

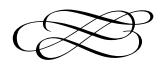
FROM THE AUTHOR OF THOSE WHO WAIT

HALEY CASS

On the
SAME PAGE



ON THE SAME PAGE



HALEY CASS

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To Monica, we know what this is.

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Epilogue](#)

CHAPTER 1



*J*t was not Riley Beckett's M.O. to text while on a date.

She liked to think that she, generally, gave Good Date. Occasionally, Great Date.

She asked questions, she gauged the mood to try to match energy, she was open but not clingy, she put her best foot forward, offered to pay, she had a small list of consistently crowd-pleasing stories she kept in her back pocket in case of a lull in conversation. And unless a guy gave her a bad vibe, she was nearly always willing to try a second date to see if first dates that fell flat could improve.

She'd always been good in a social situation, and dates were no different.

But *this* date... she was pretty sure the deities of social interaction would grant her this transgression..

Riley – 7:16PM

Are we still on for tonight?

Riley – 7:16PM

And by this simple question, I mean – please, for the love of any and all gods, promise me we are still on tonight.

Dull Dan didn't even realize she'd texted, Riley knew as soon as she looked up from her phone and found him still talking. His eyes were fixed over her shoulder, then down to his phone – oh, good.

The graph of The Market was still on there.

Dull Dan wasn't dull as in, droning on like the teacher in a Peanuts cartoon. Dull Dan was actually, maybe, worse than that. *He* seemed to find everything he had to say very, very interesting and was less interested in whatever Riley had to say.

Whenever she'd chimed in with her own story or anecdote – which, for the record, he didn't ask for or about – he responded with something like, "Yeah! Right, that reminds me of..."

And, unfortunately, it wasn't like Dull Dan was telling her an interesting story, either. There were no heart-pounding moments or tales marred by uncontrollable laughter.

Dull Dan very passionately liked to discuss his job, in finance.

And Riley, though she truthfully did not give a personal fuck about the Dow Jones, had, as a Good Date, asked questions about this job. Dull Dan had gotten a second date *because* of his passion. She'd hoped she would learn on a second date that his passion extended to something other than mutual funds.

She was proven wrong for the last – she glimpsed down at her phone as it vibrated – hour and fifteen minutes.

Gianna – 7:17PM

Come on over, come on over, baybay

Gianna – 7:17PM

Just putting final touches on a video, but you can legit come over whenever

Gianna – 7:18PM

Dull Dan really living up to his name?

Riley – 7:18PM

You have literally no idea.

Riley looked back up at Dan, biting her lip as indecision crawled through her.

The thing was, she *wanted* this night with Dan to work out. She wanted it badly, on so many levels.

She wanted it because work was busy and exhausting, and the possibility of something new and exciting happening in her personal life would be so incredible to look forward to in the midst of it.

She wanted it because she'd watched her twin sister, Ellie, and Ellie's girlfriend, Mia, cuddling up with each other a few days ago during movie night, and watching them be so *in love* made her ache with longing.

She wanted it because – to be frank – it had been months since she'd had sex and she wanted it, so fucking much. She craved a satisfying release, even if it wouldn't resonate on an emotional level. But while Riley didn't need the romantic component to enjoy sex with a partner, she at least needed to *like* the person.

With all of those wants aligning, she made her decision. One more chance.

"Hey, Dan," she spoke as soon as there was a slight pause in his diatribe. And she got in just in time, too, because he was already taking in a deep breath to gear up for the next riveting topic.

She both hoped and feared it would be about golf.

"Yeah?" Was all he offered, snapping his mouth closed and looking at Riley in startled question.

As if it was alarming to him that she could possibly have something to say on this date.

Riley stared him in the eye, as she leaned in, putting on her very best *would-you-believe-this* voice. "You know what happened at my work today?"

His eyebrows drew together as he slowly shook his head. "No...?"

And Riley actually had an amazing story – one of the stories she'd put together this morning after hitting the ground running was that of finding a literal serial killer from a cold case over twenty years ago. All because of DNA collected from CodeBreaker, the most technologically advanced ancestry breakdown on the market.

Which, as a fun fact that she was excited to add in, her sister had helped develop some of the information that went into the genetic health part of the DNA breakdown.

And maybe, she *hoped*, Dull Dan would engage in it, in something other than himself, and –

He scratched the back of his neck and looked outside at the cloudy, dark evening. "Cloudy skies? Temperature dropping to below freezing? That's what my weather app said, earlier."

Riley could only stare at him for several moments, her thoughts slowing to one, screeching halt. "Do you think that I'm a weatherperson?"

"At CBS," he stated, with an authority Riley was confounded by.

The longest she'd spoken to him about herself had been for five minutes on their first date – as well as a week and a half of texting before that – in which she'd mentioned her job as an associate news producer at BostonNow, after leaving NBC last year... multiple times.

Bafflement and irritation and utter disbelief, that *this* was how low the bar was, worked through her.

"I—" She started to tell him just that, before she bit her cheek and shook her head at herself.

It wasn't even worth it at this point.

Another one bit the dust.

CHAPTER 2



*D*ecember, Freshman Year

SHE'D OFFICIALLY SURVIVED her first semester of college.

Gianna tossed her hair over her shoulder as she strutted out of the classroom, happy to shut the literal door between herself and that fucking astronomy final.

“Gianna, hey!” Paul Something or Other whisper-shouted from her right, as she turned left and started to strut down the hallway of the science building.

She didn’t pause or even spare a look. She gave no response, even as she heard the quick patter of footsteps behind her, scrambling to catch up. If anything, she made sure to maintain a steady stride, a visceral satisfaction sliding through her with the knowledge that Paul was at least two inches shorter than her own 5’10 and would have to really try to keep up.

When he caught up to her, he tried again, “Gianna, wait, I just wanted—”

Gianna shot him a sharp glance, still not slowing her stride. “Were you waiting for me in the hallway to finish my final, like some kind of creep?”

She didn’t have to be looking at him to know he was blushing, as he stumbled over his steps.

“I – no,” he denied.

“It seems to me that you finished our final at least, what, twenty minutes ago? And yet, you were waiting outside the door, until I came out...” She looked at him this time long enough for him to really see her face and the

distaste she had for him, as she definitively finished, “*Creep.*”

“Fine, yes, I was waiting, but I wasn’t being creepy, I swear. I only wanted to apologize, before the semester was completely over.”

“Apologize?” Gianna dug her phone out of her back pocket, as she asked, “Whatever for, Peter?”

Once again, Paul, in his unsightly loafers and baggy khakis, stumbled. Only for a few seconds, before he quickly started keeping pace with her again. “Uh. I mean. Just, that we had a deal and I wasn’t able to, um, you know...”

“Oh, *right*. The deal we had that worked out perfectly for you, that you went back on, when we still had six weeks left in the semester? That deal?” She asked, haughtily.

The thing was, for some reason, Basic Principles of Astronomy was listed as a science course and not a math course.

She’d needed to take a science course to fulfil her general education requirements; astronomy sounded like a good idea. It sounded much better and easier than biology or physics, that was for damn sure. And who didn’t like looking at stars?

Maybe it *sounded* better and easier, but it sure as hell wasn’t. She’d learned that the second fucking week of classes, when she’d failed the first quiz of the semester on *the basics*.

So, she’d done some recon amongst her peers, and settled on Paul.

Paul, who sat diagonally in front of her every day and indiscreetly – though she was sure he thought otherwise – stared at her out of the corner of his eyes for half the class. Paul, who was very clearly the odd-man-out amongst the other men in the class. Paul, who blushed and stuttered whenever Heather, one of the other women in class, spoke to him. Paul, who’d gotten an A on the first quiz, took fastidious notes, and was always ready to raise his hand when their strict as hell professor asked a question.

They’d struck a mutually beneficial agreement. A *classic*, in Gianna’s opinion: she flirted with him in front of their class and let him practice talking to women while giving valuable and much needed advice, and he would let her copy a majority of their classwork and give her a dedicated study sheet before every quiz or test.

Her part of the deal paid off, in that Heather took a liking to Paul, all thanks to seeing him with Gianna. Paul’s end of the deal took a sharp turn, though, because Heather didn’t want Paul talking to Gianna or even sitting on

the same side of the classroom, anymore.

Gianna was then out a lab partner, classwork, and study guides, over halfway into the semester. She had no fucking clue what was going on in class at that point!

Talk about completely screwed over.

“Yeah, um, that deal,” Paul hedged, reaching up and pushing his hand through his hair, before dropping it back down and clutching the strap of his backpack. “It’s just – it wasn’t personal. Heather, she just doesn’t understand our friendship. And...”

She well and truly tuned him out as she looked down to see the email notification from her mother, and a jolt of excitement shot through her. Relieved excitement, if she was being honest, and her steady stride slowed to a pause as she hastily opened the message.

Her mom was wrapping up filming a movie on Lake Como, and Gianna had asked her a few weeks ago if she could meet her there, flying out after her finals were over. She’d suggested they could do Christmas together, for the first time in years, and her mom had agreed.

Gianna totally understood why her parents hadn’t flown her back to Italy for most school breaks when Gianna had been in high school. She’d spent the last six years attending and living at Elliston Preparatory Academy, one of the world’s most elite private schools located just outside of Boston, and her parents paid a pretty penny for her to attend.

So, Gianna truly had gotten the most bang for their buck and made a home for herself, there. Holidays at Elliston had been fun, even. Sometimes.

But she was eighteen, now! She didn’t need either of her parents to, like, babysit her or take care of her; she was responsible for herself. She could legally drink and party all she wanted, right along with them. Legally in Europe, anyway, which was all that really mattered.

She’d just been waiting to hear from her mother about when would be the best time for her to fly over, and...

Giannina –

I have amazing news. Marco has agreed with my vision for my character and has written in several scenes more for me! I’m getting a much more fleshed out arc. So, my filming dates are extended for another four weeks. He also believes that this movie might open doors in Hollywood for me and has advised me to start speaking and writing more in English for practice.

I thought – who better to practice with than you?

But thinking of you reminded me that you planned to fly here over your holiday break. So sorry, bambina, but I simply will not have time to host you here.

Perhaps see about visiting your father? I know he is busy, given how close we are to fashion week, but it may be worth a try.

My monthly deposit was made in your account this morning – a holiday bonus xx

Ciao,

Giulia

Inviato dal mio iPhone

As her stomach bottomed out, she tightened her grip on her phone, and sucked in a deep, steady breath through her nose.

It was fine. This was f–

Gianna's jaw set as the world came back into full swing, and she cut her gaze to Paul. Who was, apparently, still rambling his lame-ass apology.

"Yeah, so I've been planning on bringing it up to Heather. It's been complicated, since she's my first girlfriend and all. But I don't want to lose you, and I think I miss the way things were earlier this year. With us. I was thinking, mayb–"

Gianna let out a laugh, both amused and agitated, cutting him off. "Lose me? You miss the way things were, with us?" She echoed, rolling her eyes, hard. "Peter, did you honestly believe we were even friends? There is no us."

He startled, looking up at her with wide eyes, and she took satisfaction in how hard she could see him swallow. "Uh..."

"What? Did you think this was going to be like some cringey romcom from decades ago, where you would – in any way – end up with me?" She deliberately stepped closer to him, unsurprised and not even entertained by the way he swallowed notably hard and looked down automatically toward her chest.

She laughed again. "The most ridiculous thing I've experienced all year is the fact that your little girlfriend felt threatened by me. If I wanted you, I would have had you in a heartbeat."

"I, um... fr-friends," he stumbled over his own words, face flushing as Gianna leaned in even closer.

She winged up an eyebrow. "If I was your friend, I would tell you to stop wearing khakis outside of a goddamn IT store and to stop having your mother cut your hair. Or that the truly sloppy makeout sessions you and your

girlfriend have together on the quad outside of this building are terrifying to see, and that an unskilled kiss is nothing to brag about.”

Paul’s mouth snapped shut, and in his blush, Gianna tried to take every ounce of satisfaction she could. It was very little, but it did *something* to soothe the feelings swirling inside of her.

“Now, you come racing over to try to get back in my good graces because you’ve been second-guessing whether or not you would have ever had a chance with me? Whether you should have blown our deal off for a first-time hand-job from someone who gets you less kudos from the other assholes on this campus?” She eyed him with disgust, leaning away from him. “Why don’t you go back and wait for Heather to finish her final? In case you didn’t notice, *I* finished before her. Without your help. And while you’re at it, the next time you make a deal with someone, why don’t you try to keep your end of it so you don’t come off as a complete jackass?”

There. All right. That did give her a little more satisfaction, especially with the way Paul blinked at her and didn’t seem to be capable of saying anything back.

Gianna spun on her heel. “Goodbye, Peter. Don’t ever creepily wait for me in another hallway like this again.”

“It – it’s Paul,” he called from behind her, feebly.

“I’m aware.”

Gianna shoved open the doors to the outside world, shaking out her shoulders and breathing in the cold, December air. It felt good.

And, in spite of that email, life was good.

Actually, no. Life was *great*, she nodded to herself at the thought, bolstering her confidence.

Yes. Life was great.

She’d finished her finals, and she *had* to have passed. She needed to pass. If she didn’t get at least a B on this final, her grade wouldn’t be high enough pass, and she *wasn’t* going to fail a gen ed. She wouldn’t. She wouldn’t even entertain the idea, because it wasn’t remotely in her stratosphere.

Gianna Mäkinen *didn’t* fail.

And she didn’t have to go to Italy to see her mom to have a good holiday break, either.

She wasn’t even going to text her father – despite the fact that her parents were clearly in one of their seeing-other-people phases given that her mom definitely fucked her director, she was right. With her father’s fashion line

having just been given his own mainstage show at fashion week starting last year, there was no way he would have the time to spend the next month with her.

Gianna was going to start her vacation off right.

A holiday bonus from her mom meant she could absolutely afford to throw a world-class party.

Her self-assurance rebuilt itself as she walked back to her dorm. By the time she got back, she'd already booked a suite for the weekend at the Fox and Hyde Hotel, started an alcohol order with the immaculate fake ID she'd obtained when she'd been fifteen, and had amassed a guest list from her contacts that she'd sent a mass text invite out to.

Good. Yes. This was exactly what she needed.

And, as a little treat to herself, she was absolutely going to convince Riley to join her night of debauchery, she decided, as she got off the elevator onto her floor.

Riley-the-Roommate was... interesting.

Even though Gianna was used to living with a roommate – she'd had once since enrolling at Elliston for the seventh grade – Riley was by-far the best one she'd ever had. Not that she would ever say that to Amber, her best friend and roommate of the last few years at Elliston.

Honestly, she had not been looking forward to move-in day at the end of the previous summer. Especially when she hadn't been able to find Riley-the-Roommate on social media when they'd gotten their room assignment.

Like, what was that?

But she'd been extremely pleasantly surprised when her roommate wasn't a crabby, judgmental, loser hermit. In fact, Riley exhibited shockingly *no* tendencies that Gianna found annoying.

She wasn't loud and obnoxious. She was pretty without trying hard. She was smart but didn't super nerd out or rub it in Gianna's face. She was funny, but didn't laugh at her own jokes. She was nice but not holier-than-thou. She had a very decent – especially for someone who was from Nowhere, Vermont – fashion sense.

She made cutting commentary about life on campus that was observant and amusing and point-blank. She helped Gianna into her bed a few times when Gianna had returned to the room a little more drunk than she'd meant to be. She listened to Gianna whenever Gianna talked.

She even liked to watch the reality dating shows that Gianna secretly

enjoyed. She'd have *never* imagined that she would have randomly ended up living with someone who liked to watch the shows with the same combination of acerbic distaste and genuine investment, but, as luck would have it, she and Riley had fallen into a schedule every Tuesday night. They sat in either one of their beds, the light turned off, with one of their laptops between them, eating the snacks Riley always provided.

It was... nice. Gianna had *fun* with Riley-the-Roommate during the times they'd spent in their dorm room together over the last four months.

She liked Riley enough that she'd started inviting Riley out with her friends almost immediately. That nearly never happened.

And what had literally never happened before? Was that Riley always turned her down, with the exception of *one* party, at the very beginning of the semester.

She'd made it her mission in the last few months to get Riley to come out with her and her friends again, to no avail. Which in and of itself, was *weird*. Because Riley was – shockingly – fun!

Gianna just knew that if Riley lightened up a little, they would get along even better. The prospect of *that* was exciting. It was exciting and a little strange, because typically people who seemed to like Gianna always wanted to hang out with her more.

Riley was making Gianna work for it. Strange, for certain, but Gianna found it wasn't annoying.

She pushed the door to their room open, rapidly responding to the texts she'd already received about the invite.

In the time it had taken her to get up to her room, she'd received thirteen texts – three from guys she was talking to, one from a girl she *wanted* to be talking to but was still sussing out how it would go beyond a tipsy make out at a house party, two from a couple of other guys who wanted to be talking to her, and all of the others friends – and more were incoming.

Yes. This was *exactly* the way to spend her vacation; honestly, she should have thought to plan this weeks ago. She should have thought to plan this instead of even asking to visit her mom.

"Rileyyy," she sang out her roommate's name, thumbs flying over her screen as she continued to look down at her phone. "Tonight is the night. I let you off the hook for every other party invite you turn down, but tonight is *my* party. So, you can't turn it down; it's against roommate etiquette. My friends are all going to be there; you'll have fun."

She was nearly done answering the texts she'd decided she'd mentally prioritized, deciding the majority could go unanswered for a while. Perfect.

"So, find whatever your sexiest dress is," she commanded, "And I'm going to drink until I forget the fact that my professor actually wrote as a bonus question on my final – *if you were on the roof of a skyscraper to admire the stars, would time move faster for you than it would in the lobby of that same building?* Like. What?" She scoffed, before mentally putting up that blocker. This was party time, not finals-time. "Unless the lobby is in a different time zone, then – yeah, right."

She took a deep breath, finally locking her phone and tucking it into her back pocket, as she snapped their door shut. "And I—"

She cut herself off, as twin pairs of hazel eyes had turned to face her. It was Riley... and then a Riley clone. *Twin* pairs. Really.

Same height. Same eye shape and color. Same cute little nose. Same exact pink lips with that little dip in the center of the bottom one, where it was fullest. Same honey-blonde hair – though while Riley's was styled well, the clones was curly and tousled.

Riley was standing next to her bed, where she had a duffel bag and two suitcases open, wearing fitted jeans and a knit sweater that was definitely off the rack, but still nice looking, and a pair of boots Gianna had admired since Riley had brought them back from a shopping trip last month. The clone standing a foot behind Riley, however, was wearing an ill-fitting long-sleeved T-shirt and scuffed sneakers.

