes at most to do this.

Tucking my phone into my pocket, I approach the front desk.

Unsurprisingly, it doesn’t take much convincing to get Seth’s room number, since the idiot uses Carson’s dad’s ID.

What does surprise me, however, is Seth standing in his open doorway with a smirk on his face.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

Chapter 40

Carson

Is it possible for an eighteen-year-old to have a heart attack?

The second my phone flashes with a reply from Ivy, telling me the name of the hotel Anna has walked blindly into, I'm off like the fucking Flash.

How could she just follow after Seth alone? She knows how dangerous he is. It's not like she's going to be surprised if he pulls a gun on her.

Jesus. My mind becomes flooded with worst-case scenarios. He could shoot her, or stab her, or kidnap her and hold her hostage. This is the same guy that ran my parents out of town and tried to have them killed. He won't think twice about hurting someone he doesn't even know.

I turn up the volume in my car as I race across town.

"I've been waiting for you."

Fucking hell, I knew this shit was a trap. Seth isn't stupid. He's gone this long with flying under the radar. He wasn't about to be found by one eighteen-year-old girl. Why did Anna have to try and play the hero?

"I was hoping we could talk." Anna's voice fills my car, sounding a lot stronger than I know she is right now.

It's like I can feel her fear, even though she sounds like she has her shit together right now. I know her, though, and I know that she's barely keeping it together. Hell, I'm barely keeping it together right now. She should not be in a room alone with him. Not now, not ever.

"Talk?" Seth laughs. "Sure kid, let's *talk*."

I can barely restrain myself from punching the steering wheel and screaming. He speaks with a low edge, sounding exactly like the creepy fuck I know he is. Panic tries to paralyze me as more and more images plague my mind.

If he touches even one hair on her head, I'll bury him alive.

"Why do you want Carson's parents dead? That's your brother." Shit, she isn't going to dance around the elephant in the room, is she?

“My brother, ah yes, my dear older brother. The golden child,” Seth mutters bitterly. His voice fades, almost like he’s pacing the room. I grit my teeth every time his voice drifts closer to the phone, closer to Anna. “He could do no fucking wrong. I was sure that he could have gone on a murder spree, and they would have just sent him off to Fiji while they cleaned up his mess.”

“Talk about middle child syndrome. Bit overdramatic,” Anna scoffs.

Something smashes in the background and I almost curse. It takes a considerable amount of effort to keep my mouth shut. “You’re only proving my point, you know. I get the impression that you were a kid that never went a day without throwing a tantrum. Am I right? I’m totally right, aren’t I?”

What the fuck are you doing, Anna?

It’s one thing to get a confession, but it’s another to rile up the lunatic you’re stuck in a room alone with. Does she suddenly have a death wish?

“Such a smart mouth. I assume that would be Carson’s doing. I tried to warn you away from him, and instead, what do you do? You go out with him! Do you not remember everything he did to hurt you?”

My stomach rolls as I wait for her to speak. Her best bet would be to lie right now, to tell Seth that she hates me. That should be enough to keep her safe until I get there.

“I remember everything. I remember when he believed my dad was tearing his family apart. I remember when he was confused and hurt. I remember his parents had to leave because *you* wanted them dead. Carson may have done some fucked up shit, but I forgave him for those things a long time ago.”

I release a breath I didn’t even know I was holding. She could be lying right now, but this hope is all I have, and I’m not ready to let it go.

“You say wanted like it’s past tense. No, honey, it’s *want*. I want them dead. They have something that’s mine, and unfortunately for them, they refuse to hand it over,” Seth says.

“The company, right? That’s what you want?”

Yes, Anna, that’s right. Stop antagonizing the crazy man and get him to incriminate himself, because if I can’t kill him for whatever reason, we’ll at least have enough to lock him up.

“What I want? It’s what I deserve!” Seth screams, his voice

vicious.

My foot is already so hard on the floor, it's a damn miracle I don't have cops on my ass. I'm not far now, probably only three minutes.

"Our father owned a marketing company with a friend of his from college. The plan had always been that I'd take over with the other guy's eldest son when the time came, but I refused."

"If you're talking about Henry's company, then you really are an idiot, because that company is huge." *Oh my god, shut the fuck up, Anna.*

"That mouth is going to get you in a lot of trouble," Seth growls, sounding too close for my liking.

Anna doesn't know how to listen to silent threats because she talks again. "Yeah, okay, I'm shaking in my boots. Carry on with the storytime already. Why did you refuse the company? And hold up, how did your dad own both a marketing company *and* an airline?"

"Because he was a fucking over-achiever, that's why." His voice moves further away, and I let out a silent sigh of relief. "Mercury Airlines was a small thing built by my grandfather. It was in his will to be passed down to his daughter, but when both died in a car accident, it automatically went to dear old dad. I was fifteen at the time and under the impression that I was no longer taking over the marketing shit, because I was always with him at the airline, doing what I could to help build it up into something huge."