She couldn't exactly place the why yet, but this moment was picking at the very feeling in the pit of her stomach that she was very much trying to ignore. And *that* aggravated her.

Gianna ran her eyes slowly back and forth over Riley and the doppelganger with questionable fashion sense, then back again to end on Riley. "Did I already start drinking and not realize it? Because I'm definitely seeing double."

Not-Riley spoke first, "Actually, time *does* move faster on the roof of a building than in the lobby. It's a microscopic difference, so it's not something that would change, say, a workday. Someone working on the first floor doesn't work longer than someone in a corner office. But, as discussed in Einstein's Theory of General Relativity, the further you are from the earth's surface, the faster time passes. It's called gravitational time dilation."

Gianna blinked several times at this person invading her dorm room,

because – *what the fuck?* “Well, there is no way in hell my drunk mind could have come up with *that*, so there has to actually be two of you. Thanks,” she said, dryly, as she narrowed her eyes.

Goddamn it. If that was true – and she was sure it was, because why would someone just say that and it *not* be true – then she definitely did not ace that final by any definition of the word.

She cut her gaze back to Riley, though. Because she was resolutely not thinking about anything that happened before right now, but mostly, because she really couldn’t think about anything other than what was literally right in front of her.

Because – how in the world did she not know that Riley had an identical twin sister? Like. *Why* would Riley not tell her that?

It was a ridiculous feeling that curled through her. This sense of betrayal and hurt and – ugh, stupid. *Bad feelings*.

But, Riley? Her honest, funny, authentic roommate, who she saw *every single day*, hadn’t shared this with her? Not even during one of their reality dating show nights? Not even when two of the competitors this season were *twins*!?

Gianna liked Riley. She hung out with Riley. She’d invited Riley out with her inner-circle. She’d told Riley she could borrow some of her designer shoes.

The thought of it, of the fact that she considered Riley her friend, and Riley didn’t even tell her she had a *twin*, put a sour taste in the back of her mouth.

Yeah, no. Gianna did *not* get made a fool of. No way in hell. And definitely not by Riley-the-Roommate and the female Einstein over there.

She narrowed her eyes at them, but before she could fire off her questions and comments that were rapidly stacking up, Riley picked up her purse and pulled out her wallet, before pushing some money at the doppelganger. “Here, El, why don’t you go fuel up the car while I finish packing? I’ll meet you down there in ten.”

The doppelganger – *El*, apparently – stared down at the money in what Gianna guessed was confusion. She slowly turned to look at the luggage on Riley’s bed, then back to Riley. “Wasn’t the point of me coming in here to help you carry your stuff?”

“No, the point was that you were here twenty minutes early and you had to pee,” Riley shot back, but there was an undeniable softness in her tone that

Gianna wasn't overly familiar with – she'd only heard it *once*, and that memory was making her feel a little sick at the moment.

Riley grinned, and, again, it was so... *sweet*. Not in a way she ever smiled at Gianna in the last four months, not even when they were having fun together. "I was just going to rope you into helping me do some heavy lifting while you were up here."

The doppelganger shrugged and took the money, appearing unperturbed. There was a very serious, stern look on her face that reflected in her voice as she said, "Okay. But please be ready in ten minutes, though, because I don't want Mom to be mad at me if we're late."

"I won't be late," Riley assured.

El frowned, two lines appearing between her eyebrows – the same lines Riley got! Absolutely wild – looking reluctant to leave. "She said that there's a holiday party at the Walker Resort tonight that she wants us to go to, so we have to get home—"

"I am the one who passed on the message about the holiday party and mom's time constraints," Riley broke in, exasperated, but still warm. There was an etch of laughter, even, on her face as she lightly pushed at her clone's shoulder. "Go. What if you make us late because we didn't fuel up in time?"

The curly-haired twin nodded seriously at that. "Good point. I'll see you in ten."

Gianna dubiously watched the doppelganger walk right toward the door – and her – without seeming to realize or care that Gianna was even here. She only came to a pause when she was only inches away from Gianna, coming to a quick stop and blinking up at her.

As if only realizing in that moment that Gianna was a stranger and that the normal thing would be to introduce herself.

Which she did, after another pause.

"I'm Ellie Beckett," she offered, with an awkward little wave. As if she didn't know quite what to do with her hands, but also wasn't sure she wanted to offer one to Gianna.

A weird one, without a doubt.

"I gathered the last name, from the twin situation," Gianna said back, grinning in a way that she knew was charming. People liked this smile – wide, personable, perfected in the mirror. She liked to put her best foot forward when meeting someone new, regardless of how *insane* this introduction was. "I'm Gianna Mäkinen, Riley's roommate."

Those hazel eyes were uncomfortably the same ones she'd lived with for months, yet not —where Riley's gaze always seemed to be searching, Ellie's was blisteringly intense — and they bore into Gianna's. "I know," she stated succinctly, before she fidgeted where she stood for another second, then shrugged. "Um... well, bye."

And just like that, she shuffled past Gianna, and left.

No *nice to meet you* or any other pleasantries? Gianna turned to stare at the closed door for another beat, uncharacteristically confounded by *everything* going on around her, before she slowly turned back to face Riley.

Riley, who was continuing to pack her final suitcase, seemingly unbothered by what had just played out. As if that was a completely normal thing to have happened.

Which was fine, because Gianna had no problem bringing it up.

"How did I not know you had a sister? And a *twin*, at that," She clarified, incredulous. "We've lived in one rather small room together for an entire semester! What is that?"

"That was Ellie," Riley answered, her voice even and quiet, as she continued to pack. "She goes to MIT, and I assume you gathered from our conversation that we're driving back home to Vermont together for the break. So, I can't party with you and your friends tonight."

They could be your friends, too, automatically sprung on the tip of Gianna's tongue. It was what she usually said to Riley, when Riley referred to Gianna's social circle very pointedly as *your friends*.

But this was not the time for their typical song-and-dance, because she had way bigger fish to fry. "She lives in the city and you *still* have hidden her from me, for months?!" Gianna wracked her mind, desperately trying to make sense of it. "What, do you never see her or something?"

Even with her own demanding, upset tone — fucking *embarrassing*, and she commanded herself to get it under control — Riley's voice never strayed from that measured quietness. "I see Ellie all of the time; I just go to her."

Riley's obvious calmness while Gianna was feeling so worked up made her even more agitated. Like — why didn't Riley care that this was so *strange*?

Why didn't she care that she'd lied to Gianna about, apparently, a huge part of her life?

She crossed her arms over her chest, holding them against herself, tightly. "Well, it's *weird*, you know," she pointed out. "That you didn't ever bring

her over here or even mention her.”

Riley nodded slowly, but didn’t say anything back as she packed her final, folded shirt, gently patting it down.

There was something about it, about *all* of it, that needled at Gianna, though. Something that wouldn’t let her drop it with a glib comment, as much as her instincts were screaming at her to do so.

It bothered her. It really bothered her. And this ridiculous, desperate – not that she would ever call it that, she just didn’t have a better word in this very moment! – feeling clawed at her, at how much it didn’t seem to bother Riley.

“I mean, I guess she seems... particular,” Gianna settled on, as she pushed, “Did *she* not want to come over here? I could tell she’s not much for meeting new people.”

Riley drew in a deep breath through her nose, and Gianna could see how her shoulders rose with it before she slowly blew the breath out and – ah. Maybe Riley *wasn’t* as calm as she was letting on. “No. *Ellie* isn’t the problem.”

Gianna opened her arms, palms facing up, as she invited Riley to explain, “Then, what is it?”

A few seconds beat by, before Riley finally shook her head. “Since you clearly desperately need to know, fine.” She bit the inside of her cheek, and zipped up her suitcase, keeping her voice low and even as she finally gave Gianna what she’d been looking for. “I didn’t bring her here this semester, because I didn’t want her to meet you. I honestly thought you would be in your astronomy final until at least four, so I didn’t think you’d even meet her today.”

That made Gianna’s blood rush through her veins, instantly becoming all she could hear. She *had* to be mistaken! There was no way she’d just heard what she thought she’d heard. No fucking way. “Me?! Why wouldn’t you want her to meet *me*?!”

People loved Gianna! She was the life of the party! She was, honestly, a delight!

But Riley didn’t correct her. She lifted her suitcases off of her bed and stood them up on the floor.

And how dare she be so calm and collected when she’d essentially just slapped Gianna in the face? She’d never been so insulted in her *life* – people didn’t go out of their way to avoid making an introduction to Gianna! People, actually, went out of their way to introduce their friends to Gianna.

“Um, *hello?*” Gianna demanded an answer, crossing her arms again. Tighter, this time. Holding against herself. Holding back the insult and the anger and the bafflement and the hurt and her mom’s email and the likely-failed-astronomy final, and everything else, as much as she could.

“Why wouldn’t I want Ellie to meet you?” Riley repeated, as she turned to look at Gianna head-on for the first time since they’d been alone in their room. “Let’s start, first, by the look you gave her every time she spoke.” Riley arched her eyebrows at Gianna, not explaining further.

Gianna thought that the looks she’d given Ellie when she’d spoken were perfectly reasonable, given what Ellie said in those moments, but she wasn’t going to argue that right now. Not when apparently, that was only the *first* thing on the list. She pressed her arms tighter into her stomach, hating the unfamiliar churning there.

“And, secondly,” Riley paused, searching Gianna’s gaze with her own. “Because you’re not exactly a nice person, Gianna. You’re a mean girl. In the most classic definition.”

That made everything come crashing to an eerily still inside of her. The room went silent, as she struggled with the tumultuous feelings all waging war inside of her. To hear it from some rando or loser or spurned hookup was one thing, but this – this was *Riley*.

It was someone she’d actually, somehow, come to like in the last few months. A lot. Maybe even come to respect.

It took her a few seconds, but when the world came back into a sturdy focus, she retorted, “I am *not*!”

She was embarrassed, then, at her damn self. *I am not?* What was she, ten? She could come up with something that could cut someone to the bone in seconds, and the first thing she thought of to say after being insulted like that was *I am not*?

And, damn it, she *shouted*. Which was ridiculous, because this shouldn’t be something she was taking seriously! This was laughable.

What made it not laughable, was the earnest look in Riley’s eyes, the forthright tone of voice she used – like, she wasn’t saying it to be mean or taunt or judge. Like she was merely delivering one of her cute little news stories that she practiced in the mirror some mornings.

Like she was telling Gianna a *fact*.

And she used the same tone, as she arched her eyebrows at Gianna, incredulously. “Yes, you are. And Ellie has had more than enough mean girls

make her feel uncomfortable throughout our lives; I'm not going to subject her to it all over again in college. So, that's why you haven't met her."

Gianna was at an abnormal loss for words, because she was still feeling Riley's like a kick to the stomach. Like hell was she going to just – just let Riley say that about her, though. After a few seconds, she managed to challenge, "Fine, if I'm so *mean*, then why are you my friend?"

And just like that, her stomach knotted even tighter. Because, having Riley's friendship... fine. It mattered to her. A little. Whatever.

It wasn't like she *needed* it, she forcefully reminded herself, because she had a ton of friends. Just in this useless, ridiculous waste of energy and time conversation, she'd felt her phone buzz six times. She had friends who didn't think she was mean and actually wanted to hang out with her.

Maybe that was it, though.

Maybe it was that Riley had seemed to enjoy hanging out with her, that made her feel so stung by this. It felt like – like Riley saying that she deliberately hid her sister from Gianna was not only insulting, but it also invalidated everything they'd experienced this semester.

From the first weekend, when Riley had slid a little Gatorade and granola bar under her covers when Gianna was coping with a massive hangover, to that time when they'd gotten that massive tropical storm near the end of October, flooding the streets and knocking out power for a couple of hours, and Riley had been unusually quiet and then let Gianna do her hair as they'd listened to music and just existed together.

And the biggest thing, really, was how Gianna felt like it invalidated what had happened only a couple of weeks ago. When Gianna had danced – like, *danced* – with said girl from her texts tonight at a party. And while Gianna knew she was bisexual, she hadn't yet ever acted on it, outwardly. Because, well, social standing could be precarious, and she knew better than anyone that you *didn't* want to be on the wrong side of the social ladder. And as she'd laid in her bed that night, tipsy and hot and unsure, her alcohol-loose lips confessed her sexuality, for the first time aloud, to Riley.

And Riley had used that soft, comforting voice – the one she'd used with Ellie a few minutes ago – to simply say, "*Cool. There are so many pretty girls I've seen around campus. Have you dated anyone here?*"

It had felt safe and Riley, in that moment, made her feel safe, and...

No, she didn't party with Riley, and yes, Riley was kind of reserved with Gianna, but to Gianna, they were friends.

Except, *clearly*, they weren't.

"Since you like honesty so much, Riley, then tell me," she goaded, walking closer to Riley. Even though Riley was a respectable five foot seven, Gianna still towered over her in her own heeled boots. Normally, she enjoyed that feeling of being taller than most people. But now, even as Riley had to look up at her, Gianna had this crazy, inexplicable, nightmarish feeling of being... small.

Screw that.

"*Why are we friends?*" She repeated, snapping out the words. "You clearly love living by this righteous moral code, as such a good person. So, tell me why you would deign to lower yourself to hang out with me?"

"Because we're roommates," Riley admitted after a few beats of silence. As if she'd debated whether or not to answer truthfully, like the dualities of her that Gianna knew – honesty and kindness – were battling out for a winner. Clearly, Riley's version of honesty won. "And living together would have been absolutely miserable if we couldn't have found common ground. I went to the student housing office during our first week here, but they don't allow room swaps that easily."

Gianna's mouth fell open as that truth trampled right through her, crushing something deep in her stomach – maybe in her chest – that forced the breath from her lungs.

No. *No freaking way*. People didn't become Gianna's friend because it was convenient for them! That was *not* how this worked; Gianna was – she was someone people became friends with because she, as a person, was fun and funny and hot. She was the person who had the connections, who got doors to open, who could flirt into and out of any situation.

She was *not* the person someone *had* to become friends with, in order to avoid a shitty living situation.

She could only stare for far too long, unable to put an exact name on what it was swirling around inside of her. But her heart was pounding and her throat felt dry and her eyes stung and her face felt hot – was she *blushing*? Was her body breaking down or something?!

Riley watched her, hazel eyes big and turning a little soft, now, rather than that raw directness. "Gianna—"

"Wow." She dragged her hands through her hair, deliberately tugging a bit to try to reorient herself to reality. Right now, she felt like she'd strayed very far from it. It worked, a little. Just enough, she supposed, because when

she saw Riley open her mouth again to speak, she swiftly cut her off, “No, you don’t have to say anything else.”

She knew that whatever Riley was going to say, she didn’t want to hear it, that was for sure.

But the look in Riley’s eyes, the softening of her tone when she’d said Gianna’s name, gave Gianna enough strength to latch onto. To claw onto, really.

She dropped her arms to her sides, offering Riley an exaggerated shrug. “I am just *really* sorry you had to live with such a terrible person for the last few months, Riley. That must have been really hard for you.” The acid that bubbled up from deep inside of her to spill out in her tone felt like it burned the back of her throat.

She hoped it burned Riley just as much. No, actually, she hoped it burned Riley even more.

Riley took the words with a little wince, but even that didn’t make Gianna feel better, as much as it should have. If someone hurts you, and then you hurt them back, you should then feel better. That was an equation she understood.

Gianna might not know enough math for astronomy – fucking *science* course – but that math? Was simple.

“I don’t think you’re a terrible person. I didn’t say that,” Riley’s tone was so insistent, it tore a mocking laugh harshly from Gianna’s throat.

“Yeah, actually, that’s not what I’ve heard for the last few minutes,” she bit back, wrapping her arms around herself again.

“What I *do* think? Is that the people you surround yourself with? Your *friends*? Are not great people,” Riley explained, seeming to choose her words carefully, as she stepped closer to Gianna.

Instinctively, she stepped back from Riley.

Riley, for the only time all night, read the room and didn’t attempt to come any closer. “I’m sorry. Not for what I said, but for how you’re clearly feeling.” She scrunched her eyebrows up in a look Gianna, before the last ten minutes, thought was weirdly adorable. “But after we went to that party in September and from the times they’ve been over in our room, I felt bad about myself, even being around them.” Riley grimaced. “And I wasn’t sure for a little while, but, I know you better, now. After spending time one-on-one, and—”

“What, is this the witching hour or something?” She snapped, needing

Riley to just, *stop*. Gianna just *ached*. All over, inside, she ached, and she didn't want to, anymore. She refused to. "Is there some reason you feel like spilling all your guts, now? You dropping out and not coming back after break?" She lifted her eyebrows considerably at her own words. "Maybe that's for the best."

Yeah, she said it to purposefully try to sting Riley, but Gianna didn't want to live with Riley anymore, after this. Not for a single day.

Riley pursed her lips, before slowly letting out a deep breath. "All right. Well... I'm *not* dropping out, so I guess I'll see you after break. And I didn't enjoy hurting your feelings, Gianna. I'm sorry that I did."

"You were just *being honest*, right?" She spit the words at Riley's back as she turned to gather her luggage. "Like, you're going to talk shit about *my friends*, but they're not the ones who've ever made me feel like – like dirt."

Jesus, that galled her to admit aloud. Why would she do that? Why would she give Riley that kind of power? Riley, unfortunately, had the power to make Gianna feel badly about herself – which was enough to make her want to cry and vomit – but the fact that she *knew* it? Ugh.

It made her angry. It humiliated her. It made the backs of her eyes burn, but like hell would she allow Riley Beckett to see her cry, after tonight.

Riley didn't say anything back to that, though. She stacked her duffel bag securely on top of one of her suitcases and held onto the handle, before she gave Gianna another lingering look. And maybe more than anything else that had happened between them, she hated the pitying look in Riley's eyes most of all.

She didn't need pity from anyone, let alone Riley fucking Beckett. *She* had a great life. And she didn't want to give Riley anything, anymore. She didn't want to even let Riley get away with what she'd already said.

And still, Riley's words played on a loop in her head – *you aren't exactly a nice person, Gianna. You're a mean girl* – and she couldn't stop herself.

"I've never been mean to you, Riley. Never. And you – after the – after what I told you—" she choked on her words again. She hadn't planned on coming out to anyone, yet, or maybe ever – she hadn't really decided – and yet, Riley was the one who knew. Riley was the one who lulled Gianna into some manipulated false sense of security. It made her throat feel so tight, it was nearly impossible to swallow.