I remember bits and pieces of this story. Dad told me how he was being trained to take over from my grandfather when he was ready to retire, but he was under strict orders to keep it from Seth. Even my grandfather knew what a crazy fucker he was.

"When I was twenty-three, I was running shit at Mercury airlines while Derek was stuck in marketing. It was perfect, fucking perfect. Then that old bastard has to have a heart attack and die!"

"I'm sure he didn't mean to have a heart attack, geez." Thankfully, Seth either doesn't hear her, or he chooses to ignore her.

Finally, after what feels like a century, I pull onto the never-ending street. I can see the hotel taunting me, reminding me I'm still not there.

"He fucked us all over. In his will, he named Derek to take over Mercury Airlines, while I was still set to take over that joke of a Marketing company. So, I refused. I heard about Henry's little holiday fling, found out everything I could about her, and threw some harmless little threats around. It's a good thing they worked, too, otherwise I would've been down one

brother sooner than planned. When Henry stepped up, I set my plan on taking back Mercury Airlines. It was working, too, until your stupid father had to stick his fucking nose in my business.”

Don't, Anna, keep your mouth shut.

“Stupid?” She lets out a strained laugh. “I’d watch who you’re fucking calling stupid. You’re the one trying to kill innocent people just because your daddy didn’t give you the toy you wanted.”

I pull up in front of the hotel, parking illegally without any care. I’ll be the last one the cops worry about when they show up.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Seth screams. “That company is mine, that money is mine, it’s all fucking mine and if I have to pry it from Derek’s dead hands, I won’t fucking hesitate.”

“How are you gonna kill him without your little friend?”

“Oh, you’ll be helping with that.” His voice takes on an edge that makes me feel sick. “I imagine Carson will be here any moment to rescue his precious damsel, and when I have him, it’ll be all too easy to lure my dead brother out of the shadows he’s been hiding in.”

Ivy rushes across the street and I frantically get my phone to press the mute button. I can’t risk Ivy talking and letting Seth know that he’s been listened to.

“The police are taking so long to get here, I don’t know what to do, I can’t, I don’t,” she gasps, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Ivy, take a deep breath, okay? When the police get here, tell them it’s room *two-oh-nine*.”

Guilt hits me when I have to turn away from Ivy as she hyperventilates, but now isn’t the time. I’m so close to Anna, and yet I still feel miles away.

The hotel is outdated and smells of mothballs, with only three levels and an untrustworthy looking elevator I avoid. I’m faster on foot anyway.

Anna’s snarky voice brings me back to the phone as she calls Seth out for being too scared to tell her his master murder plans.

Of course, I have to be in love with a crazy bitch content to taunt a psychopath.

Silence greets me, causing my feet to pound harder on the floor as I race up the stairs and finally come to a stop on the third floor. My lungs burn with their inconvenient need for oxygen, but I don’t listen, not when I’m this

close.

Outside of two-oh-nine, I don't waste a second of hesitation before I'm shoulder barging the door open.

The scene the greets me is one that forces me to confront my very worst fears. Seth, slimy, dead-man Seth, standing pressed against Anna's back with the barrel of a handgun pressed to her temple. The same temple I used to kiss whenever I walked past her. The same temple that I used to trace circles over when she would fall asleep across my chest.

"How nice of you to finally join us," Seth grins.

"If you touch her, I'll fucking skin you alive and dump your limbs in a tub of acid," I sneer, venom lacing my words.

Seth laughs, sounding exactly like the deranged fuck he is. "She asked a question; I'm just choosing to answer with actions. What was your question again, my dear?"

He traces his disgusting finger across her cheek, and I clench my fists when she flinches away. The look in her eyes right now, the stubbornness trying to fight through the fear, cuts me so deep that I'm afraid I'll never heal from this scar.

"Let her go. I'll get you to my parents, but only if you let her go," I promise.

"No!" Anna fights, trying to push away from Seth. "Carson, you fucking idiot. He'll kill you; you need to leave."

After everything I've done to her, especially what she thinks I've done, and she wants to protect me? This could just be her trying to be a hero, but I don't care. I'm taking it as a sign that she's in this just as much as I am.

"Do I fucking look stupid?"

"You don't want us to answer that," I retort dryly. "Let. Her. Go."

Seth pretends to ponder as he holds my entire life in his meaty fucking hands. I've never felt so much anger and hatred in my life than I do in this very moment. If he weren't holding a gun to Anna's head, I would wrap my hands around his fucking neck and squeeze until his eyes pop out.

Everything seems to happen within the span of five seconds. Sirens fill the otherwise silent room. Anna slams her head back, connecting with Seth's nose and breaking his hold on her at the same time I dive for him.

We fall to the floor, grunting and cursing. Seth turns his head to spit out blood a second before my fist connects with his face, adding to the impressive mess that Anna started.

It's as if I'm possessed as I slam my fists into Seth's face, the look of fear on Anna's face playing on a loop in my mind. He was the reason for that fear. He threatened her life. He hurt her.

Small hands wrap around my bicep, tugging weakly. "Let's get out of here, come on."

Anna's voice breaks through the fog surrounding my mind. I sit back and take her hand in mine, allowing her to help me stand and pushing back the need to pull her in my arms until we're out of this room, until she's completely safe. Seth may be lying in a heap of his own blood, seemingly unconscious, but I've seen enough horror movies to know that it isn't safe until they're either dead or locked behind bars.

By the door, Anna pauses with a frown, looking over her shoulder and freezing. The widening of her eyes and the click echoing through the room is the only warning I give myself before I'm pushing Anna in front of me, curling my body around hers.

"This isn't over," Seth rasps at the same moment he pulls the trigger.

A piercing pain hits me, so blinding and nauseating that I'm not even sure where I've been hit.

Two more shots go off, and as I collapse to the floor with Anna cradling my head, I take a second to listen to the sound of footsteps filling the room, shouting orders.

Thank fuck. The shots were for Seth. Anna is safe. She's okay.

"I love you," I croak, closing my eyes against the throbbing pain spreading through my entire body. My hand is still wrapped around hers, soaking in the warmth and softness that's all Anna.

"No, no, stay awake, you drama queen. It's just a gunshot, come on," Anna begs, her soft hands brushing my hair out of my face. "You can't leave me. Please don't leave me. You promised me forever. You can't go back on your promise. That would be such a dick move."

Her sweet words fill me with warmth, even though I feel like I'm standing in the middle of the snow. She continues to beg me to stay awake, but damn, it's hard. I just want to sleep.

Yeah, sleep sounds good right about now.

Chapter 41

Annabelle

Nothing forces you to face your issues faster than a gun to your head.

I've been pacing the waiting room for the past two hours, ignoring Ivy's endless offers to get coffee, and Asher's weak attempts at joking with Gianna. I can't even bring myself to pay attention to the hushed arguing between Valerie and Weston.

The moment his eyes closed in that washed out hotel room, I shut down. Regret washed over me like a tidal wave, and it hasn't let me come up for air since.

What if this is it?

I'm the reason he was in that room. I'm the reason he was shot. If he dies, it'll be my fault. I could have called anyone else, I could have called my dad or Slater, or even the fucking police. Why did I have to be so stupid?

I lured him into a dangerous situation, and he tells me that he loves me?

Carson loves me.

Reading those words did nothing to prepare me for hearing them. It's all I can hear, like a broken record that I never want to repair.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

He has to get through this. He has to fight because I didn't tell him that I love him. I didn't tell him that I forgive him, that I take his side. He doesn't know that I want him. He doesn't know that I can't breathe without him.

"Holy fuckballs." Asher stares wide-eyed over my shoulder, his eyes flickering to Weston, who has also frozen.

"Guess they're not dead," Gianna whispers almost bitterly.

Curious enough to break out of my pity party, I turn to see what everyone is gawking at.

A stunning couple stand in the entry of the waiting room. From the

pictures I saw in Carson's room, I recognize Sophia Dorian easily; chocolate brown hair that matches Valerie's natural color, eyes the color of an overcast sky—also a mirror of my best friends—and legs so long and lean that it's like I'm staring at an older version of Valerie.

Jesus, how the hell did Carson not have any doubts when he met Valerie? These two are practically twins.

To Sophia's side is a man that rivals Carson's impressive height and build. His sandy blonde waves give him more of a surfer look, while the trimmed beard and piercing blue eyes show him as the cunning businessman that I've heard he is.

What a way to meet your boyfriend's parents.

Or rather, your *ex*-boyfriends' parents. I really need to fix that. Which is why he needs to get through this surgery and wake the hell up. How long do surgeries usually take? Is something wrong? Is the bullet stuck?

"I think I'm gonna go." Valerie's voice cuts through the air like a blade.

Sophia is watching her with pain-filled eyes, and it makes me wonder if she's just upset about Carson, or if she understands that she's face to face with the daughter she gave up eighteen years ago.

"Please stay," Sophia says, her voice ringing clear.

That answers my question.

Valerie replies without turning. "I'll ask Anna how my *brother* is later."

Ouch.

Sophia flinches from the venom in Val's voice, and Derek wraps his arm around her shoulder. Surprisingly, he also watches Val with an almost longing look.

Ah, well. I have more pressing issues to deal with. Like the love of my life lying open on a fucking operating table. I wonder if I can watch, like in *Grey's Anatomy*. Surely that's a real thing. Although, I would definitely lose my shit if I had to watch Carson being operated on. Just knowing that it's happening is hard enough.

Valerie kisses me quick and leaves without sparing a glance at Sophia. I hope one day she can make peace with her situation, for her sake.

"You're Annabelle?" Derek steps forward, offering me his hand.

There's only a second that I hesitate before taking his hand. Resentment burns through me; however unfair it may be.