"You know what? I don't need you to be my friend. I was doing *you* a favor by being your friend, not the other way around." The words felt hollow

even to herself, which upset her even more.

And yet, she couldn't stop them from bubbling out as she watched Riley pull on her jacket and wheel her suitcases toward the door. "I have a ton of other friends. Real ones. Friends who don't call me names, or insult me, friends who would love to replace the time I waste hanging out with you."

Riley turned, then, as she opened the door to their room, and the look on her face made Gianna's stomach drop even before she asked, "Then where are they when you come home drunk from a party all by yourself when you went out with them, yet I'm the one who makes sure you're okay? And why am I the only person you've talked to about your sexuality? Why am I the only one still around when you aren't offering to pay for drinks or get access to designer clothes? Why am I the only one here when all you're offering is *you*?"

Gianna felt the words land like a physical blow, yet Riley hadn't delivered them like one.

They were said in a firm, but gentle voice, while Riley gave her that ever-present searching look. One that asked for answers, even when she wasn't asking questions. One that, right now, seemed like she knew the answers and was waiting for Gianna to know them, too.

"I hear it's because the housing office wouldn't let you switch rooms," she snapped. And she was proud of herself for delivering *anything* in a relatively scathing tone, when she felt so... hollowed.

Riley accepted her words with a small, sad smile. A smile that only made Gianna feel even worse, because she *wanted* Riley to snap. She wanted Riley to say something in anger. To be... mean.

She didn't, though. "I hope you have a good break, Gianna. Have fun visiting your mom at Lake Como."

That was it. *That* was the final straw breaking, and Gianna could feel it snap. She could feel that comment break through whatever thread she still had tying the barrage of emotions together.

"Go to hell, Riley."

CHAPTER 3



*S*he let herself into Gianna's house later that night, hauling her laundry hamper in before she shut the door behind her. She knew other people found it strange that she and Gianna made time to do their laundry together, but it was actually something she'd come to look forward to.

It was a stability and routine she'd come to rely on in her adult life. Back in college, laundry – the waiting for the wash and then the dry, then having to fold – was a chore they'd both found tedious, and they'd realized that it was much more bearable when they did it together.

They used to make a whole night of it back when they'd lived in a dorm. They'd bring snacks and a laptop for movies and sneak mixed drinks in water bottles into the laundry room, and they'd talk and gossip and laugh for hours, until it seemed like the whole process flew by. And it continued when they'd moved into their own apartments, meeting at the laundromat closest to the both of them.

At this point, it was almost unbearable to have to fold her clothes by herself.

Plus, it gave them built in time for each other. Even when both of their lives and careers could get busy, this was something they always made time for.

She shed her jacket, comforted by the glaring warmth – Gianna was always cold, just like Riley was, and subsequently kept her thermostat up higher than anyone else liked – and the mixed scent of lavender and coconut that came from both candles that Gianna religiously burned and from the variety of products Gianna used with those smells.

Walking into Gianna's always felt like home.

Gianna had reached mega-influencer status nearly two years ago and had purchased herself a newly renovated rowhouse in Beacon Hill that had an actual, private laundry room. A gorgeous one, at that.

Riley would gladly lug her laundry the extra miles for the luxury.

Pausing in the mudroom, she slipped off her shoes and put them in her spot, before tossing her keys into the dish Gianna kept near the front door.

Gianna was likely still finishing up her videos – if she’d started working on it around six, which was when Riley knew Gianna had gotten home from a late lunch/early dinner with some friend, she’d probably be done soon.

She lugged her clothing into the laundry room, before quickly climbing up to the second floor to fetch Gianna’s hamper from her bedroom. Part of the tradition was tossing their laundry in together, after all.

Gianna’s office door was right at the top of the stairs, on the way to her bedroom, and Riley slowed to a pause, when she saw that the door was open a few inches. Enough that Riley could see her clearly – sitting in the center of her expertly placed ring-lights as she spoke into the camera set up on her tripod.

Gianna had several brands that she worked with and advertised for, ranging from skin care to clothing to makeup to hair products to alcohol to exercise equipment to, most recently, sex toys. None of this was even to account for her own brand of lingerie, Worthy, that she’d been designing for years and had finally started to market in the last few months.

Beyond that, she produced her own vlogs detailing other aspects of her life: personal stories, whatever Gianna was working on for herself, as she would often take her viewers on several week or month long journeys through learning different skills. Things like mixology – which she’d ended up being amazing at, archery – which she’d been passable at, origami – which she’d enjoyed but had been laughably bad at.

Gianna was essentially a one-woman business, and she marketed something most people they met were interested in – herself.

Riley had seen how she’d built it all up over the last nine years and it hadn’t been quick or easy. But the heart of the matter was that Gianna had a killer business acumen, could read people extremely well, and she just had that *way* about her. That effortless way, that made people want to exist in her sphere.

It wasn’t just that she was gorgeous, even though she was. It wasn’t just that Gianna was so confident in her decisions that it often felt like Gianna’s

opinions weren't necessarily opinions at all, but that Gianna, herself, was *the* authority of what made something good, though that was true, too. It wasn't just that she had enough charisma even through a camera to make someone feel like they were talking directly to Gianna, even though Riley was certain that was what it was like.

It was some strange and glorious combination of all of those things.

With her long, golden blonde hair pulled up in a skillfully braided chignon, wearing one of her off-the-shoulder black bodysuits tucked into a pair of light wash jeans, Gianna was making content for... the cosmetic line, Riley deduced, even before she could see the products set up in front of her.

Gianna paused as soon as she saw Riley in the doorway, flashing her a bright smile. "Hey! Almost done here; I thought you'd be out a little later on your date or I would have started earlier."

Riley scoffed, leaning against the doorway as she folded her arms over her chest. "You and me, both."

Gianna scrunched up her face in sympathy. "I want to hear about it; just give me a few minutes?"

"Not much to hear about," she admitted with a disappointed sigh. "Clearly. But, sure. I'll meet you down there, just grabbing your clothes."

"Wait." Gianna's request came just in time to stop Riley from pushing away from the door and walking away.

She acquiesced, arching an eyebrow in question.

"You wanna jump in, here?" Gianna asked, gesturing to her camera. Her eyes were wide, and her expression was totally innocuous.

But Riley could see the humor lurking below the surface. She could see the spark in Gianna's eyes and hear the teasing tone bubbling just under her words, given that they both knew that Riley was very staunchly a behind-the-scenes kind of person and had been since college.

She could probably count the number of times on one hand that she'd actually been featured, even fleetingly, on camera in Gianna's illustrious career.

The ridiculous offer worked to make her smile, forcing out a begrudging laugh, which she was sure was Gianna's intention. "I'll spare your reputation and see you downstairs," she shot back, shaking her head as she turned around.

She ducked into Gianna's bedroom and grabbed the hamper, bringing it down to the laundry room to join her own.

She loved that Gianna had a giant floating table installed opposite her washer and dryer, just for these nights together.

“We can finally do this in style. And without the people at the laundromat bitching about us taking up too much space,” Gianna had announced when she’d shown Riley the room.

Not only did it have the table, but two ridiculously comfortable chairs at the perfect height to perch on, with a small shelf just above it with a docking station for their phones, where they could keep their wine glasses and snacks. Truly, custom.

“Dull Dan,” she muttered under her breath, snorting derisively as she started sorting their clothing into lights, darks, colors, and delicates.

It wasn’t as if she believed that her life was over now that she’d hit thirty. But it was just – how was it so fucking *hard* to find a fulfilling relationship by now? How was it that every time she thought something was promising, it went totally ass-up, and usually within six months, too? How was it that Dull Dan had been one of the best dates she’d *had* in over six months?

And how was it that Gianna *always* managed to swipe her favorite Boston University sweatshirt? She swore under her breath, with no real malice, as she found it in Gianna’s hamper; she’d been looking for it last night.

“Laundry going? You want anything while I’m up? Wine? Vodka? Snacks? Drill for a lobotomy?” Gianna called as Riley heard her jogging down the stairs.

“I’ll stick with water tonight or I might have to down the whole bottle to rid my sorrows.” She grimaced, even though Gianna couldn’t see it. “And I cannot tell you enough – no one I know *other than you* drinks straight vodka!”

She took a moment to think of the very unsatisfying dinner that she hadn’t finished. In fairness, the food was decent, it was the disappointment of the overall date that had put the sour taste in her mouth.

“Snacks, I’ll take.” She huffed out a breath as she tossed a handful of their underwear into the wash – delicates went first, always. “And, do you have any bleach handy, instead? Couldn’t find any in here, and I’m about ready to end it all. I’m not sure a lobotomy would do the *full* job.”

“With you showing up early and making such serious threats, I’m going to assume Dull Dan wasn’t a winner?” Gianna asked, her voice faux-sympathetic, as she used her hip to push open the door all of the way. She’d come through with the water and a pack of the cookies from the specialty

market that Riley *loved*... as well as a small bottle of bleach in her hand.

Noting where Riley's gaze had fallen, Gianna grinned – in that kind of mean, kind of cheeky, and fully amazing way she had. “Just want to make sure you have everything you need.”

“I’m going to bleach all of the fall collection you’ve curated this year,” she said darkly. “Including all of the underwear you designed for your line.”

She dangled one of Gianna’s silk thongs from her index finger to really hammer the threat home.

Gianna’s mouth fell open in offense as she used her longer reach to snatch it back. She held that thong like it was a precious baby, cradling it to her chest. And, in a sense, it was like her baby; she *had* painstakingly hand-made it herself.

“Don’t threaten her just because I was granting your own wishes for some bleach.”

“I wasn’t threatening her because of the bleach, actually; I was threatening her because of *that*.” She pointed to the stolen sweatshirt in the colors pile. “You have your own. I bought it for you!”

Though, with the frequency in which Gianna harbored Riley’s sweatshirt, she wouldn’t be surprised if the one that technically belonged to Gianna was long gone.

“Yours is better,” came Gianna’s standard, predicted response, as she perched on the chair next to Riley’s.

Riley couldn’t even pretend to be upset. Not at the same song-and-dance they’d been doing for over twelve years, and definitely not when she was actually pretty damn demoralized about the night with Dan.

Still, though, “How did you even sneak it by me? I was literally right here the last time we did laundry together.”

Nearly two weeks ago, just after Thanksgiving. Riley had worn the sweatshirt over, then stripped it off and tossed it in the wash as they’d eaten leftovers from the holiday meal Riley had made.

“You act like you don’t know that I’m just that good.” Gianna winked, starting the delicates cycle, before she swiveled in her stool to face Riley.

Their knees brushed as Gianna braced her heels on the bottom of her stool. Blue eyes were alight, resting on Riley, her expression sobering the more she studied Riley’s face. “Really, though – tonight sucked?”

It was Riley’s default to shrug off a shitty date with Gianna. To just recount it, grumble and groan and then laugh about it, before moving on.

Tonight, however, with the utter *defeat* she was feeling... her posture crumpled as she reached for a cookie to console herself. "Sucked. Horribly. Honestly? I'm at the point of just wanting to have a good night of sex after meeting someone."

Gianna nodded slowly. "Right. But, I mean, that's not weird? You've liked a good hook-up as much as the next person."

Riley chewed thoughtfully, really making sure she was certain about what she was feeling before unloading it, and... yeah. She was really, finally, at that point. "Not just like a normal hook-up and then keep dating. As in, I think I'm just – done *looking*. It's exhausting and draining and I'm *tired*." So, so tired. Bone-tired. "I think I'm going to take a page out of your book. For the foreseeable future, anyway."

Because – Gianna *never* had these kinds of problems. Even though they both knew dozens of people who would chew off both an arm and a leg to get a chance to truly date her, Gianna hadn't dated since... Riley couldn't remember when.

She'd dated men and women – but never longer than a few months at a time – back in college. But it had tapered off, so long ago, and by the time Riley really noticed that none of the people she was hooking up with were sticking around more than a few weeks, Gianna had easily shrugged it off, unbothered. "*I realized that whole... relationship thing? Isn't really for me.*"

And, that was that. She would hook up with people – there was always an abundant number of volunteers – for varying lengths of time but always was very upfront about what it meant, and then it was over. Easy, uncomplicated, and untaxing.

Well, it did occasionally become taxing for Gianna, when people ended up catching feelings for her. Especially when those people tried to continue their sexual relationship, violating Gianna's number one boundary: no sex with romantic attachments.

She'd never questioned it, because Riley, herself, wasn't against a few nights of fun, either. But she'd never given up on wanting to find *more*.

Until recently. Tonight, specifically, being when she felt she'd hit her limit.

Gianna's eyes widened in obvious shock. "Dull Dan *really* lived up to his name, then, to sully you on all of the dating world." She dropped her hand to Riley's knee to give her a quick squeeze of sympathy. "What the hell happened? Oh my god, did he order for you? Did he try to play footsie under

the table?"

Riley lightly kicked out her own foot at Gianna's knee at the playfully mocking tone. It was a move so practiced between them, Gianna had been anticipating it, as she reached down and grabbed Riley's socked foot before it could fall back to the floor. Instead, she pulled it into her lap and started massaging.

Riley automatically relaxed into the warm, practiced touch as she half-heartedly groaned. "Okay, no, he absolutely did not. But, seriously, how am I ever supposed to actually find someone when you dub them with their ridiculous nicknames after a single date?"

"How are you turning this on *me* now?" Gianna gripped her foot a little harder at the accusation.

"Because, Gi, after you give them their name, it's all I can associate with them." She gestured widely with her cookie to make her point, even as she found herself, grudgingly, laughing at the offended look her best friend wore.

If she was being honest, though, it felt like every nickname Gianna had ever given panned out perfectly. They were terribly, damningly, accurate.

Whiny William – when things were good, they were good. But when they were the slightest bit off from his liking? It was all she'd hear about for hours.

Clingy Colton – wanted to know all of Riley's whereabouts, constantly texted. And whenever they were in the same place, constantly wanted to be holding hands or having Riley share a chair.

Needy Noah – different from Clingy Colton in that, he needed constant reassurance *all of the time*, with every single thing he did.

Selfish Samuel – his personality on dates? Stellar. Did he make Riley come? Never, not even after she'd talked to him about it.

Careless Chris – wasn't overtly an asshole, but never wanted to take ownership of any of the problems he did cause or feelings he hurt.

Asshole Ashton – and he'd been the one to start it all, really.

The man she'd dated her two years of college and into the year after. The only one she'd ever introduced to her mom, the only one she'd ever seen a real future with. The only one who'd proposed to her.

Also the one who had broken her heart and cheated on her the following week. He'd confessed and begged her forgiveness, saying it had been a moment of weakness.

"Riley, if someone was worthy of you? They'd move heaven and earth to

be with you. There wouldn't be any "moments of weakness" because you should be the only woman on their mind like that," Gianna had murmured softly to her after it had happened. She'd stroked Riley's honey-blonde hair behind her ear as Riley laid against her, trying and failing to hold in her tears. "*Asshole Ashton doesn't deserve an ounce of forgiveness.*"

And thus, the nicknames had been born.

"Have you ever thought that maybe it's because my nicknames just fit?" Gianna arched flawlessly shaped eyebrows, in a movement that said *gotcha*. She squeezed Riley's foot in the perfect place, a sigh escaping her, bringing her right back to the moment. "Maybe, I have that good of a read on people, that I can sum them up in a single word, after you tell me about them. Have you considered that?"

She groaned in relief as Gianna dug her knuckle into her heel, her body shivering with the touch. "Fine. Maybe you do." Gianna, incredibly, did. But also, "Maybe you're just lulling me into that sense with your magic hands, but I don't really care which one it is right now."

The massage courses Gianna had taken a couple of years ago had really paid off. Especially for Riley.

Gianna's full lips slipped into a victorious smile as she continued massaging for another minute before she released Riley's foot and let it gently fall back down. "Okay, magic over. Serious talking time." She adjusted herself so she could fully face Riley, scooting a little closer, looking more intently at her. No room for secrets. "All right. Don't avoid the question. What are you talking about, giving up on dating?"

Her voice went soft, in the way that it did with very few people, but Riley most of all.

She gestured at Gianna. "You don't date, and it works perfectly for you."

"And before you say that we are different people and all – you're right," she conceded, knowing exactly what Gianna would say in that moment. "Still. You never have these shitty nights, where you dress up for people who barely notice it, who take you to dinner and think they're doing you some giant favor when they pay even when you also offer to pay." Just thinking about these moments she'd lived got her going all over again. "These situations where, even if by some miracle, things work out for a handful of dates and you get a little bit of hope that this could really be something, you get blindsided by something else that you never saw coming."

"Mm, like that guy who had a wife. Married Mike," Gianna ruminated,

sympathetically.

Riley nodded, because – *exactly*. “Or the guy who had a confederate flag on his wall at home.”

Gianna mimicked gagging. “The one who decorated his entire apartment in animal heads. That he’d killed himself.”

“The one who took me to his amateur comedy show.” It had been so, so cringey, Riley could hardly recount the date to Gianna without dying of secondhand embarrassment.

“Or the guy who took you to see a movie on your second date, after you’d told him on the first date how much you didn’t like movie dates.”

She groaned. “I just feel like, what’s the point? If we don’t know each other yet, we aren’t *getting to know* each other in a movie!”

Gianna hmm’d in agreement with her, before she repeatedly hit her palm against the folding table. “Oh, oh, the guy who had cheesy breath, even when he didn’t eat cheese.”

Riley almost gagged for real at the memory.

“All of these guys, all of these dates?” She gestured, encompassing everything they’d just said in it. “That’s what I’m saying. And my point is, you *never* have these problems. Because you get to know someone enough to get a decent sense of who they are, turn on your location sharing, and have fun. No expectations that then get dashed, no hoping that *this time* it’ll be different.” Riley gestured at Gianna sitting inches away from her. “And it works amazingly for you. It always has.”

It wasn’t like Gianna never had problems, but she certainly didn’t have them in her sex life, an area she nearly always managed to have going exactly as she wanted. The biggest issue she ran into was occasionally bemoaning having to hurt someone’s feelings when she inevitably didn’t feel the same way.

Still, though, Gianna’s generous bottom lip stuck out in a thoughtful pout as she studied Riley. She could see the disagreement coming even before Gianna spoke.

“But – you want the fairy tale,” she insisted, her voice comfortingly soft. “Even if we’re going to modernize it, and make you the working independent woman, et cetera et cetera.” Gianna rolled her eyes and waved her hand as if to push away the many arguments Ellie had made over the years as to why the Disney examples of fairy tales were terrible examples. “You’ve *always* wanted it. The relationship. The connection.”