These two abandoned their son. They dumped him and just disappeared into thin air. Sophia was visiting my dad, just an hour away from Carson, and she couldn't take any time to visit her son or even *call*. They put him into a dangerous situation; they left him with no protection. If they never left, Carson wouldn't be hurt right now.

If they never left, I wouldn't have had a chance with him.

"It's lovely to meet you." Sophia steps forward and pulls me into a hug. "And I believe we have you to thank for Seth."

I cast my eyes down. That isn't exactly something to thank. What I'd done was incredibly stupid. I already received the lecture from my dad and mom.

Dad swore so much that he had to bribe security to stay away from the waiting room, and Mom found out what had happened from nosey nurses and stormed down, scrubs and all, to ground me in this life and my afterlife. Henry is currently in New York working on an account before the wedding, so all I received from that end was a disappointed text and a promise to take care of his stubborn nephew.

"I know you mustn't think too highly of us," Sophia says. "There really is no excuse to how we handled this situation, except that we truly believed we were doing the right thing. Seth had always been unpredictable, and we knew that so long as he couldn't touch us, Carson would have been safe, seeing as he is our sole heir. It was foolish of us not to consider that Carson would have been bait to have us come forward."

"I'm not the one you need to talk to," I interrupt.

"Of course, yes." Sophia smiles sadly, glancing over her shoulder. "Your dad told her, I assume? I said that he could, but I..."

My heart aches for Valerie. She has spent her life believing that her mother died during childbirth, only to be told that she's actually alive. She just didn't want her.

"She just needs more time. It's a lot, you know." I shrug, silently begging to move on. Again, I'm not the one she needs to talk to about this.

"I'm sorry we couldn't meet any better circumstances," she says with a sad smile. "From what Roman has told me, my son is quite fond of you."

"The feelings mutual." I'm not about to get into my feelings for Carson, not when he doesn't know how I feel.

Sofia nods and walks over to Derek, who is standing with Asher

and Weston.

Ivy comes to stand beside me, taking my hand and interlacing our fingers. Whatever caused her reaction to Seth earlier picks away at the back of my head, but now isn't the time. I allow her to pull me to the uncomfortable couch where I lay, resting my head on her lap. We're silent as she runs her fingers through my hair, lulling me to sleep.

The next thing I know, I'm being woken up to a teary-eyed Sophia.

"He wants to see you," she smiles softly, standing to her full height.

I stand up so fast that I hold my hand out to Ivy to stop from swaying. How long have I been asleep for? Sophia walks away, and I'm quick to follow her, eager to see for myself that Carson is awake and fine.

Unless the *he* she referred to is my dad. No, that would be fucked up and cruel. Not that I'd be disappointed to ever see my dad, he just isn't who I'm itching to see.

"He hasn't been awake very long," Sophia says as we navigate the sterile halls. I don't know how my mom spends so much time here. My nose is stinging just from a few hours. "We've had our chance to talk to him and make some peace, but he has been very adamant about seeing you. We need to go to the police station to hand over all the evidence we have on Seth, so you will have plenty of time alone with Carson. And you don't need to worry about visiting hours, you can stay for as long as you'd like."

This woman makes it near impossible to dislike her. I want to hold on to my anger for Carson a little bit longer, so I remain quiet as we walk.

"I'm happy that he has you." Apparently, my silence does little to deter Sophia from doing all the talking. "He loves you, and it's quite clear you love him, too. What more could a mother want?"

For her son to not be lying in a hospital bed after she left him behind with her crazy brother-in-law.

Once we reach Carson's room, we stop. My heart slams against my chest and nerves wreak havoc over my body. Is he going to hate me? I am the reason he ended up in that room with Seth. I wouldn't blame him if he did.

"We won't be back until tomorrow. If Carson wants to contact us, tell him we'll be staying with Henry." She leans forward to kiss my cheek then walks back in the direction we just came from.

Right. Carson. Ten feet away.

Bracing myself with a deep breath, I push down my nerves and walk into the sterile room. The nauseating smell hits me at full force,

reminding me that the only thing sitting in my stomach is coffee. The next image claws at my chest. Carson, unusually pale, with an oxygen mask covering half his face and wires everywhere. Sophia said he was awake.

Is this one of those things where you're awake and seem fine until you die suddenly? I saw that happen on Grey's Anatomy.

My panicked thoughts are interrupted when Carson's chest starts shaking.

This fucking asshole.

When I follow the line of the oxygen mask and wires to see that nothing is plugged in, I close the remaining steps and yank the mask of Carson's face. He still looks pale, which isn't surprising considering what he went through today.

"You're not fucking funny," I hiss, pushing the wires off him.

His eyes open slowly, holding me as a willing hostage. "Quite the opposite, I think I'm hilarious."

Angling my body, I ditch the chair and sit on the bed, careful of the IV that is actually connected to Carson's hand. I drag the back of my hand down his cheek, needing some kind of contact. These past few weeks without him have been harder than I anticipated, but they've held nothing on the agonizing pain of this day.