Riley blew out a deep breath of frustration. Not *at* Gianna, but because she wasn't wrong.

"Maybe," she allowed, then shrugged defeatedly. "But, maybe it's just not something that can happen for everyone. Even if we lived in a world with *soulmates*," she pulled a face at the word. "Where there's guaranteed to be someone who understands you and loves you exactly as you are, the likelihood that you could find that person is slim-to-none."

The thing was, Riley wasn't a hundred percent certain Gianna could understand this on a bone-deep level, anyway.

Not that she was unintelligent in any way, just that Riley simply wasn't sure that someone who hadn't been through the arduous rigamarole of modern day dating first-hand, full of apps and situationships and noncommittal answers and always looking for the next-best thing, could grasp how draining it was to have to keep trucking along.

Plus... she studied Gianna with a loving exasperation.

When you mixed Giulia Gallo, a dark-haired, smoky-eyed Italian bombshell runway model-turned-B-list-actor with Antero Mäkinen, a six-foot-two, blonde-haired, blue-eyed underwear model-turned-luxury-fashion-designer from Finland, you got Gianna.

With her parents' tall stature, pin-up figure of her mother, and her fathers' fair complexion, Gianna was, objectively, as close to physical perfection as Riley thought a human being could get. Unfairly gorgeous, and not even in a real-life kind of way.

In the kind of way that made people stop on the sidewalk and stare. Or, she thought wryly, see her in a video thumbnail and just *have* to click on it.

Riley really believed that if Gianna didn't *want* to seek out romance, that was totally fine and she should do what made her happy. But she also knew that Gianna could snap her fingers at any time and have people falling over themselves to show her the wonders of romance, whether or not it would work out.

It wasn't quite the same case when it came to herself.

"Okay, if you've been feeling this way," Gianna's tone signified to Riley that she felt she had an *a-ha* moment on her hands. "Then why have you been dating so much more than usual in the last couple of months?"

She watched as Gianna counted on her fingers, before nodding to herself. "Yeah. Usually, you go out with maybe one or two guys a month, if you have the time. Right now, you're not only super busy at work, but Dull Dan was

the... fourth guy since Halloween? And that's not even counting the guys throughout September and October.”

Riley reluctantly nodded, blowing out a breath. She'd gone out with four guys in the last six weeks, and more before that as well.

“Talk to me,” Gianna prompted softly, her hand landing on Riley's knee. She squeezed, easy and gentle but present. Coaxing. “We're in the safe space,” she semi-joked.

Only... with the gentle hum of the new washer in the background and the smell of clean laundry and the warmth of Gianna around them, she truly did feel like she was in her safe space. Enough to admit, “Ever since Ellie moved in with Mia in September, I've felt kind of... restless. Unsettled, I guess.”

Ellie had finally gotten together with Mia, her best friend and crush of several years, last February. And even though it was now only December – they'd been together less than a year – things were full steam ahead. They could be as good as married by next summer, at this rate. Like, literally, it would not surprise her.

Which, for the record, thrilled Riley. Because she had spent a lifetime watching Ellie struggle to connect with people, and she wanted her sister to be happy more than anything.

Unfortunately, Ellie's big, positive life-changing relationship made Riley closely examine her *own* love life.

“Yeah, they can be sickening.” Gianna's easy delivery broke through Riley's serious thoughts, making her choke out a laugh.

And, *god*, she loved Gianna for always being able to brighten a moment. “Not exactly what I was getting at.”

Gianna's large grin was enough to tell Riley she knew that.

“It was just kind of a wakeup call. Like, I'm alone in the apartment for the first time—” She nailed Gianna with a reproachful look just as her best friend opened her mouth. “*Don't offer me money.*”

Gianna's breath left her in a rush as she held her hands up defensively. “I know things are a little tight for you and they don't have to be! That's all I'm saying.”

Yet again unfortunately for Riley, Gianna wasn't wrong. Even with her relatively stable job that she worked her ass off for, living in one of the top ten most expensive cities in the country, without a roommate, was a lot. She could do it – she *was* doing it – but it was tight and she wasn't saving a whole lot, either.

“Or, I have a whole house here...” Gianna sing-songed. “And you already happen to have your own room.”

“It’s a guest room,” she countered.

Gianna stared at her, incredulous. “And how many other guests keep a change of clothes in there, and their preferred hair products in the shower?”

“... I will give you that,” she conceded, before shaking her head dismissively. They were getting off-topic, and with the way Riley’s stomach clenched uncomfortably, she knew it was her body’s way of telling her that she *had* to get this off her chest.

She slumped down in her seat, feeling the gnawing *guilty* feeling that she always had when she thought about this. And she thought about it a lot.

Gianna’s warm, coaxing hands fell to land on her wrists, silently beseeching Riley to look at her.

It worked, and she swallowed back the negative feelings she had, instead trying to take in the always-supportive look on Gianna’s face. “Come on. It’s just me,” she said, softly.

Which seemed to be the magic words that unlocked Riley’s vocal chords, and the words started to tumble out. “I’m so glad Ellie has Mia.” She wanted her sister’s happiness from a very pure, very certain place inside. “But ever since she moved in with Mia, I’ve been living alone for the first time ever, and it’s *not* about money,” she cut off, before they could get derailed again. “I’m... I’m *lonely*.”

She could already see the sympathy in Gianna’s eyes and could see the cogs working behind them. Before she could come up with the solution that she was undoubtedly trying to think of, Riley got ahead of it. “And I know you’re going to say again that I could move in with you, which would alleviate both money and loneliness, and I love you for it.”

She truly, deeply did.

“But that’s one of the reasons why I haven’t told you about this, before. Because it’s not the kind of loneliness that can be solved by being around someone, even if it’s my favorite someone.” She flipped her hands and curled her fingers around Gianna’s wrists, mirroring her hold. “It’s...” Riley shook her head, searching for the right thing to say. “It’s about my *life*. It’s about wanting to have someone I’m building a life with.”

“And it’s not constant. I’m not sitting at home feeling depressed whenever I’m there by myself,” she assured, and once again – it was the truth. “It’s like... I can see Ellie having everything I want to have and living

a life I've always wanted to have. And that's amazing," she stressed, again. As if she was worried that the universe itself would mistake her comparisons for resentment. "But in a way, I guess I just don't *get it*."

"Get what?" Gianna asked, her voice so soft, as she drew comforting circles on Riley's forearms with her thumbs.

"How Ellie did it," she voiced aloud for the first time. "How Ellie just – she's *never* seriously dated. Never. You know that. She never even seemed like she wanted to figure that part of herself out." That was the frustrating part. Not directed at Ellie, but at the freaking universe. "I've been dating and trying to figure all of this out for over a decade, and – nothing. I've got nothing to show for it except for far too many anecdotes."

She stared down at their hands for a few moments, working through the frustration and the disappointment and confusion that always accompanied this avenue of thought.

Finally, she looked back up to find Gianna staring at her intently, curiously. As if all she wanted at this moment was to understand Riley so she could help her.

Which made it easier for Riley to keep going, "So, ever since I've started really feeling like this, I've been diving into trying to make it happen for myself. Like, yeah, I've always dated. But I've been really, really trying to make the magic happen. And it's just... not."

Riley dropped the cookie onto her napkin, taking to chewing at her bottom lip before giving in to the thoughts that had been circulating her mind for a while, now. "What I can't help but circle around to is – what if *I'm* the problem? Or at least a big part of it?"

It sucked to admit aloud, but there it was. The conclusion she'd been getting around to for the last few men she'd gone out with. Either she was doing something horribly wrong, or the people she somehow always found were never meant to work out. But either way, dating had officially become too tedious to keep going.

Gianna reeled back, looking as put-out as if Riley had spit in her face. "Don't you *dare* say that. You are never a problem."

Riley caught Gianna with a measuring look. "Seriously, Gianna. If someone continuously has the same problem, what are the odds that it's *always* due to *everyone else*? You know?"

Gianna's eyes narrowed to little slits. "Listen. I'm not going to let you sit in my own house and insult my favorite person."

Feeling that easy affection for Gianna, an unstoppable smile, however small and at odds with the shitty feeling in the pit of her stomach, played on her lips. “I’m not insulting. I’m just – thinking. Maybe I need to be more like Ellie.”

Slowly, Gianna turned to stare blankly at her. “... become obsessed with science and develop a penchant for sweaters? Riley, I love you so much, maybe too much, but I *will* put my foot down.”

Her laughter surprised even herself as it bubbled up. “No, thank you very much.” She shook her head, tapping her knuckles against the table in front of them. “I just mean – Ellie never focused on finding a relationship or seeking out romance. She simply existed, unapologetically herself. She went out and did her own thing, explored her own interests, and when it was *right*, the universe led her to Mia.”

“Riiight,” Gianna drew out, placing her hand over Riley’s to stop the unsettled knocking. “Listen. The thing is, what happened with Ellie is, like, one in a million. She met someone and they became best friends and also were mutually in love; I’m not necessarily sure you can use her as a good barometer for finding romance. It’s not that easy for most people.”

“Okay, but, hear me out,” she challenged, “What about me has changed, at all, in the last ten years? Maybe I need to spend whatever time I’ve been investing into my dating life focusing on *me*. Let everything else fall where it may.” She held her hands up, as if to say *c'est la vie*. “I can take up things I’ve always peripherally thought about but never *done*.”

“Like *what*?” Curious incredulity absolutely dripped from Gianna’s lips.

That stopped Riley up for a second, and she had to consider... “Like, I don’t know. Sewing. Getting my shit together and keeping up with a sourdough starter,” she tossed out the first thoughts that popped into her head. “Skydiving. Or – I don’t know, it’s almost Christmas,” she mused, as her gaze landed on the small window from the laundry room. “It’s two weeks until Christmas and I’ve gotten dozens of those cute, silly little custom Christmas cards. But I’ve never made any to send out, myself. I’ve been waiting to do it with a partner or family, and I should just, *do it*.”

Gianna stared at her, unblinking. “You want to do a photographed Christmas card, by yourself?”

Riley ignored her. “I’m just sick of focusing on cultivating a love life, even peripherally. About going on the apps and trying to chat someone up. It’s so–” She groaned in wordless frustration. “Is it crazy?” She demanded.

"Is it crazy, that I want to be with someone that I genuinely want to talk to every day? Not like, Clingy Colton; I don't want to be up someone's ass. But – I want to feel that way. I haven't had anyone since, well, Ashton—"

"The asshole," Gianna supplied, with the vehemence Gianna could always summon for Ashton, years later.

"Who has made me feel like that," she finished, her voice sounding nearly as wistful as she felt. "It's been seven years, and not *one* of the guys I've been with gave me that feeling. Even the ones I like, I never want to see them after a long day at work or a stressful talk with my mom. I want to – to be excited every time I get a text. I want to feel giggly and ridiculous. I want the butterflies, again." Those feelings were only long distant memories for Riley, now. Maybe she'd built them up as more exciting than they were, because of it.

Gianna was quiet, and Riley knew she was seriously considering and taking in her words, which she appreciated.

If Riley was laying it all out on the line, she might as well lay it *all out*. "Even with all of my dating? I haven't had sex in months. Since..." She tilted her head as she thought back. "Late July? June? Because work has been crazy and then I've been focusing on trying to build the romance part of the relationship, before the sex. But, I want sex! I miss it! Ergo, I should just do *that* part for a while."

There, she'd come full circle. And, truthfully, she felt pretty good about where she'd landed.

Gianna bit at the inside of her cheek as she locked eyes with Riley, and she clearly reluctantly said, "Okay. I am *only* saying this because I know how much you value honesty."

Riley nodded. It was a character flaw or strength, sometimes both, and she thought it had been honed by growing up with a painfully honest twin.

"The truth is – and do not take this as me saying that you're the problem, Riley Jane Beckett – that you *are* very picky, about the people you date."

Truth or not, Riley hadn't been expecting *that*. Rocked with disbelief, she shoved at Gianna's shoulder with her own. "You always find what's wrong with my dates! Sometimes before I do!"

Gianna leaned her shoulder, hard, back into Riley's. "I'm always just calling them like I see them!" She pulled back a few inches, just enough to be able to really look at Riley. It was a serious look, an earnest one she didn't wear with many people. "And, you know, not all of my nicknames are bad

ones.”

Riley let the words settle inside of her, and... Gianna had a point.

There had been Optimistic Omar, who had been unrelentingly positive, in just about every situation. Including when their car had broken down on the way to a ski resort in the middle of a snowstorm, and Riley had legitimately feared for their lives. And Sweet Steven, who had been, as the name implied, so *sweet*. He’d constantly been complimentary and courteous and had gotten Riley a Valentine’s Day card that was literally four feet tall, with a bear, and had given it to her, entirely unironically, with a song he’d written to go with it.

Riley frowned, settling back in her seat but snuggled into Gianna, letting the comfort of being close to her extinguish the *ick* of the dating talk and everything that had come with it. “I guess you’re right.”

Gianna wrapped her arm around Riley’s shoulders, tucking her in close. “But the biggest, most important thing I have to say, babe, is this: you should never be less picky. You should only be with someone that you truly want to talk to after a long day. Not someone you just *want* to want. And that is the truthest truth I can say.”

CHAPTER 4



*N*othing kept Riley busy at work like the stretch of time between Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve, which they were officially dead in the center of. Despite her lamenting about not being able to find someone, the holidays were maybe the best time for her to be single, in terms of work.

And this year, given her position at BostonNow, was even busier than usual. Not only was the station a newer, far less-established network, but Riley wasn't merely a producer, anymore. She would jump in when needed and prepped anchors, curated and vetted news pieces – the usual aspects of her job.

But her literal role at BostonNow was in attempting to reform the typical news-watching audience, building a platform for a younger demographic. There was a lot more on her plate with a lot more at stake than any holiday season before, which added up to a lot more hours.

Which was fine. Totally fine. Given that she'd decided to cut dating out for a while, she would have a lot more time to focus on work.

Despite everything being *fine*, regarding work and her dating life, her stomach was acting up the way it did whenever she was running late, and she pounded on the door of one of the bathrooms at the station.

"Joel, can you *please* hurry up?" She called. "One more minute and I'm leaving without you."

"It's Gianna's party! It's not like she's going to be mad at us if we're late!" Joel shouted back, slightly muffled through the door.

"And? I have to be back at the station before the morning broadcast at seven, so I already have to leave early; I don't want to be late." Riley pursed her lips in annoyance.

No, Gianna wouldn't be mad.

Gianna threw her Holiday Spectacular over a week before Christmas because of the sheer number of parties and events Gianna got invited to this time of year. Gianna had a *lot* of contacts, be it for business or merely social, and almost every one of them requested her company at official holiday celebrations.

This year, Gianna would be traveling to L.A., so the party was also doubling as a bonus to see everyone beforehand in one place.

Gianna had started this tradition five years ago. Wanting to throw her own party, where she gave out all of her holiday gifts and circulated the room, explaining, "This way, I can organize all of my social obligations in one fell swoop, mingle, and make everyone happy in one night. I won't have to pick and choose what events to go to for the rest of the month, unintentionally slighting someone or blowing anyone off. It'll just be one busy, stressy night for me. Then, I can relax for the *real* holidays, as the social gods intended."

It seemed to be working well; the party was a hit every year and it *did* keep people happy. Gianna's Holiday Spectacular, despite the name, didn't feature the Rockettes, but did feature almost everything else – a live orchestra, a Christmas tree raffle, holiday Karaoke, a light show, a make-your-custom-cocktail hour complete with all traditional holiday flavors to incorporate.

Given the very ambitious number of activities, every year something inevitably happened to throw off everything from running smoothly.

But this was the first year Riley hadn't been there early to help deal with the extra pop-up issues. First, because of Owen, the newest anchor at the station, wanting to go over some notes before their official meeting tomorrow morning, and now, because of Joel's wardrobe emergency.

Gianna was typically the opposite of having social anxiety and she certainly didn't *need* Riley with her to kick off a party. Just like Riley didn't *need* Gianna as her plus-one whenever she had a big work event.

It was just what they did for each other.

The door to the bathroom swung open, revealing Joel, who was grinning proudly.

Riley ran her eyes up and down, some of her punctuality-induced frustration melting away as she was unable to hold back her laughter. "Did you seriously change into a full tux?"

Joel tugged on his lapels. “Of course! Riley, Gianna knows Amir Hart. They did an ad together! What if he’s there tonight?”

This was the first time she’d heard Joel mention anything about any man in five months, since Aaron, his boyfriend of four years, had broken things off to take a job offer in England. At that, the rest of her frustration dissipated. “In that case, I hope he’s there and notices the Armani,” she encouraged, before aiming a sharp look at him. “Now, let’s go.”

She grabbed Joel by the arm and dragged him out of the station.

She’d met Joel Masterson during undergrad, taking similar classes – though she was in producing and he worked with cameras and tech – even before they’d both won coveted internship spots at NBC their senior year. Their university had the best journalism program in the state, and earning a spot there had been ridiculously competitive. There had been times in their first year that she and Joel had both wondered if they were fucking insane for even attempting to stay in the media journalism business long-term.

Yet, it was a calling for them, both. Maybe they were crazy – they’d discussed the likelihood of it many times – but there was nothing like the adrenaline hit of a breaking story at the station, and there was nothing more comforting than relying on the everyday schedule of the truth, right on your tv, at your fingertips on your phone, morning, noon, and night.

When Riley had made the switch to BostonNow earlier this year, Joel had shortly followed, enticed by the promise of more creative tech work and continuing to get to work together. Riley was deeply appreciative of Joel making the leap with her.

Even amidst her irritation at his obsession over his appearance for Gianna’s party.

Thankfully, though, the event hall Gianna had rented for the evening wasn’t far. They arrived twenty minutes later than she’d planned to, entering the festively decorated hall after handing their jackets to the coat check.

Somehow, the décor incorporated little bits of every winter holiday without looking gaudy. Then again, maybe it wasn’t *someday*; it was very Gianna. Her touches – the products for companies she worked with artfully displayed and blending in with the other decoration choices, the splashes of color to throw contrast against the neutrals; it was beautiful, both classic and fun.

She scanned the hall, trying to find Gianna, which she knew would be a feat in and of itself, because it was already packed. And tonight was Gianna’s

night; everyone here was here for her, everyone wanted a fraction of her attention.