"I love you, too," I whisper, fighting back the tears wanting to make an appearance.

The smile that breaks over Carson's face causes my stomach to flip. "I'm sorry. Can you say that again? I think they actually messed something up in surgery because my hearing has been so weird. You might have to repeat that, like, fifty times. You know, just so I can hear you right."

I laugh and press my lips to his in a kiss that moves me off my feet. It's a kiss filled with promises and apologies. The room disappears around me as his tongue slips past my lips and reminds me of why I took a chance on this guy in the first place. Everything about Carson sets me on flames, even something as simple as the confident, possessive way he kisses.

He owns me, body and soul.

"I love you so much." I pull back and rest my forehead to his. "And I forgive you, and I believe you. I never should have doubted you."

"You listened to the file?" He leans forward to kiss me quickly, just as unwillingly to break apart as I am.

After I ignored his call the day I saw him, I kept kicking myself.

Figuratively, of course. I was a mess and doubting everything I ever thought, so when I only got one message from him—a link to download—I pushed it aside to deal with after my weekend.

“No. I was planning to after this weekend.”

“I confronted Jess,” he tells me. To my surprise and relief, her name no longer sends a rush of hatred through my veins. If anything, I feel sorry for her. “I recorded the whole thing, of her admitting to overhearing you and Jordan at the party and stealing his phone. She was pissed off because I told her to back off from you, that I was over it, so she heard about the sex tape and saw an opportunity to get back at me and hurt you in the process.”

“Why would that have been getting back at you?”

He lifts his hand to tangle in my hair. “Because she knew I called things off for a reason, and it wasn’t because I was over it. I started ignoring her texts and stopped seeing her. That was a pretty big hint that I wanted you.”

My side starts to cramp at the awkward angle, so I manoeuvre myself beside Carson, tucking against his side. Since he can’t lift his arm, — a doctor came out during his surgery to tell us that the bullet had lodged in his right shoulder, and that he’ll be resting his arm in a sling until it’s all healed up—all we can do is lay side by side with our fingers laced together over his stomach.

“I hate what happened, but I know I can’t blame anyone but myself. I handled everything wrong, from the very start.” The pain behind his words cut through the bliss I’ve been floating on since seeing him awake and laughing. “I should have tried harder. I should have known Jess was going to do something.”

“Stop,” I say firmly. “That’s all in the past. We both made mistakes. It’s not like I was some Saint. I’m pretty sure I made you infertile.”

He laughs, turning to nip my shoulder. “I have super sperm, that would be impossible.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Unless you have a string of baby mama’s hiding away somewhere,” I tease, enjoying the slight detour from the heavy conversation.

“Oh shit, are they all outside?”

All I can do is squeeze his hand since the guy is injured. It’s in poor taste to punch the person that moved in front of a bullet for you.

“What you did was crazy stupid, barging in like that,” I tell him. He scoffs in disbelief. “Me? You shouldn’t have gone in there. I was swallowing down vomit on the entire drive.”

“That’s pretty gross.”

“Anna.” The command in his tone has me lifting my head off his shoulder to meet his stare. “If he hurt you, if he...”

I cut him off with a kiss that has him groaning into my mouth. Unfortunately, my distraction doesn’t steer him off the *scolding Anna* path.

“If something happened to you, it would have killed me. You are not invincible. Promise me you’ll never do something so reckless again, okay?”

Those pesky tears threaten to spill once again. “Oh damn, I’ll have to rearrange my schedule then.”

“Fuck, I love you,” he smiles, bringing his hand to the back of my head to pull me in for another soul-destroying kiss.

When we pull apart after an eternity, I move down enough to rest my head on his uninjured shoulder.

“Tell me all about your family reunion.”

Carson groans dramatically while I laugh.

There might still be a lot of things to discuss, but for right now, I allow myself to float off.

Carson is okay. He loves me. What else could I need in life? Well, I could name a million things, they just wouldn’t compare to this feeling. This feeling of being loved so wholeheartedly that I might cease to exist if it disappears, the feeling of trusting someone completely, of having no doubt of the love and care they have for you.

With a smile on my face and a whirlpool of love lighting up my veins, I listen as Carson goes on an hour-long rant about his parents’ appearance.

Yeah. Nothing will ever beat this feeling.

Epilogue

Carson

Whoever said that fucking in graduation gowns were easy fucking lied. Okay, I don't think anyone ever said that.

Anna's ass bounces as I thrust forward, ploughing into her tight heat with a harshness that I know she'll be feeling when she crosses that stage later. That's the goal, after all.

Her hands grab the shelves in front of her, her knuckles turning white as I completely lose myself in her. My shoulder isn't quite back to one hundred percent yet, so instead of fucking Anna against the door like I'd wanted to, all I'm left with is bending her over. Which really, I can't bring myself to complain about.