Joel's dark eyes widened and he started swatting at her elbow. "Oh, my god. Riley, Riley, Riley, Ri—"

She grabbed his hand to stop him, already looking around in alarm trying to cite the cause of his agitation. "What? What is it—"

"Is that Athena? From Aphrodite?" He sounded truly *awed*.

In fairness, the aforementioned Athena did often inspire feelings of awe, on-sight. She stood at five-foot-nine with a waterfall of dark hair, and piercing green eyes, in a perfectly tailored black suit. When she walked, it looked less like walking than... prowling, almost. Like there was sensuality in every movement.

She caught them staring and offered a lifted eyebrow from across the room, offering a wave.

Riley smiled and waved back.

"Oh my god," Joel gasped.

She broke eye contact with Athena to stare at him. "What is your deal? We've literally met her!"

At the beginning of this past year, Athena had gone viral – and Riley had subsequently featured her as a human interest piece. It was the first piece Riley had done at BostonNow, actually – as the founder of Aphrodite, a cam site that had sky-rocketed in popularity in the last couple of years. She'd given them a great interview about the relationship between society's constantly shifting views on and relationships with sex, and building a healthy, sex-positive site.

"But I didn't know *Gianna* knew her. And I didn't really get to talk to her when you did the piece; you only introduced us for like, a second! What's she doing here?"

"I introduced her and Gianna, too," she murmured, eyeing him in amusement.

It wasn't often that Riley made any contacts through her work that would be beneficial to Gianna. But if she *did*, of course she would link them up.

"But what – oh, my god. She's coming over here," he hissed, clutching at her hand. "God, I'm so glad I wore the tux."

"Be cool, bud," she whispered back just in time.

"Riley! It's so good to see you again," Athena's smooth voice washed over her as she dipped down to press a kiss to Riley's cheek.

She had to work hard to hold back the laughter that wanted to escape at how she could *feel* Joel vibrating next to her.

“It’s really great to see you, too!” She leaned up, pressing her lips to Athena’s cheek to mirror the movement. She reached up a hand, landing on Athena’s shoulder to stabilize herself; both of them were in heels, which meant that Athena still stood several inches taller than she did. “I’m not sure if you remember my friend Joel? From the station?”

Athena’s eyebrows lifted as she ran her gaze over him. “Yes. Hello, again.”

To his credit, he pulled together his composure and offered a wave. All right, the wave was admittedly a little exuberant. “Hi! Yeah. Big fan.”

Athena’s eyebrows lifted, her lips tugging into a sultry smirk. “Big fan, huh? Well, thank you for that.”

Riley could hardly contain herself, the laughter escaping her even as she tried to smother it behind her hand.

Joel blushed profusely, his mouth falling open in mortification. “I – I meant – of *you*, like, as a person!” He explained quickly. “I think it’s amazing, what you’ve done with sex-positivity, and the piece you did with Riley was great! I didn’t mean, I don’t subscribe to your...” he trailed off, coughing.

The warmth that pressed into Riley’s side at that moment was so familiar she knew instantly who’d joined the group. She leaned right into Gianna and the arm that wrapped around her lower back, as she laughed.

“What’s going on over here?” Gianna asked, looking at all of them expectantly. She looked... well, exactly as gorgeous as Riley expected her to.

The electric blue minidress she wore had long sleeves and a neckline that plunged down between her breasts. The hem was deliberately uneven and made her legs that were about a mile long seem even longer, while the color made her eyes pop. Her pale golden blonde locks were classically styled up, with carefully teased strands falling around her face.

“Oh, Joel is telling me about how he is a big fan of mine,” Athena, clearly amused, shifting her gaze to Gianna as well.

Who didn’t bother to hide her laughter, bright eyes sparkling with it. “Oh, yeah? You really into that kind of thing?”

“I don’t – I’m not–” He cut himself off, helplessly stressing, “I’m *gay*.¹”

Riley squeezed his hand in assurance. “We know.”

“Do we?” Gianna teased.

Athena shot him a wink. His poor flushed cheeks.

"It looks amazing in here," she changed the subject to help him out, and also because, well, it *did*.

The arm Gianna had around her waist squeezed in appreciation as she aimed that mega-watt smile at Riley. "I had a few last-minute emergencies, but I managed to put them out in time."

Riley managed a split-second glare at Joel. *That* was always her job and why she was here to help. "Sorry I wasn't here earlier; Joel had a bit of a wardrobe malfunction."

"At least he came out of it looking spiffy," Gianna cut in. "So glad the suit I got you is getting some good use."

Joel grinned so proudly, Riley couldn't hold onto any irritation. She refocused on Gianna, searching her face for signs of last-minute distress. "Everything okay? Do you need help now?"

She looked around, not spotting anything that gave away what had gone wrong. The waiters milled around offering cocktails and snacks, the music was playing – pop covers of holiday songs, a Gianna classic – and people seemed to be having a good time already.

Gianna's smile was soft when their eyes met again. "No, it's all totally fine. The worst thing is that during transport, my gifts were tossed around." She scowled. "One of them broke, which was... anyway. A few cards fell off, too, so I had to quickly sort through everything and re-match cards and boxes. But," she released an airy sigh, waving her free hand through the air. "It all worked out."

She turned to face Athena, sliding her hand along Riley's lower back as she took a step away and tilted her head up to air-kiss Athena's cheek. "Not to bog you down with the details; I'm so glad you could make it this year!"

Gianna affectionately reached out and rubbed at Joel's shoulder in her form of physical greeting before she leaned back into her spot against Riley's side. She stroked her hand up from Riley's hip to waist, before tilting her head down at the same time Riley tilted her jaw up to accept the brush of Gianna's soft lips right against her cheekbone.

"Huh," Athena commented, watching them with arched eyebrows. "That was scarily in-sync."

"They always are," Joel added. "It's kinda weird."

"And maybe one day you will have a close friendship, if you try really hard," Gianna shot back, teasing.

Joel shrugged. “Riley and I would get a lot more assumptions if *we* did that than what you guys get.” He gestured to Gianna’s arm, and the way her hand splayed over Riley’s waist.

Gianna reached out her other arm to tap him on the back of the head.

“Riley,” Athena interrupted before anything else could play out. Riley had long-locked Gianna and Joel’s relationship as about as sibling as one could get, which was crazy since they didn’t meet until their early twenties. “Is your sister not coming tonight?”

“You know Ellie, too?” Joel’s voice rose an octave, as he looked from Athena to Riley, incredulously. He stared at Riley, silently asking, *she hung out with everyone except for me?!*

“Mm, yes. I’d asked Riley if there was somewhere we could have our dinner meeting somewhere... low-key. She took me to – what was that bar called?” Athena’s gaze bore into her own.

“The Witching Hour?” Gianna cut in, her voice mired with laughter. “I *cannot* picture you sitting at The Witching Hour.”

Athena’s expression was similarly amused as she acknowledged. “It’s, indeed, not my usual locale.” She shrugged. “Still, it had a certain charm. Ellie does, as well. Quite an interesting woman.”

“That she is,” Gianna agreed affectionately, smoothly flagging down a waiter and passing out champagne flutes. “Riley and Ellie? Two of my favorite dinner companions.”

“I can see why.” Athena tipped her glass in her direction.

Riley flushed, then shrugged. “Well, we try.” She cleared her throat and gestured around the room. “But, well, you had a long chat with Ellie, so... you might be able to gather that this isn’t really her kind of preferred evening.”

In fact, Ellie had chosen to abstain from Gianna’s party every year, save for the very first one, when Gianna and Riley had tag-teamed to make her get out of the house and attend.

“Too many people, not enough intellectual stimulation,” Joel supplied, not incorrectly.

“This is the only year I’m not giving Ellie shit for cutting out of tonight because she and Mia just came back from their sexcapade vacation last week,” Gianna chimed in.

Riley grimaced as Athena laughed.

Gianna noticed, playfully bumping her shoulder into Riley’s. “What?

They did!"

"First, they were at a *work conference* for Ellie, and second – honestly, *that* is the only thing I don't miss about her now that she's moved out." Riley really hadn't appreciated prior to Mia, how good she'd had it that Ellie, as a roommate, was not into hooking up.

Their apartment had thin walls.

"A healthy sex life is very important. Good for sweet Ellie," Gianna cajoled, lightly dragging her fingers up and down Riley's spine in the exact way that always gave her a warm shiver.

"Good for everyone who's into sex, really," Athena added, saluting her glass.

"We did *just* have a conversation about the benefits of keeping an active sex life even if you aren't dating someone," Gianna reminded her, before she caught sight of something behind Riley, and straightened her shoulders, attention immediately.

Riley barely even turned before Cora was upon them. Cora was Gianna's fast-talking, high-powered, very-good-at-her-job agent, who'd been brought into Gianna's brand years ago, and it was inarguable that she'd helped propel Gianna into her top tier status. Direct, no bullshit was Cora's specialty, as demonstrated by the fact that she greeted no one before cutting straight to the point as she approached.

"Gianna, major issue with the alcohol vendor. The guy who's supposed to be bringing everything for the DIY cocktails? I'd handle it, but I'm still on the phone—" She waved her own phone around as she explained, "I muted for a minute – trying to get in contact with the guy whose number we got about the sneakers you'll be wearing in the Boston Marathon next year."

Gianna swore under her breath. "Still?"

Cora hummed affirmation. "Oh, and, you left your phone in the back room." She held it up in her other hand, offering it to Gianna. "Your grandmother has called, twice." Her attention re-directed back to her own phone in a snap, as she turned on her heel, speaking rapid-fire at whomever was on the line.

"It's barely five in the morning in Finland," Riley looked at Gianna in question. "Is she okay?" The last she'd heard – earlier this month – Gianna's grandmother was as spry as ever.

"She's fine," Gianna assured, tapping her phone against her palm. "It's – she's been having trouble sleeping lately and I told her to call me if she

wanted to talk before her aide comes in.”

And *this* was why she’d wanted to be here, earlier.

Riley slipped out of Gianna’s hold to face her, grateful to have the opportunity to be useful. “Okay, what do you want me on? Mummo or alcohol?”

“I want *you* to relax and have fun like every other guest, because you’ve been working ten-hour days all week,” Gianna countered, reaching up to tuck a strand of hair that must have fallen out of Riley’s braid, behind her ear. “You aren’t even going to be able to stay late enough for most of the festivities, so I want you to have fun while you’re here.”

“I’m not your guest, I’m your Riley,” she reminded, and was more than relieved to see the bit of stress that had settled in Gianna’s face lessen as she smiled down at her.

“If you’re sure...” Gianna bit her lip. “Mummo has been asking about you; how’s your Finnish lately?” Her grin turned impish, knowing damn well how Riley’s Finnish was.

Riley could only fake glare. “It’s good enough for Mummo.”

Gianna wordlessly offered Riley her phone, which she took gladly. A conversation with Mummo was always welcome, in Riley’s book.

As she tugged at the phone, Gianna didn’t let it go easily. Instead, she held and leaned down again to kiss Riley’s other cheek. “Olet tärkeä! Rakastan sua.”

“I know that much Finnish, and I love you, too.” This time she turned so she could kiss Gianna’s cheek back.

Gianna stood up straight and shot a trademark dazzling smile to Athena and Joel. “You both enjoy the party! I’ll be out making the rounds with gifts as soon as everything is settled.”

Athena stared at Riley with a quizzical look on her face as Gianna walked away, smiling and greeting people as she went; you’d never guess she was off to manage a vendor crisis.

She couldn’t question the look, as much as she wanted to, as Gianna’s phone vibrated in her hand. “Hyvää huomenta,” she answered, cringing at her own accent.

Gianna had attempted to teach Riley both Finnish and Italian – the languages she’d grown up speaking to her parents, who communicated with one another in English, but with their individual families in their native tongues – with varying degrees of success in the last decade.

Italian was easier for her to pick up, but she spoke it far less, given that she talked to Gianna's grandmother much more than she'd ever spoken to Gianna's mother. She'd give herself an A for effort in Finnish, but a far worse grade for the language itself beyond very basic phrases.

There was a brief pause, before Gianna's grandmother answered, "Riley? Missä Gianna on?"

All right, so that was asking where Gianna was. Riley wracked her brain. "Se on..." Shit, how did she say holiday party? "It's her Holiday Spectacular," she explained, defeatedly having to switch to English. She groaned. "I can't believe I didn't even make it two sentences."

Mummo only laughed. "You tell me – in English – tell me how your new work is going?"

* * *

SHE HAPPILY SPARED the next thirty-five minutes discussing Mummo's thoughts on Gianna's holiday party, getting the updates on Mummo's neighbors in her retirement community, and what Mummo's plans were for the day – her home health aide was going to drive her to her indoor aerobics class when she arrived shortly.

"She is here, so I will let you go to enjoy the party," Mummo said, warmly into the phone. "It's been a long time, though, since you come to visit."

Riley shook her head slightly as she entered back into the main area of the party. "I'd just switched stations earlier this year when Gianna went to visit you; I couldn't get the time off!"

"Hmm," Mummo sniffed, the sound haughty, and if Riley was honest, she loved it. It was so very Gianna-sounding.

"But I promise I will join Gianna on her next trip," she assured.

"Good. You have fun tonight. Tell our girl to call me tomorrow."

"I will."

It was easy to find Gianna to return her phone as they hung up; the gift-giving portion of the night was just starting to get underway at the back of the grand room. Even if it wasn't, though, Gianna was always easy to find in a room. Wherever people were flocking to like moths to a flame, it was likely that Gianna was in the middle of it.

Riley took a minute to stare at Gianna from the back of the crowd that had formed. She was entertaining as easily and naturally as breathing; smiling a bright smile, laughing, as she gestured at the mountain of gifts behind her, handing one to the man in front of her, like she was in a running for the world's most attractive Santa Claus.

As soon as Gianna's eyes locked onto hers amidst the crowd, they softened, and Gianna waved her forward to where she was perched. "I didn't think you'd be on the phone to Mummo for so long. All in Suomi?"

"Every single word," she drawled. And while she hadn't expected to talk to Gianna's grandmother for so long, either, she didn't mind it.

She never had a *bad* time at Gianna's holiday party, but it was far from her favorite evening. First and foremost, while Riley wasn't averse to a good party, her favorite part of any party was partying with Gianna. And at the holiday party, Gianna's time was so eaten up by everyone else, they hardly got to spend time together. Which Riley understood, but it was a bummer.

Which led into the second and biggest reason, which was Gianna-of-the-masses wasn't quite the same Gianna that belonged to Riley, in private.

It was the same reason Riley didn't watch Gianna's videos or follow her big accounts on social media accounts.

A lot of people found it strange, but she knew Gianna *understood*. Riley didn't watch Gianna's videos, not because she didn't support her – obviously – but because she'd learned years ago that the Gianna portrayed in her videos wasn't *her* Gianna.

She vetted every product she used, every company she partnered with, every personal topic she touched on was true; nothing about the internet perception of *Gianna Mäkinen* was inauthentic. Riley had been there at the conception of many videos, and had helped in any way possible when Gianna needed her.

But after watching the first handful of videos years ago, something about it always felt... wrong, to Riley. Even though Gianna was putting herself and her life on display for the world – the good and the bad, all authentic – it was never the *exact* Gianna that Riley knew.

She didn't want Gianna's review on a product, no matter how truthful, via video on her phone.

She wanted the phone call from the night Gianna received her first shipment of Sköglund Vodka, telling her, "Get your ass over here, babe, tonight we party like we still think we're twenty-one." She wanted the way

too close-up photos of Gianna's perfect teeth in pictures, with Gianna texting *I think the whitening strips did... TOO good of a job??* She wanted the phone call just as she woke up in the morning with Gianna's stressed-out voice asking Riley to come over and *help*, because the makeup product she was trialing might have caused a rash.

If Gianna wanted Riley to know something, Riley wanted Gianna to be the one to tell her. Gianna-to-Riley. Not Gianna-to-everyone.

"Well, you are back amongst the people in the nick of time." Gianna turned and took hold of three gifts, set to the side. "Would you mind giving Joel and Athena theirs? They're still sitting together, over there. God only knows what Joel's been discussing with her; I wish *I* could have god's knowledge, though. I haven't had a chance to go back over; I'm just caught up in..." She gestured to the people milling around.

"You okay?" She murmured, low enough so that no one else could hear, momentarily ignoring the gifts.

Gianna could and would work any room like a pro, but Riley was the only one who knew the stresses underneath the perfect veneer. It was why it was her duty to help carry them through the night. That, right there, was her third strike against the holiday party.

While Gianna was able to work any room like a pro and while she was, by nature, a very generous person, it was Riley's concern that Gianna gave too much of herself – time, energy, and money – to everyone even peripherally in her life.

"I'm good," Gianna insisted. "Remember, one long, chaotic night now, and then, it's whatever I want until fun and sun in California next week."

The smile she gave wasn't totally veneer; most of it was authentic, so Riley accepted it.

As someone else approached, calling Gianna's name, she nodded. "All right, I'll bring Joel and Athena their gifts. You think he's still alive after being alone with her?"

"Unclear, but she can keep his gift if talking to her made him fangirl so much he had a heart attack."

Riley reached for the immaculately wrapped boxes before it dawned on her.

"Gianna," she deliberately drew out her name, pursing her lips in displeasure. "Why is there a gift for Riley here?"

Gianna gave her the most bullshit innocent smile. "Ummm, it's for a

different Riley?"

Riley only arched an eyebrow, pushing the gift back toward Gianna. "We have a rule."

And that rule was – no special holiday gifts. They gave each other gifts throughout the year, small things. Things that made them think of one another. But Gianna had the tendency to go a little overboard. The more she cared, the more she wanted to spend. And she cared about Riley a lot.

Which had resulted in her renting out the most expensive spa in Boston for an entire day their senior year in college, for just the two of them, as Riley's holiday gift. *Thousands of dollars*. Which Riley had appreciated, truly. But could in no way ever mirror and she didn't need it.

And, most importantly, she refused to be one of the people in Gianna's life that used her for something, as so many had been throughout the years. Not even peripherally.

Gianna pushed the box back toward her. "This is just a little something. I'm giving a gift to *everyone*, so just take it."

Riley sighed, as much irritation as she ever really felt for her best friend moving through her. It was admittedly difficult, though, when the most irritating thing about her was insisting on giving Riley too many things. How do you be upset with someone who is just being *too* thoughtful and generous toward you?

"This is specifically inspired by our conversation last week. I swear it wasn't a mastermind plan to spoil you to the point where you get all Righteous Riley." She winked, before sobering, her eyes wide and imploring. "Just, take it, okay? What are you gonna do, leave it for someone else?" Gianna looked at everyone around them, especially the people who had moved even closer, clearly not-so-patiently waiting for their portion of her time. "And, um... it's really not an offer for everyone else. So, it *must* be you." She finished with a cheeky grin and pressed the gift firmly into Riley's arms.

Riley accepted it with a deep breath, leaning into Gianna, so close their noses brushed. She pushed forward even a little bit more, feeling Gianna's forehead press into hers, keeping her eyes solidly on those baby glues. "Bad Gianna."

Gianna pushed back, nudging her nose into Riley's again for good measure. "Good Gianna."

Riley pulled away, gifts in hand, as she headed toward where Joel and

Athena were sitting and set the boxes on the table in front of each recipient.

Athena accepted hers cautiously, staring down at it with a questioning look. Before she slid her gaze back up to where Riley had been sitting with Gianna, who was already ensconced in a new conversation. “So... what was *that*?”

Riley’s eyebrows furrowed, confusion moving through her. “What was *what*?”

“That’s just them. It’s normal,” Joel replied, not shedding any clarity for Riley, before he looked at her, clearly excited. “I’ve been telling Athena about the documentary I filmed? A few years ago? About sex work, sexuality, and hypocrisy in government.”

“It was actually pretty interesting, I’ll admit,” Athena murmured, still looking over at Gianna, before intently looking at Riley.

Who could only offer a small, quizzical smile back. Because... well, she still didn’t get it.

Athena dropped her gaze to the gift in front of her, shaking her head. “I wasn’t aware tonight was about presents?”

“It’s Gianna’s... thing,” Riley settled on, still vaguely unsettled by the lasting amusement on Athena’s face.

“She’s probably the best gift-giver I know,” Joel added. “She’s so good at reading people! What they want or need. Last year, she got my ex-boyfriend the makings to build his own gaming computer because he’d mentioned it in front of her, like, two years before that! She’s crazy amazing.” He frowned. “It makes it difficult to find *her* a great gift, though.”

Riley occasionally struggled with that, herself. It was sometimes difficult to shop for the woman who had seemingly everything. Which was yet another reason why it was good for them to not exchange gifts.

Athena’s eyebrows rose in acknowledgement. “Ah... I think I’ll wait to open mine. I’m a little self-conscious about receiving gifts, and I definitely don’t enjoy opening them in front of other people.”

“Maybe I’ll wait, too,” Riley nodded, as she pulled up the seat on the other side of Joel.

Joel shot her a beseeching look. “Oh, come on; don’t make me alone in this?” He tapped enthusiastically on his giftbox, where he was already fiddling with the card, clearly ready to open it.

She took a deep breath and nudged her shoulder into Joel’s before giving in; fine. It would make sense; she could thank Gianna for it before she had to

leave, at least. She picked up her own card, adorned with her name in Gianna's neatly scrawled handwriting across the front.

Riley –

Here's the thing: you better not ever lower your standards, all right? You'll find the person who melts you inside, the one you want to share all of your triumphs with and cry to about your hard times and vent with about the bad days. If YOU can't, there would be no hope for anyone else.

But, I've come around to your decision on the matter – maybe it isn't a bad idea to try new things. You should explore every avenue, all of the things you've thought about or wondered about.

I figured we can do it together. You pick what we're starting with and when.

In fairness, as you obviously know, I've done it before (except for the one thing, you'll see), but I'm always down to do the other things again.

XO

G.

She hated whenever Gianna ever felt like she had to buy her anything, but she wouldn't deny that her curiosity was piqued.

She slid the top of the box off to see –

What the fuck?

– a vibrator, a strap-on and harness, a blind-fold, silk ties, and were those *nipple clamps*?

It wasn't often that Riley was literally, actually speechless.

But at this moment, as the light, bubbly string-cover of *All I Want for Christmas is You* played through the room, Riley's typical inner-monologue was... just... gone. Entirely, completely gone, as she stared in utter bafflement down at the contents of the box in her lap.

She realized she was gripping the card in her hand hard enough to crinkle it, and she yanked it back up to re-read, this time holding it only inches away from her face. She had to have missed something? She read it wrong before. Must have.

But, no. Her reading comprehension skills hadn't completely failed.

Confusion warred with shock as she could only stare at the words in front of her.

We can do it together?!

What the hell did that mean?

Only, there was only one thing it really could mean, when one was given

a box of sex toys along with that particular note. Right?

Riley's racing mind tried hard to find an alternative way to interpret this, but... she was struggling.

In all honesty, Gianna totally would give someone a whole set of sex toys as a gift. That in and of itself didn't stun Riley in any way, shape, or form.

But... Joel wasn't wrong. Gianna gave gifts that people *wanted*. Riley loved that she never had *any* clue what Gianna was going to get her, but that she always knew she would enjoy it. She'd never once received a gift from Gianna, in their entire friendship, that wasn't reflective of something Riley had either expressed interest in or something Gianna had guessed Riley would enjoy – correctly, she might add.

They discussed their sex lives the way they shared everything: in explicit detail. Their likes, dislikes, funny mishaps, satisfying encounters.

But *this* wasn't their norm in any sense of the word.

Like, Gianna knew Riley ate meals, but she never gave her a cutlery set and offered to feed her.

She could get over the sex toys, themselves. That would be... fine? Not their norm, but acceptable. Barely something to blush at, even though Gianna knew very well that Riley wasn't one to enjoy being tied up – anyway. That would be one thing.

But the... the card.

She could accept the sex toys as Gianna being – Gianna. Outgoing and a little funny and entirely shameless.

She'd been there with Gianna when a conservative group had protested outside of the LGBTQ+ Center in college their senior year and Gianna had decided to take her top off, bra included, as she'd walked by them to give them something to *really* feel scandalized about. There was no shame in her game.

And even though Gianna sometimes flirted with her, it was in the way she flirted with *everyone*. Gianna was, by nature, the flakiest person Riley had ever met. She flirted with Riley – in winks and touches and cheek kisses and little teasing jokes – the same way she sometimes flirted with Joel, a gay man.

In twelve years, Riley had seen the way Gianna turned on her *real* charm, many times. The smiling and banter and cheekiness of when Gianna really meant business with a man or a woman. Those moves weren't the same things she did with Riley.

We can do it together.

A part of her wanted to brush it off as a joke, because, what the hell else would it be?

But a much larger part that knew Gianna so well, knew when Gianna was joking. Riley knew all of Gianna's tones, even in writing. She knew when she was irritated but hiding it under the guise of being professional. She knew when she was exhilarated, but trying to maintain a semblance of decorum. She knew what was meant as humorous and what was meant as serious, even when it could be misconstrued to nearly anyone else.

Still, she stared down at the card again, nonplussed. She guessed... maybe she could be wrong...?

Maybe that instinct that she'd developed, honed, and finely-tuned throughout their friendship was failing her, for the first time.

The entire room buzzed around her, none of it truly *registering*, until Joel's shoulder brushed against hers, his voice too close to comfort near Riley's ear, as he asked, "What did she get you? You didn't even totally take the lid off."

Riley snapped the box shut, feeling her blush intensify. And only realizing then that she was *blushing*.

And, the thing was, Riley *didn't* typically blush.

Ellie did. Ellie got flustered and embarrassed and stressed, and you could always see it on her twin sister's face plain as day.

Riley was collected. Rarely and uneasily flustered. It was a great attribute at work when she had to interview someone in a high stress situation.

But, having her best friend give her a box of sex toys and suggest they try them out together...

Heart pounding in her chest *so hard*, Riley shook her head, keeping one hand clamped tightly over the lid. As if sweet, docile Joel would even try to open it. "Uh. Actually. It's – it's nothing. It's a mug," she said the first thing that came to mind, totally floundering but unable to put any brainpower into it.

Joel's frown was fraught with disbelief. "A mug? She got *me* Amir Hart's latest album with a personalized autograph, and she got *you* a mug?!"

"Uh... huh. Uh huh."

"Your hand is shaking," Athena pointed out, gesturing at Riley's hand that was still clutching at the card. The one that was, indeed, shaking. Just a little.

Which she then slammed face-down against the box, as well. Not that the card itself was incriminating in any way, but...

But.

“I have to go,” she said abruptly, pushing up from her chair, keeping her death grip on the box. “I... Bye.”

“It was nice seeing you again,” Athena called out to her.

“You, too!” She called over her shoulder, distractedly.

She had a long-held belief that there was a clear-cut solution whenever you experienced something that made your head spin: go to the root of the issue.

When she found Gianna, she registered that she was busy. She could see that she was in the middle of making a video with a woman she vaguely recognized as another promoter for one of the clothing lines Gianna advertised for.

Normally, Riley would take that as her cue to make herself busy until Gianna was done working. Tonight, though, she stepped as close to Gianna as possible without ruining the video. Some things couldn’t wait.

Gianna’s eyes flickered to her, visibly confused, and she excused herself within seconds. Which was great because Riley was starting to feel so keyed up, she could hardly keep still. She felt so off-kilter. Like, with this gift and that card, her world was tilting off-axis.

“Hey, you. Did you like it?” She gestured to the box Riley had clasped in her hands. The box she would most certainly *not* be opening again in front of people. She didn’t even want to talk about it in front of people, but in this moment, there weren’t really other options.

Riley blinked incredulously at Gianna; *that* was what she had to say?! “Um.”

Gianna’s face fell, disappointed. “It’s not a big deal, if you didn’t, I guess.” She bit her lip. “I just, I think I gave you the impression that I didn’t really take you super seriously or that I didn’t *hear* you, the other night. And I never want you to feel that way. So I put a lot of thought into it, and...” She trailed off, breathing out a deep breath, gesturing to the box in Riley’s arms, a tentative smile on her lips.

Riley could only stare, speechless. Which was fine, because her brain was still incapable of finding words anyway.

“Please don’t be upset?” Gianna implored.

Riley’s entire world wasn’t just off-axis, now. It flipped upside down.

Gianna was being entirely... genuine. Her instincts had been correct; this wasn't a joke. This wasn't for laughs. She was *serious*.

"And – that – we would – together?" She echoed the note, as best as she could while her mind was racing and her pulse was feeling a little skittery, too.

Gianna gave her a questioning look. "I mean, if you're going to be on this journey of discovery, I want to be there. Why not me?"

"You want to be there," she repeated, dumbly. But it was all she could say.

Gianna's expression slid into obvious concern as she reached out and put the back of her hand against Riley's forehead, then gently moved it down to her cheek. "Are you feeling okay?"

Riley still could only stare, even as she instinctively leaned into Gianna's warm touch. It felt especially nice against the raging tide still coursing through her. Grounding, in a way, which also made *no sense*, because Gianna was the one who was throwing Riley's entire thought process completely off!

"I'm..." She used the hand not holding the gift box so close to her stomach it might indent against her for life, to gesture uselessly in the air.

She had *no idea* how she was, right now.

"Gianna!" Someone called, and Riley could not even muster the mental capacity to look and see who it was or what was going on. She didn't have to, because the person – a staff member working the venue – interrupted a moment later. "Excuse me, sorry. But the final approval you wanted for the schematics for the light show were supposed to be a few minutes ago, to stay on schedule?"

Gianna pursed her lips, throwing a look over her shoulder that had a smile that was all charming veneer. "I need a minute, please." She turned back to Riley, worry etched all over her expression. "Do you want to go out in the hall and talk? We—"

Riley shook her head, straightening up and away from Gianna's hand. "Um, no." She squeezed her eyes closed. Some space to *think* might actually be exactly what she needed right at this moment. "I think... I'm going to go. Just, to take some time. Plus, I have work early." She put on her best reassuring smile that she knew wasn't convincing in the least.

And she did something she hadn't done from Gianna, ever.
She fled.

CHAPTER 5



*J*anuary, Freshman Year

GIANNA DIDN'T INTEND to give any credence to anything Riley had said when she'd left their dorm to go home for Christmas break.

With her secret twin.

Who she hadn't ever mentioned to Gianna, even anecdotally. Not even when Gianna had told Riley secrets about herself that she didn't tell everyone else, like her *real* friends.

She didn't need to give any credence to *anything* Riley said, because clearly, Riley wasn't really her friend. Clearly, Riley didn't even really know her. So what, they had late-night talks sometimes? So what, they hung out and watched some tv show together every week?

Riley hardly knew the real her. And, obviously, Gianna barely knew anything about Riley Beckett. And Riley knew even less about Gianna's friends who Riley so easily classified as "bad people."

So, fuck her.

Gianna had meant what she'd said; she didn't need Riley Beckett or her imploring hazel eyes looking at her from across their room or the little way she snorted after she laughed really hard.

Which, actually, was stupid and embarrassing, and endearing in any way

"Oh, my god, Gianna, I seriously do not care," Amber shouted over the music playing in the club they were at. Gianna had met Amber Langley the

first day at Elliston Prep. Amber had been living there since she'd been ten, and had marched up to Gianna the first time Gianna had made herself at home in the girl's resident lounge. She'd attempted to pull a power-play on Gianna to intimidate her into moving out of "her" seat. Gianna refused. And when Gianna pulled out a literal tote of designer handbags and cases of new Sephora makeup, the loyalty of Amber's army of followers had wavered. A lot. Amber's own loyalty to maintaining solo top dog status wavered, even.

From there on out, they'd been at the forefront of their grade when it came to social activities. They were, admittedly, the popular girls, but *not* the mean ones, Gianna assured herself. Which she hated having to do, but she found herself constantly doing it, after Riley's little stunt.

"I don't want to hear about Whiney-Riley, anymore. I don't give a shit about your loser roommate or what she said to you! It's been weeks!" She shouted over the music, as she leaned back against the bar and sipped her drink.

It was their most regular spot, and had been since it had opened a few years ago, when they were sixteen. It had been named the hottest place in the city, and at the time, Gianna had been dating a junior at Harvard. He'd been the one to hook Gianna up with the ridiculously realistic fake-ID. That ID had stuck around and been more useful than the boyfriend ever had.

Than *any* boyfriend ever had.

Gianna huffed out a breath and downed the rest of her vodka soda in one gulp.

"I've been telling you all semester, Riley's fucking awful," Amber snapped, gesturing at the bartender for another drink.

"I thought we were supposed to be dropping it," Gianna shot back, irked by the fact that *she'd* listened to Amber talk shit about her boyfriend's wife for nearly an hour at the start of the night.

"Yeah, we are. *But*, every time we pre-gamed in your room, Whiney Riley got all eye-roll-y! To the point where she didn't let us party there, anymore, even when it was closer to the parties we were going to. She had no right to do that; it's *your* room, too. Like, grow up!" She huffed out an annoyed breath, before she aimed a look at Gianna. "Ergo, none of this is a surprise, and it's annoying to hear you talk about it so much, when I've been saying it for months."

"You *did* spill a fifth of tequila all over her bed, a month into the semester. And on her phone. And you didn't tell anyone about it until the

morning after,” Gianna reminded her.

And even though Amber continuously put the blame on Riley, it had been Gianna’s decision to not let Amber and their other friends pre-game in her dorm room after that. It – they – had embarrassed her, the way they’d torn through her and Riley’s room, uncaring about the carnage left behind.

Amber waved her hand through the air as she asked dismissively, “And? You replaced it, didn’t you?”

“Obviously.” She’d gone out to the nearest Apple store the day after they’d partied, when she’d returned home in the morning to Riley trying desperately to fix her phone by soaking it in rice, after she’d been up all night washing all of her bedding.

Riley hadn’t shouted at her about her and her friends or called anyone any names or anything like that. Which Gianna had anticipated and wouldn’t have blamed her for.

All she’d done was firmly request that whenever Gianna’s friends come over, that they stay away from her things and own up to any accidents.

“I rest my case. Always judge-y, always bitchy. Maybe next time, you’ll listen!” Amber

And even though she was still pissed at and... fine, *hurt* by Riley, she couldn’t help that she wanted to defend her in some way. Gianna supposed it had become a habit in the last few months. Amber – and several of their other friends who were here tonight, as well – had some choice words about Riley all semester, but Gianna always shot them down.

The comments were always ribbing about the fact that Riley turned down their continuous invites to come out with them. Just saying things like – rude, nerdy, snobby, judge-y, hermit, grumpy, bitchy – joking, though. They were always joking, Gianna *knew* that. But, still.

She swallowed her defense this time, though, frowning into her glass. No more Riley-talk.

In fairness to Amber, Gianna supposed she had talked about their little altercation several times since Riley had left for break, almost three weeks ago.

But in fairness to *her*, she was reminded of it every time Riley texted her.

Obviously, Riley didn’t understand that when Gianna was freezing someone out – especially after they’d straight up insulted her! – she wasn’t going to answer their fucking texts.

Riley the Roommate

Hey... I really am sorry that I hurt you. It wasn't my intention.

Riley the Roommate

You didn't let me say this before I left, but I think you have so much to offer and I don't think you're really tapping into it, or that your current chosen company recognizes it, either

Gianna had received those the day after Riley went home.

She'd typed back several messages and hadn't sent them – some that were nasty, but she deleted them because even though she felt like she *should* send them, she just... couldn't. Wouldn't that prove Riley was right, anyway?

And just because Gianna wasn't going to *answer* the texts, didn't mean she wasn't going to read them. Besides, leaving someone on read was its own punishment.

But, like, what did Riley even *mean* "she had so much to offer"? She was – she couldn't just tell Gianna point-blank that she was a shitty person, but then turn around and say that kind of stuff. It was maddening!

Riley the Roommate

Merry Christmas, Gianna. I figure you're in Italy by now. But you weren't super clear when you were planning on going/coming back and you didn't talk about it, much, so I'm really not sure. Either way, I'm sure you're having a glamorous day

She'd almost answered that one as she'd laid in her bed in their dorm room on Christmas day. Very glamorous.

Didn't Riley know that texting Gianna so many times made her look desperate? Didn't she know that *she* was proving *Gianna's* point, now?

That she clearly needed Gianna more than Gianna needed her. Otherwise, why would she be texting so much?

But Gianna wouldn't deign to answer. First, because she wasn't about to spill her personal business to Riley anymore, and secondly, because she

wanted to get some power back. It was so fucking *embarrassing*, that Riley had been the one to walk away from their argument with the upper hand.

Riley the Roommate

*Just so you know, I'm really not dropping out.
I'm going to be coming back and we will be living
together again sooner rather than later. So you can
keep ignoring me if that makes you feel better right
now, but we are going to have to talk eventually*

She'd received this one tonight, just after arriving at the bar, which had kicked off her whole Riley-rant again. Gianna stared down at her phone and the string of unanswered messages, biting at her cheek at the weird and overly-emotional response Riley's messages evoked in her.