I bring my hand away from where I'd been drawing tight circles over her clit to slap her ass, groaning low in my throat as her pussy clenches tight around my cock.

Fucking hell, if she doesn't come soon, I'm going to feel like a total asshole. Her cries are muffled against my palm, since we can't risk anyone stumbling across the storage room and cock-blocking us. I might just be capable of murder if we're interrupted right now.

Anna has developed quite the kink for choking, so I throw caution to wind and move my hand from her mouth to wrap around her throat, just as I give her clit a harsh slap, sending her over the edge with a scream that I'm sure is about to blow our cover. My breathing becomes erratic and my thrusts stammer as I empty myself into the condom, draping my body over Anna to place small kisses along her shoulder blades.

After we both recover, I peel the condom off with a disgruntled grunt, earning a pinch in the ribs from Anna. She said she refuses to walk across the stage with come dripping down her thighs. I thought it would've been hot as fuck, but unfortunately, it was a battle I wasn't going to win.

"Pink is an amazing color on you," she smiles, brushing a soft kiss over my lips.

My scowl is mocking as I reach into a box of paper towels, ripping

a sheet off to wipe the lipstick off my lips. “Even better than the red?”

A week after I got out of the hospital, I made the mistake of getting drunk with Anna while we binge-watched RuPaul’s Drag Race. She somehow convinced me it would be hilarious to dress me in drag. I’m talking full make-up, a wig we found from Halloween two years ago and clothes that I spent two successful minutes in without ripping. Thankfully, photos were banned, so this remains our little secret.

She taps a finger on her lips in thought. “Hmm, I don’t know. We might have to try again, this time with a different color palette.”

“Hell no,” I laugh, tugging on her hair.

“It’ll be fun,” she pouts. “Come on, you like how they dress on RuPaul’s.”

Slapping my hand over her mouth, I pretend to look over my shoulder. “You promised you wouldn’t tell anyone.”

Her eyes sparkle with amusement as she laughs against my palm. My stomach tightens with a wave of warmth. I am still not convinced that I deserve this beautiful creature, but I’d be damned if I ever stop trying to deserve her love.

“We should go out and see everyone before we have to find our seats,” she mumbles.

I move my hand away to kiss her, unable to resist and unbothered if I’m smearing more of her lipstick on myself.

“Your parents should have come by now.” And that’s one way to kill any desire building back up.

Since they came back into the picture, they’ve surprisingly tried to make more of an effort to be around. Although it might have something to do with their accounts still being on ice; whatever Slater did to keep Seth out was also good enough to keep my father out, and unfortunately for my dear old father, Slater is currently in New York for a job. They’ve allowed me to stay with Henry while they moved back home, and even though we’re not under the same roof, my mother is around constantly—mostly helping Sydney with the wedding, which is now two weeks away—and my father is determined to ramp up our father/son bonding time before I leave for college.

“You know, we could leave, and they’d just mail our diplomas,” I wink, only half joking.

“And what would we do instead?” She steps close and wraps her arms around my waist, burying her face in my chest.

Holding her tight, I kiss the top of her head. “Go swimming in the lake, nobody will be there.”

“You’re so funny,” she mumbles dryly.

Despite my many attempts to reassure her that no alligators are in the lakes here, she continues to refuse stepping even one toe in the water. Actually, she’s the same at the beach. I’m starting to think it has more to do with a fear of large bodies of water.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Neither of us makes any move to leave, though.

In one week, Anna is getting on a plane with Valerie—who I’ve surprisingly gotten quite close with after the incident with Seth—and Gianna. Her plan had always been to take a gap year after high school with Valerie, but when she got her acceptance into Lakeside U, she decided to change her gap year into a *gap four months*. That gives me four months to set up the apartment near campus I bought us as a surprise. There’s no way I’ll be able to handle the separation of dorm rooms, not when I’m struggling to separate myself one foot away from her right now.

Finally breaking apart, I lace our fingers as we move through the school halls for the last time in search of our families. Students walk around in their robes, wasting time until we need to sit down for our graduation ceremony. Mia offers a small wave from where she’s standing with her parents, and I note the way her eyes linger on Anna for a moment too long. Guilt flashing across her face.

Mia helped a lot when it came to Jess. During my break-up with Anna, when I was still figuring out what the fuck to do, Mia had shown up at Asher’s with a screenshot of texts from Jess, making a whole bunch of threats against Anna after I’d told her to back off. She was the one to give me the idea of confronting Jess and getting her to confess to posting that video without any of my knowledge.

That confession, and the texts, were enough to have Jess expelled and charged with underage pornography distribution. She’s currently doing community service and has a permanent charge on her record. Yale pulling their acceptance was just the icing on the cake, really. Oh, and Michael dumping her. Anna deleted the file I sent of Jess confessing everything; she swore she didn’t need to hear it, because she trusted me. She snatched up the rest of my soul when she said that, and I’m okay with not getting it back.

Anna has come a long way in moving on from the past, except for

the occasional digs at my mental state for ever having fucked around with Jess. I let her have those, since I kind of always knew Jess was insane, yet I still slept with her.

“We should clone your cock before I leave,” Anna muses.

A laugh burst out of me. “You’re not covering my dick in clay.”

“Dildo’s aren’t made out of clay... I don’t think. We should look into it, otherwise my fingers will definitely break.”

“Aren’t you sharing a bed with Valerie? Do you think she’d appreciate you fucking yourself with a clone of her brother’s dick?” I shiver at the thought.

Anna blanches. “Okay, when you say it like that, ew.”

Walking outside, I’m hit with just how damn lucky I am. I may have gotten shot by my own damn uncle, but this has been the best year of my life. Seth is finally in jail where he belongs, serving a life sentence. My parents were shocked into giving a shit about their son. Henry is marrying the girl he’s been pining after for the past twenty years, and I’m loved by the most perfect woman I could ever imagine. I don’t think life could get any better than this.

By the first row of seats for family and friends, my parents stand with Roman, Sydney, and Henry, all of them lost in conversation. Not far from them, Valerie stands with her boyfriend, Ezra, who should be a pile of dust with the way Weston is glaring daggers at him. That’s not a mess I want to get involved with.

“Oh no,” Anna mutters, nodding her head to Monique talking to that asshole from Roman’s gang; *Mike*. “That’s trouble if I’ve ever seen it.”

“You’re trouble.” I bump my hip into her, tearing my eyes from the potential drama I plan to avoid. “Did you ever think we’d be there? On that first day, if someone told you?”

“Oh my god, no,” she laughs. “I fucking hated you. Still do, sometimes.”

I mock offense and slap my hand over my chest. “How dare you?”

“You’re a bloody bed hog,” she argues playfully, slapping my hand off my chest.

“Nah, I only do it so you’re left with no other option than to just lay on me.” It’s not really a lie. I do sleep better with Anna’s weight across my chest.

She scrunches her nose up and giggles. “You’re insufferable, I

swear.”

“Where did you two sneak off to?” Mother comes up with my father at her side, kissing Anna on the cheek. “Ivy’s father has been looking for you, dear. He wants to see how you’re doing.”

Chris, Ivy’s father, had been a massive help in finding that fucker from the video, *Lucas*, and having him charged. It pays to have a father in the FBI, that’s for sure. Just last week, Anna stood in front of a jury and spoke alongside six other girls that Lucas had filmed during sex and attempted to blackmail.

“I’ll find him after,” she smiles, nestling into my side.

My father looks pointedly at Anna and shoots me a wink. It took next to no time for Anna to win my parents over. I swear sometimes they like her more than me. Just the other night, I came home from seeing Asher to find my Anna watching *Friends* with my mother and filling her in on all the drama.

“Good, well, we’re going to take our seats. We will see you after for photos,” Mother says. “And do not forget we have a reservation for lunch.”

“Sure thing,” I reply, shaking my father’s hand and accepting a kiss on the cheek from my mother.

As I watch them walk away, I’m hit with a feeling of utter bliss. I have everything I could ever want, everything I could dream of.

Turning Anna in my arms, I kiss her gently, cradling her face in my face. Kissing Anna is never a simple thing. It’s something I put my heart into every time. Her taste, her softness and scent intoxicate me. It’s the sweetest drug.

Pulling back, I press my forehead to hers and urge my heart to slow down before I have a heart attack. “You know I love you, right? So fucking much.”

She smiles, her eyes lighting up with mischief. “It would be crazy awkward if you didn’t, because I sort of love you, too.”

“Sort of? You sort of love me?” I press my fingers into her ribs where she’s ticklish, and she giggles.

“Okay, okay.” She slaps my hands away with a breathless laugh. “I *really* love you. I love you so, so much.”

“Enough to come swimming in the lake tonight?”

“Not that much,” she says dryly.

Pressing a kiss to her neck, I wrap her in my arms. “Ah hell, I’ll take it.”

Read on for a preview of My Broken Trust

MY BROKEN TRUST

ROSE BUCKLEY

Chapter 1

Valerie

Dumping my bag on the small bed, I'm hit with how weird this whole situation is.

College has never been in my life plan. Traveling. That's what I've always wanted to do, ever since I was eight and stumbled across the food network. I had dreams of traveling the world and tasting everything I could from every culture I could. Food is easy, uncomplicated, everything my life isn't.

Gianna whistles low, falling to her back on her matching bed. "It's smaller than I imagined. Maybe we should've taken Anna up on her offer."

That would be a big no for me. I love my best friend with all my heart but moving into her new apartment with her boyfriend – and my half-brother – and hearing them getting it on every night is my definition of a nightmare. It was bad enough sharing a bed with her for the four months we traveled across Europe, hearing her giggling and gossiping on the phone every night.