It just *bothered* her. Not even what Riley had said, no. What really bothered her, was that she couldn't shake it off. Gianna had been in her fair share of verbal clashes in the last few years, and she'd been called far worse than what Riley had said. It shouldn't matter if *Riley Beckett* thought she was nice or not.

But everything Riley had said wouldn't stop playing on a loop in Gianna's mind. Wouldn't stop making her feel sick and off-kilter. Questioning things that she would have never previously questioned.

She groaned and slid her phone back into her purse. "You know what, you're right. I'm done talking about her."

Talking about her, thinking about her, giving her any credence or power in her life. *Done*.

"About who?" Katy, another girl they'd gone to Elliston with, asked as she sidled up to them at the bar.

"*Riley*," Amber supplied in the mocking voice that Gianna had always loathed.

Katy tossed her head back and sighed. "Thank fucking god. Winter break is supposed to be about relaxing and having fun, and you've been a serious downer because of her. It's really irritating."

Gianna reeled back, insulted. "No, I haven't."

"Uh, yeah, you have," Amber scoffed. "You refused to come out with us the other night, when we wanted to go to Grigio."

The accusation in her tone set Gianna immediately on the defensive, as

she tossed her hair over her shoulder and stared Amber down. “And? That wasn’t about Riley; I had a headache. And it wasn’t like we had plans.”

In truth, Gianna had been massively hungover. The day before that, her official failing astronomy grade had been posted. She’d seen pictures of her mother posted on a few Italian gossip sites, partying in Rimini – so... not in Lake Como, anymore. And, as she’d filtered through her texts, she’d realized that though she’d gotten dozens of messages on Christmas and New Year’s Eve, they’d all been mass texts, requests for her to come to a party or get people into a party, or messages from guys who wanted to hook up.

She’d realized that the *only* person who had texted her, personally, not asking for anything from her on either holiday... had been Riley.

So, fine, her skipping out on going out with Amber and Katy to Grigio had been slightly because of Riley, but not because of what they thought.

All right, *maybe* because of what they’d thought.

Because, Gianna never went through her texts with a critical analysis; she wasn’t a fucking weirdo. Only, she had Riley’s voice ringing through her ears, criticizing her social circle, and she’d gone through her texts with the haughty intention of proving Riley wrong.

Instead, *she’d* been proven wrong. So, she’d spent the day drinking alone in her room, and had felt like shit – physically and emotionally – the entire day after.

Amber’s eye roll couldn’t have been harder. “We missed Zoe Davis’s lowkey show there because *you* didn’t come.”

Annoyance zipped through her, her hands falling to her hips. “So, what? You couldn’t go out without me? I have to hold your hand if you want to leave the house?”

Katy glared. “How are we supposed to get into the hottest club in town when *you’re* the one who has an in with the doorman?”

Gianna tossed her hands in the air. “I told you, I had a headache! And I invited you over to hang out; you both said no.”

It wasn’t something they usually did – stay in and hang out – but she’d been feeling lonely. And sad. And pathetic. But she’d invited Katy and Amber to her room that night, anyway. Again, trying to prove to herself that they had more value in her friendship than what Riley had said.

“We don’t want to have a slumber party like we’re in fucking middle school. We *wanted* you to get us into Grigio,” Amber retorted, shaking her head as she turned away from her to flag down the bartender again.

Why am I the only one here when all you're offering is you?

Riley's question refused to go away or dissipate. Right now, it was all Gianna could hear as she stared at her two friends, who were clearly agitated with her. And even though Gianna wanted to be agitated back – and, she was – mostly, she felt a similar feeling to the other night.

That one where her face felt hot and her stomach sank and... she didn't like this. At all.

Gianna shook her hair back, taking in a deep breath through her nose, then slowly out of her mouth. "Whatever. If you guys want to go to Grigio, then, let's go."

* * *

SHE WISHED she'd never met Riley Beckett.

She wished Riley had never said all of those things to her. She wished that all of the things Riley said were false. She wished that she didn't start hyper fixating on everything her friends said and did after that night at the bar two weeks ago.

She wished, very much, that there wasn't a part of her, that needed to prove Riley wrong. To prove that Gianna's friends weren't bad people who were only using her and that, by extension, she wasn't bad, either.

Unfortunately, her wishes didn't come true so easily.

Only a few days after they'd been at the bar and then gone to Grigio, they – she, Amber, Katy, Melanie, and Kasey – had been at dinner, and Kasey had made a comment about the woman at the table next to them looking like a clown.

Gianna's automatic impulse was just to scoff a laugh regardless of the fact that the comment wasn't even funny, and then continue about her business as their friends snickered.

Now, though, all she could freaking hear were Riley's words in her head. She turned to look at the woman – she, indeed, did have an unfortunate outfit on and her makeup palette was so far from flattering, it should have been a crime for a salesperson to have allowed her to buy it. If that woman had spoken to anyone who actually knew anything about makeup, they would have offered her something to better match her natural features.

Gianna's stomach had turned, though, and she didn't fake the mindless

laugh. She found that she couldn't. Especially not as the woman was sitting across from either a friend or a partner and was laughing – genuinely, laughing. There was a happiness that lit her up from the inside out, that far outshone the poorly done makeup choices.

A happiness that Gianna certainly wasn't feeling. A happiness that no one at this table, nor any of the literal dozens of guys she'd ever dated, had ever made her feel.

"Imagine looking at yourself in the mirror after doing that to your face, and thinking *yep! Job well done!*" Amber added, glancing at the woman again, as the other girls giggled more.

"Hey," Melanie piped up, her voice reproaching. Gianna looked at her with interest, desperately hoping she would say something that could help redeem where this conversation was going. "I'm sure Ronald McDonald would think the *exact* same thing she does."

Gianna couldn't help the sound of disgust that rumbled out of her throat.

Though quiet, it captured the attention of everyone sitting at the table.

Katy was the one who spoke up. "What?"

Gianna sat up straight and stared Katy down from across the table. "I'm just – like, who cares? Who cares about her makeup? Yeah, it's unfortunate looking, but she's *trying*, and she has nothing to do with us. So, why are we talking about some random woman at the other table?"

Katy stared at her incredulously, even as her cheeks flushed. Because, Gianna knew, Katy didn't enjoy being called out. Especially not by someone higher up in their unspoken hierarchy, like Gianna or Amber. "I mean... why not?"

"There are plenty of makeup faux-pas I could talk about at our own table. The majority of your clothing is a warm summer palette, you wear makeup like you're a spring, but with your coloring, you're a cool winter; I've told you this before, and you still wear what you want. Which is fine, but I'm sure you'd be really upset if you found out our waitress was calling you a clown behind your back," she challenged, folding her hands over her menu as she stared Katy down.

Katy, who could only splutter.

Amber huffed out a laugh. "Oh my god, you're so right."

They turned their conversation back to the menu, and still Gianna's stomach roiled.

And it hadn't stopped there.

It was like Riley had shined a light on these moments, and whereas Gianna used to be able to ignore them or snark with her friends, she now felt like she was hearing every comment they made, magnified.

Which, in turn, made it harder and harder for her to hold her tongue. Because truthfully, Gianna was someone who had never been one to hold back. Her friends had always enjoyed that about her, had found it very entertaining.

It turned out that her friends didn't seem particularly receptive, though, when her comments were directed at them.

It all bubbled over later that night, when they'd taken advantage of Riley still being away for winter break and had gone to Gianna and Riley's dorm room to pre-game for a night out.

They'd been laughing, had music playing, when Amber spotted the Valentino dress her father had sent her as a holiday gift; it was a glimpse at the spring line. She'd gasped. "God, that's gorgeous. You're going to look great in it."

There was that undertone in her voice, the one she often had, when Gianna had something Amber coveted. It always sounded insulting, even the actual words she said were kind ones.

"Less than a month until we head to New York for fashion week!" Kasey squealed, doing a little dance where she stood.

Melanie splashed the Grey Goose Gianna had bought them earlier on her desk as she dramatically threw her arms open. "Do you already have the tickets? I just want to, like, see them."

Gianna, in hindsight, shouldn't have done it. Not if she wanted to keep the same life she'd always had. The easy life she'd cultivated.

But she was standing in the same place she'd been in during her argument with Riley, and her stomach was in knots as she continued to apply her eyeliner. Flawlessly, she might add.

"Actually, my dad didn't get tickets for me this year," she said flippantly, not slowing in her application of her makeup even as she carefully watched her friends' responses in the mirror.

She watched the way Amber turned to glare at her, mouth falling open in either rage or offense, the way Melanie pouted, spilling some of the Grey Goose as she heavily dropped the bottle onto Gianna's desk, and the way Katy clutched Gianna's dress tightly.

"Are you kidding?"

“Gianna! What the fuck?”

“You *lied* to us!”

Despite the way her stomach completely bottomed out and left her nauseas, Gianna finished her winged eyeliner with a steady hand. “I never *told* any of you that I was even getting tickets,” she pointed out, turning to face her friends directly.

All of them looking at her like she’d betrayed them, stung them. Amber most of all, as she narrowed her eyes at Gianna. “What is wrong with you? You don’t ever laugh when we make jokes, you cancelled plans twice when you *know* we needed you to get into those parties, and now, you didn’t even get us tickets for fashion week? I’m fucking over it. We *all* are.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Well, maybe I’m over it, too,” she shot back, sounding a lot more certain than she felt.

It had been the beginning of a short argument, that resulted in Amber storming out and not a single person staying back with Gianna. They’d taken her alcohol, too.

That had been hours ago.

And as Gianna had sat on her bed and stared at her empty room, that feeling came for her. The one that had been happening more and more in the last few weeks. The feeling of looking at herself in the mirror and, for the first time in her life, not liking what she was seeing.

In fairness, she had felt this feeling before. Fleetingly. But she’d always been able to push past it. To dismiss it.

Right now, though, it swamped her. She didn’t know what to do while she felt like this. *it – she –* felt... ugly. Ugly and cold and mean, and her chest felt heavy and constricted, just like it had when Riley had left last month.

Fucking Riley.

Fucking Riley, who changed everything.

Fucking Riley, who was making Gianna experience so many feelings. Feelings that were difficult to push down and away, feelings that kept trying to bubble to the surface.

Feelings that could only be shoved down in favor of Gianna keeping herself busy. Very busy.

She’d pulled all of her clothing out of her closet and drawers, having started to reorganize it. She’d organize now by color palette, she decided, rather than designer. She was going to reorganize everything in and on her

desk, too. Energy surged through her, whipping her into shape, even as the backs of her eyes burned with tears.

Sometimes they leaked out, and she hastily wiped them with the back of her hand as she continued to organize her life.

This was fine. She didn't need those fake friends; why would she? And if she did decide she wanted them back, then she could get them back! Clearly, all their friendship cost was a ticket to fashion week.

Which Gianna *did* have.

This feeling was familiar to her, even if she hadn't felt it in years. When things felt overwhelmingly bad inside, all she had to do was keep busy. Stay productive, and eventually, she would burn through these feelings. It wasn't the first time she'd ever felt this way. But it would pass. It always passed.

She jerked upright from folding her shirt as the door to the room swung open, freezing where she stood as her heart pounded. She could have sworn she'd locked –

“God!” Riley shouted, her hand with the key to their room still dangling from it slapped over her heart, as the duffel bag she'd been carrying dropped to the floor. “I didn't think you'd be here!”

“What are *you* doing here?” Gianna shot back, hastily wiping at her eyes. Fuck. The first time she was going to see Riley since she'd made her feel so badly, and it was like *this*? She quickly turned away from Riley's wide, observant gaze, focusing back on the work in front of her. “It's still officially winter break, isn't it?”

She knew it was, because she'd double-checked the other day. She'd been equal parts dreading and looking forward Riley's return, which was due in a week. Which made *no* sense, she knew.

Gianna shook her head, pushing it out of her mind.

Organize.

Armani draped over the foot of her bed. Dior on her desk. Chanel at the head of her bed. Stella McCartney and Kate Spade on the dresser. Hélène Piece on –

“Yes, technically it is still winter break,” Riley answered slowly, dragging the words out as she watched Gianna organize. She could feel the gaze on her back, the way it made the back of her neck tingle.

“Then what are you even doing here?” Gianna asked, still not looking at Riley, as she started to mix her color palette together, comparing her sweaters as she held them up, side by side. “Don't you have a secret twin sister to be

gallivanting around with in Nowhere, Vermont?"

Riley slowly closed the door behind her. "Well, Ellie... was ready to come back. And the dorms are open, so..." she trailed off, gesturing as if to say *and here I am*. She pushed a hand through her hair – Gianna admired her hair. Which, really, was annoying, and she refused to think about it. "What are you doing here, though? When did you get back from Italy?"

Embarrassment settled high in her throat, heavy like a stone in her stomach, and wrapped all around her spine. With it, she grit her teeth, ignoring Riley as hard as she could.

She continued to pour over the clothing she had out instead, not slowing down for a second.

"Um... and why does it look like a bomb went off in your closet? In our whole room, actually."

Embarrassment and shame and hurt and lonely and *stupid* feelings spiked through her, making her choke out a breath, but she resolutely kept working.

Just because Riley had come back early didn't mean she had to change what she was doing. It didn't give Riley the right to interrupt her night.

"Gianna, can you – can we just talk?" The earnest request from Riley made Gianna's stomach twist in revolt all over again.

She rolled her lips, tightly. She didn't want to talk to Riley. She wanted the tightness in her chest that was working into her throat to feel looser. She wanted her friends to barge back in here and apologize, to prove that they weren't who Riley thought they were.

She wanted, she thought with no small amount of desperation, to prove that *she* wasn't who Riley said she was.

That was the problem, though, wasn't it? She knew exactly who she was.

"Gianna," Riley said her name again, exasperation and what sounded a lot like... concern coloring her voice.

Concern. Like Riley would be concerned about her, after what she'd said. As if she cared about Gianna.

As if anyone did.

That thought echoed though the vast, hollow feeling inside of her. The one that was always present, but Gianna could usually fill the void – with people around her, with alcohol, with sex.

Right now, tonight, she felt a lot more *void* than person.

She felt consumed by it, aching all over from it.

And as she turned toward her closet and her eyes fell on the final dress

hanging there, she stopped dead in her tracks. Something about that dress broke whatever resolve she'd still had.

"Do you get off on being right?" She found herself asking, her voice as hollow as the place around her heart.

"*What?*" Riley asked, clearly baffled – if not also annoyed – at the question.

"I'm just wondering," she muttered, not stopping her organization, "Because if so, congratulations. None of my friends seem to really want to be *my* friends. You really hit the nail on the head with them. They suck." She swallowed, hard, gripping the delicate fabric of her custom-tailored slacks.

"And you get the added bonus of being right about me, too," the words climbed out of her, clawing their way out. "I'm just as bad of a person as you think. So, good job."

"I *never* said you were a bad person," Riley immediately responded.

And she sounded like she meant it, but it still made Gianna narrow her eyes incredulously as she turned to face Riley. She scoffed, "Please. You all-but said that. I'm a mean girl, who surrounds myself with assholes who only want to use me... but I'm not a bad person? How does that add up to you?"

She scoffed again at her own summary, entirely – painfully – humorless. "The truth hurts. And the truth is that... I think you were right," she admitted, unable to speak louder than a whisper. Unable to summon the energy she'd been using to try to distract herself.

More than anything, she wished she could summon the anger from that night. Anger was better than this... empty feeling.

The quiet that settled over them made Gianna's stomach cramp. She wondered if Riley would celebrate – if Gianna had been proven so right about someone and then have them acknowledge it, she'd be thrilled. Then again, gloating didn't really seem like Riley's style.

"Do you want to talk about... whatever happened?" Riley asked, interrupting her thoughts.

And Gianna could only stare in confusion. She knew the look in Riley's eyes. It was the same as when she'd offered to study with Gianna when she'd watched Gianna stare, nonplussed, down at her astronomy book. The one she wore when she asked simple, curious questions about Gianna's parents and childhood. That earnest look. Like she actually wanted to just... talk.

It had always made Gianna somewhat uncomfortable. And yet, she'd always liked it, too, even though she usually brushed Riley off in those

moments.

But she didn't know how to talk about this; the idea of it made her stomach crawl. To admit the thoughts on her mind, right now, out loud?

"Not really," she murmured, her voice hoarse.

Riley accepted that with a nod, as she slowly crossed the room to stand in front of Gianna. And she watched Riley's approach with apprehension. Suspicion. Caution.

Riley didn't push her, but *stared* at her, so intently, from only a foot away. Searching for answers.

And Gianna didn't understand the power of Riley, because for some reason she found herself talking, anyway. "Fine. You were right," she repeated, having to swallow hard at the admittance. "My friends... they don't really want to hang out with *me*."

Riley's soft, hazel eyes watched her so closely, and she hated that look in them. Like Riley felt badly for her, like she pitied her.

Gianna wanted to look away, she really did. And yet, she couldn't. "And I guess I can't really blame them." She croaked the words out, "Because... I don't even want to hang out with *me*."

And *that* – that was the biggest and worst secret Gianna harbored. That was the root of the feeling that she had during whenever life wasn't either busy or numb. It was the feeling she did everything she could to ignore.

Saying it, actually speaking the words into existence, made a spike of anxiety shoot through her, haughtiness right on its heels. "I mean, I think I'm fucking awesome in a lot of ways," she hastily added.

Riley *still* didn't say anything, and – she was the one who'd asked if Gianna wanted to talk!

The silence bore down on her again, engulfing her, as she leaned back heavily into the side of her bed. "But... in some other ways... maybe I don't think so, as much," she whispered.

She only realized she was crying as she sniffled, the sound soft and pathetic and made her feel unbelievably silly, because Riley was still *silent*.

"Fine, if you want me to say it, *fine*. Maybe I am a mean girl. But it's not like I am on purpose. I just – sometimes, I guess I am quick to judge or tease, but, I never meant to hurt anyone's feelings," she insisted, because it was *true*. "I didn't think..." she trailed off, only realizing how fucking stupid she sounded. She didn't think that anyone was really getting hurt when she made these judgments, because to her, it was a joke? Or because when her friends

did it, people usually didn't hear it?

It sounded so ridiculous and callous and *mean*. And yet, it was the truth.

And even so, as she was baring her soul, Riley was quiet.

"You had so much to say about this a few weeks ago, but now, you don't have anything?" As biting as she tried to make the words, they just fell flat even to her own ears. They sounded pleading.