"I think I'd rather take the small room," I reply, beginning to unpack my suitcase. I've always hated living out of a suitcase; it drove Anna and Gianna crazy that I'd unpack in every hostel and motel we stayed at. "What time is everyone meeting tonight?"

"Seven. Ivy has a late study group." She pulls out her phone and starts texting, her brows drawn in. "Are you still coming?"

My phone burns a hole in my back pocket. "Don't know. Ez might wanna just hang out alone tonight."

I've been back home a month, and in that time, I've only seen my boyfriend, Ezra twice. He got accepted to a college three hours away, and since his parents recently moved to Boston, he hasn't been able to stay behind in Doverhill, unless he wanted to live out of a hotel before heading back to campus.

"He's in town?" Gianna asks, disbelief in her tone.

"Just for the weekend. He's staying at the Hilton." I'm aware of the

bitterness that crawls up my throat.

Ezra's family's money has always been an issue within our relationship. His parents are convinced that I'm just after him for their money, and he's convinced that I need rescuing from a life of poverty... even though my grandfather is a successful farmer and my grandmother owns the most popular bakery slash coffee shop in all of Doverhill. Not to mention I have a father who – despite currently serving time in jail – is incredibly wealthy from a legitimate business; wealthy enough to put me through college without a second thought.

Gianna grimaces. “Gross. That place is way too posh; it's practically stifling.”

“And that's exactly why we'll be resorting to car sex. I've had enough of hotel beds,” I sigh, abandoning my clothes and walking over to join Gianna on her bed.

“I'm sure the Hilton doesn't have crusted bed sheets or bedbugs.”

We both shudder, falling onto the memory of our first motel stay. The sheets on Gianna's bed had been hard and crusted like some guy jacked off all over them, so we all slept crammed on one double bed. Only to wake up in the morning covered in bites from bed bugs. We almost called it quits and came straight home.

“I once got a concussion from car sex,” she muses, rolling onto her back and draping her leg over my thigh. During our year of travel, I learned that Gianna's love language is most definitely physical touch. The girl is very affectionate. “We were just dry humping, ya know, keeping things fun, and I heard a noise like someone walking outside, so I jumped up and smashed my head on the roof of the car. It killed the mood pretty fast.”

“That's brutal,” I laughed. “I can safely say, I've never experienced a sex injury.”

“You're missing out.”

“Or maybe not.”

“No no, you are.”

“What the hell is so good about having a sex injury?” I laugh.

Gianna sighs almost wistfully. “It gives you a memory that you'll never forget. Even if the sex is awkward, and you go on to hating each other, you'll always have at least one funny memory to look back on.”

“Who was she?” I ask, leaning upon my elbow. “Mia?”

She thinks she's so slick like we can't overhear her on the phone or

put two and two together when she's wasted and talking about closets and magical pussies. I don't know how much longer she'll hold out on getting things a secret. Gianna deserves more than a relationship kept behind doors.

"Nah, not Mia. This was someone else. The one that got away, as they say."

I'm just about to tease her when there's a knock on the door.

Knowing that it would be Ezra since he promised to stop by this morning after checking into the hotel, I get up and make my way to the door. Fully prepared to find my boyfriend, my breath gets caught in my throat when I come face to face – I mean, face to chest – with Weston. Beautiful, muscled, tan Weston with hair as black as a raven and hanging to his shoulders.

I wish I didn't know how soft his hair felt between my fingers.

"Hey babe!" Gianna bounces off the bed and comes to wrap her arms around his waist while I'm still trying to find my breath.

A year without seeing him has done nothing to stop the rolling in my stomach or the palpitating heart. A whole damn year, and my palms still sweat when I'm met by his brown eyes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my absolute best friend, Sam, there is no doubt that this whole thing wouldn't exist without you. Thank you for your constant support and your belief that this wasn't the trash that I tried to believe it was. Thank you for listening to every idea I have and pushing me to finish what I've started, and finally, thank you for always being in my corner, cheering me on, especially when I've wanted to give up.

To my mum, I know you aren't the best with words, but there has not been a day where I ever doubted how supportive you are of me. Thank you for being someone I can look up to.

To my amazing editor at Dark Raven Edits, thank you for your endless patience and for turning a new experience into something where I felt comfortable and heard.

To the lovely Samantha at TalkNerdy2me, thank you for the amazing cover, and for your patience with every question I had. You were one of the first people I contacted as I began to make plans to get this book out there, and I was terrified, but you were so incredibly kind and patient, so thank you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rose Buckley is a romance author from Sydney, Australia. She is obsessed with RuPaul's Drag Race, Hallmark Christmas movies and binge reading an entire series in one go. Her hobbies include shopping, reading m/m romances and coloring in swear books. Her idea of a night out includes going to an all you can eat buffet, people watching and crawling into bed before ten to watch Sex and the City. She has a Border Collie named Nala and hopes to one day live on a farm where she can live out of her dream of owning a hundred dogs and having 12 kids.

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