For the first time in far too long, Riley spoke. "Do you like doing those things, or when your friends do them? The judging or teasing? The using someone to cheat in science?"

Gianna stared at her, eyes still burning as they leaked ridiculous tears. "No, I don't *like* it! If I did, I would be out with my friends right now. But now, all I can think about is that they really are only my friends because of what I can give them. All I can think about is that people are around me for the way I look, and it makes no sense, because I *love* the way I look and I *do* like giving things to people." It was all so confusing and she hated it, and she closed her eyes tightly, rubbing at her temples. "And I sound like a total idiot right now, and I hate it."

She felt exposed and open and *seen* in a way that made her feel naked. Only, Gianna would much rather show her literal naked body to anyone, than feel seen like this.

"I don't think you sound like an idiot," Riley's voice was so firm and so certain, it felt at-odds with everything Gianna was feeling. She carefully picked through the explosion of Gianna's closet, settling next to Gianna against her bed, Riley's presence warm and solid against her side.

"Can I say something?"

"You don't usually ask," she pointed out. "So, this must be something *really* honest."

She aimed for a joke, but her stomach was tied up in knots because she honestly wasn't certain she wanted to hear whatever it was. She felt raw enough already.

"Gianna, you are, like, other-worldly gorgeous."

Riley's frank statement was definitely *not* what she'd expected to hear, and she snapped her head around to stare at her.

Any other time, with any other person – hell, even Riley, before all of... this – she would have tossed her hair and smiled and turned just a little charm on. But right now, it was too confusing.

"Thank you?"

She took in the ever-so-slightly crooked set of Riley's smile – how the left side went higher up than the right. Just a little. Just noticeable when you really paid attention.

"I'm just stating the fact. Everyone with eyes can see it; you're beautiful. Your parents are literally models, you have a lot of money, and you have the ability to be almost annoyingly charming. So, when you add these things together... people flock to you. It's a part of human nature." Riley's little smile faded, as she stared right into Gianna's eyes. "But you really do have so much more to offer than all that."

Gianna deflated at that, dropping her gaze down to the floor. For a second, she'd gotten caught up in Riley's build-up, let herself believe there would be some actual redeeming quality about herself. "If this reality check has taught me anything? It's that *that's* not super true."

Riley's hand fell on hers. "It *is* true," she insisted.

Gianna wished that the lights were off so that Riley couldn't see how red-rimmed she knew her eyes were – awful – as the disbelief slid through her.

But Riley only nodded, as if affirming her own words. "The fact that you're sitting here, like this? That proves it, already. Because you *could* take the easy way, and just say, hey. Fuck Riley."

She managed to identify the feeling that curled through the pit of her stomach as shame, because that *was* how she'd taken what Riley had said at first.

"But – you *care*," Riley insisted, squeezing Gianna's hand. "And I knew you would. I knew somewhere inside of you, you'd care. And caring is *good*. It's important."

There was something there, in her tone, the intense, soothing sound of it, that made the nervous flutter in Gianna *settle* for the first time all night. Settle enough for her to ask, her voice quiet and raspy, "You think? You really think I'm... better? Or, that I could be?"

Riley's immediate, affirmative nod left her no doubt that Riley really meant it. She supposed that was the best thing about Riley; she wouldn't tell her if she didn't mean it. "I really do."

"I'm worried that if I change those things about myself, that... people really won't like me," the words crawled out of her throat, and her hands shook with the confession, clenching into fists. Because her friends certainly hadn't, today. And then where would she be? Even *more* alone?

Riley's other hand came out and she used both of her small, soft hands to

coax Gianna's fist open. When she did, Riley slotted her fingers between Gianna's – and they just, fit. She rested her other palm over the back of Gianna's hand, encasing Gianna's larger hand between her own.

"If it means anything, *I* like you more right now than I ever have."

Gianna's breath caught in her throat as she held Riley's gaze with her own. Because... yeah. It meant a lot.

CHAPTER 6



Riley only had trouble sleeping when she was deeply unsettled.

When her father had died, when she worried about her sister, when she got into a stressful conversation with her mother, when she was obsessed about a story at work.

For the first time in her life, tonight sleep eluded her because of Gianna.

Gianna – *Gianna Mäkinen* – the listener and commiserator of all of her bad dates, the person she did her laundry with, the person she had hungover mornings with, the person who'd talked her into seeking out a new and better job despite the nerves of the unknown, the person she shared everything with... thought they should have sex?

It was a great thing she didn't share her apartment, anymore. Because, after getting home and changing into sleep shorts and the sweatshirt she'd rightfully taken back from Gianna, Riley turned to her calming activity: power-cleaning, while putting CNN on in the background.

She scrubbed at the oven, blowing strands of hair out of her face, at two o'clock in the morning, turning the thoughts over in her head.

Gianna obviously gave her the gift for a reason. She'd looked Riley in the face and told her that she'd thought this through. Riley truly had no choice but to do the same.

On the one hand – the *giant* hand – it was absolutely crazy.

Right?

For so many reasons.

First and foremost, Gianna was her best friend, as the obvious issue. It would be... weird? Definitely weird, to be in a not-friendly, er, position.

Second, Gianna was, very obviously, a woman. Riley had never gotten

that spine-tingling *wanting* feeling from a woman before. She'd never gone on a date with one, but... you didn't date to check to see if you were attracted to someone, right? That's not what she'd done with men. She'd just known she was attracted.

She frowned, scrubbing harder, as she felt like the cogs in her brain started turning in reverse.

Because on the other hand, she *was* sexually frustrated. She did want to have sex – some great, intense, mind-blowing sex would be ideal – and she wanted to do so without dating for the time being. And Gianna loved to have sex without dating. Those puzzle pieces fit together.

Plus, Gianna *was* her best friend. The person who knew her inside and out. The person who knew her likes and dislikes. The person she was the most comfortable with in the literal world. Maybe that did uniquely qualify Gianna as the best person for Riley to try this with.

And it wasn't like she didn't find women beautiful; that was ludicrous. She could appreciate a woman's face and body, aesthetically. Maybe she was experiencing compulsory heteronormativity or something?

And Gianna was very much an attractive woman.

She realized she'd stopped scrubbing only as she blinked down and saw that her hands were no longer moving. Shaking herself out of it, she slid off the cleaning gloves and brushed her hands against her thighs before she reached for her phone.

Her lock screen was a picture of herself and Gianna, during their impromptu long weekend trip to Martha's Vineyard last July, where they'd all gone to try to perk Joel up post-breakup. Mia had snapped the picture.

They were standing in the surf, as Riley had hopped on Gianna, piggy-back style – her legs around Gianna's waist, her arms over her shoulders, as they'd screamed with laughter. Gianna was wearing a tiny white string bikini, that made the summer tan she'd gotten pop. And... Riley bit her lip, really focusing.

From the moment she'd met Gianna, she'd been able to see her sex appeal. Breasts and hips most women would likely literally murder – or at the very least maim – for, long legs, silky blonde hair, naturally pouty lips...

Riley swallowed hard. It wasn't like she didn't find Gianna attractive. But she'd seen Gianna in one particular way, for their entire friendship. She'd assumed Gianna had seen her in the same way, despite the fact that Gianna was into women. Gianna being attracted to women didn't mean Gianna was

attracted to her.

A lot of people would kill to be in the position she was in right now. And, if Riley was entirely honest, it wasn't like she'd never considered having sex with a woman, in a very theoretical way. Riley was the only person in her group who didn't identify as queer in any way, so, of course she'd thought about it.

She'd be open to *trying* it. Probably? If she'd been asked about this situation – having sex with a woman *in theory*, she would likely *in theory* say she would be open to trying it, if the situation fell into her lap. But she would also laugh it off, because – the situation would never just... fall into her lap!

Only, right now the situation *was* in her lap.

Or, it was in a very adult-themed gift box, sitting less than twenty feet away.

She nearly threw her phone back onto the counter, dragging her hands through her hair instead.

"What are you even *thinking* about?" She paced in her kitchen, muttering to herself, "This is ridiculous."

Because, it was ridiculous!

It was a throwaway gift – okay, not literally, because those sex toys were from the new company that was brand-sponsoring Gianna, and they were some quality items. Gianna had expressly told her so, after she'd been sent a "sample" and had then decided to work with the brand.

But a throwaway gift as in, Gianna had gifted it to her. She'd written a teasing, suggestive note that was – strangely – not a joke. And Riley could very easily just say, *haha, thanks for the offer, but I'm good.*

It really was that easy.

Please don't be upset. She could picture the beseeching look in those big, blue eyes. Eyes she knew so well.

So, clearly, it wasn't that easy. Because, hours later, she was still thinking about it.

And by her own code of strict honesty, that *had* to mean something, right? That she was considering it.

In the name of honesty...

She pulled up her text thread with Gianna, looking at the message that Gianna had sent after she'd left the party.

Gianna – 10:11PM

Hope you got home safe, babe. Let me know if you

really aren't feeling well, okay?

Even though hours had passed, she knew Gianna was still up. The party was likely just ending, Gianna arranging rides to get stragglers home. But even if Gianna had been home tonight, the chances were she'd only just be getting ready to go to bed now, anyway. She liked to edit into the early hours.

Riley – 2:13AM

Hey

Very eloquent.

Gianna – 2:14AM

What are you still doing up?? Don't you have to be at the station in like three hours?

Riley – 2:16AM

Yeah but

Riley – 2:16AM

Okay, so, I don't know if this is definitely crazy or not. But I'm thinking about the... gift

All right. She'd said it. It was there. It –

Gianna – 2:16AM

Definitely not crazy. Listen, I wouldn't have given any of it to you if I thought you'd dislike it. I meant what I said. I really don't want you to feel like I wasn't taking you seriously or really thinking about what you talked about the other day

Gianna – 2:17AM

If you want to expand your horizons, then I am here to be your number one supporter

Gianna – 2:17AM

Champion

Gianna – 2:17AM

Cheerleader

And... yeah. That all tracked, with Gianna.

Riley – 2:17AM
So... doing it WITH you?

Gianna – 2:18AM

A hands-on supporter, champion, cheerleader!

Gianna – 2:18AM

I just figured – who wants to try something new by themselves when you can do it with your best friend?

Riley – 2:19AM
And you'd like to do it, with me?

She knew she was being redundant, and still, she couldn't stop herself. Because *that* was what really didn't add up for her.

Gianna – 2:20AM

Babe, I love doing everything with you. Why would this be any different??

Riley was, again, speechless. Maybe she wouldn't be if this had ever been something Gianna had ever even hinted at, but...

Gianna – 2:20AM

Why are you being so weird about this?

WHAT? Riley stared down at her phone, incredulous and righteous in equal measure.

Riley – 2:23AM
I'm not being so weird! I think I'm being the right amount of weird

She stared down at their messages, needing to take a minute to think it all through. While she definitely didn't think she was overreacting, maybe she shouldn't be as thrown by this as she was.

Sex really *wasn't* a big deal to Gianna. Riley knew that. She knew it in the way that she knew every detail about Gianna's sex life – every person she'd been with, the way she wanted to be touched, the things people had done that had surprised her in both good and bad ways. She knew every little

detail, because Gianna had absolutely no qualms in sharing it. She was so open about her sex life and sexuality and was so sex-positive, Riley honestly supposed she could be a little more surprised that this hadn't ever come up between them, before.

Gianna often likened a night of great sex to a reset. And maybe... maybe that's what she was thinking now, when it came to this?

She took a deep breath, leaning heavily against the counter as she dove deeper into her feelings on the matter.

Riley – 2:25AM

I guess it's just kinda throwing me off a lot, because none of that is ever anything we've done TOGETHER, no matter how much we've talked about it. So, I didn't expect it and, like I said last week, my entire dating... experience... has been so shitty lately and I feel so off-balance in that area in general, it's all so

She didn't know how to finish explaining her thoughts. And, luckily, she was talking to Gianna, so she didn't feel like she *had* to finish the thought before she sent it.

And she was proven right.

Gianna – 2:26AM

I know. You seemed really off your usual game last week, so that's why I figured we should do this.

Reserve some just-us time, recalibrate. Just like you said: we can try something new. Not take everything so seriously and just have fun together

Riley – 2:26AM

What if... I don't

It's just Gianna, she reminded herself, forcing herself to finish the text with the worry situated firmly on her mind, now.

What if I'm not good at it? Or, it doesn't work out because I'm just not... into it?

Like, what if she got there, and ultimately *wasn't* attracted to Gianna in that way? What if she *tried* to be and started something and it went absolutely fucking terribly? What if, despite knowing every detail – sometimes, she'd thought, too many details – about Gianna's sex life and preferences fled her mind and she couldn't figure out how to touch her?

Then again, maybe that brand of embarrassment would be better, with her best friend. Maybe Gianna had a point with that.

Gianna – 2:26AM

Riley!!!

Gianna – 2:27AM

What in the world are you talking about? You really must be in your own head lately, about the state of your life, huh??

Riley spared a look at the box that was sitting on her coffee table. Then at the clock that told her she'd been ruminating on this for *hours*.

Riley – 2:28AM

You could say that

Gianna – 2:29AM

Well, none of this is that serious, all right? It's just you and me. If you aren't into it, it's not a big deal AT ALL

Was Riley totally and utterly unhinged or was this starting to make some semblance of sense?

She leaned back heavily into the counter as that realization sunk in. Logically, when she really thought about it... the side that held all of the pros to sleeping with Gianna really seemed to outweigh the side with the cons.

And the more Riley thought about it, the more it inherently tugged at her inquisitive nature.

Gianna – 2:29AM

But maybe it will work out! And besides, I only put this gift together because YOU brought it up in the first place

Riley stared at her phone, already typing the *wtf?* before she remembered. She'd said that Gianna had it right and that maybe she should try being more like Ellie, in the span of about five minutes. Maybe she had unintentionally

suggested it. Gianna, as a thoughtful gift-giver, *always* took someone's commentary and ran with it...

Riley – 2:31AM
I guess you're right

Gianna – 2:31AM

I am. And you're worrying me tbh so, I want you to bring the stuff over my place tomorrow after you finish work. I'll clear my schedule and we'll make a whole night of it

Somehow, the easy confidence of that message, typical Gianna, made Riley's racing thoughts and nerves calm a bit. It was starting to make sense.

Riley – 2:32AM
I thought it was up to me to pick when we started?

The teasing message felt... good. Normal. And she breathed easily with it for the first time in hours.

Until her phone buzzed again.

Gianna – 2:33AM

You lost that privilege now that I'm really seeing you stressing. You, at my place, by six tomorrow. Kay?

She took a second, though, biting so hard on her lip she was worried it might bleed. And she felt a little silly, but her hands were the littlest bit shaky as she texted –

Riley – 2:35AM
Okay.

She, Riley Jane Beckett, had a sex date with her best friend.

CHAPTER 7



*I*t turned out that attempting to work on not only two hours of sleep but also with the impending evening of fucking your best friend was not conducive to productivity.

Riley was often able to block out other things and focus when she was at work. But today, the thoughts and feelings that accompanied them were at the forefront of everything else.

The thing was, she wasn't one to be shy around the topic of sex.

Her parents, both scientists, had given both her and Ellie a very factual sex talk when they'd hit their teen years. They'd talked about protection, disease, respect, consent, and then they'd asked if either Ellie or Riley had questions.

The conversation had broken off into two smaller conversations –

Ellie had questions regarding the scientific logistics of sex. Reproductive organs, hormonal balances, the *why* behind physical reactions. Riley had questions about the other stuff. Relationships, emotions, the *why* behind... well, why do it, if not just for a baby? And they were very fortunate to have parents who gave them straight-forward answers, she thought. The answer her mom had told her was that, for consenting people, it was fun.

And in later life, Riley had explored that.

Sex, in her experience, *was* fun.

She hadn't been nervous about having it since her first few times when she'd been seventeen. And even then, she knew when she had been ready and had shown up to her boyfriend's house, condoms in her purse, having already started birth control the month before, and informed him of the fact.

The prospect of having sex with Gianna, however, had her stomach tied

up in knots with an entirely different kind of nerves. She'd woken today already thinking about it, mostly in terms of logistics.

Riley knew, in theory, how to touch a woman, she thought as she absently stirred the cream into her coffee at her desk. She was a woman, so... yeah, she understood the anatomy. But making a woman come seemed harder than making a man come, that seemed obvious. *She* took longer to come than any boyfriend she'd ever had. But, was there a trick?

Maybe the fact that she knew the ins and outs – no pun intended – of Gianna's sexual preferences in the past would be handy – no pun intended. Still...

She unlocked her phone and hesitated for a moment before launching an incognito search. *Best ways to make a woman come.*

"Riley! Hey!" Owen Grady jauntily called to her, waving his hand in front of her as he hopped up to perch against the corner of her desk. He'd formed an irritating habit of doing so.

Riley snapped her head up, as she immediately locked her phone and slammed it down against the desk, heart pumping faster. What the hell was she doing, looking that up at work?

Jesus.

"Owen. Hi." She blew her hair out of her face.

He gave her the smile that had definitely factored into why he had been hired by the network. Not necessarily that *she* found him attractive, just that... he, factually, was. Which, she was aware, sounded awful but it was a trait that most news anchors had going for them.

Riley's central job at BostonNow was specifically tailored to something she was very passionate about – trying to cater the news to a younger audience. She'd attempted to streamline many of her interest stories for the last five years into things that would appeal to young adults, but were still *news*.

The project she'd poured herself into was dedicated to that idea, and was launching at the beginning of March, which meant she had just over two months to get everything in order. She wanted BostonNow to be the first mainstream news network that catered specifically to digital news. That streamed on TikTok and Instagram, about issues that *mattered*.

Owen had been the network's pick to be the primary face of Riley's digital network stream. He would serve as her digital news anchor, therefore, Riley's dreams were on Owen's shoulders.

And that fact very much stressed her out.

“You’re going to hire *that guy* instead of Peter McCoughan?” Joel had lamented as they’d discussed it over lunch during Owen’s hiring process. “Peter is a steal for the station! He’s one of the best anchors in the northeast! And he wants to work with us!”

“I’m not saying it feels good, Joel, but I *am* saying that I’m not in charge!” She’d truthfully insisted. She got to have a seat at the table, regarding who would be hired, but it wasn’t her decision, at all. She was mostly an observer, who got to have minor commentary. “And... even though I don’t *love* Owen, I’m not sure McCoughan would be the best person, either.”

“Peter McCoughan!”

Riley had stared him down. “Joel. Who watches the news?”

He stared back at her, baffled. “Who doesn’t?”

She’d *had* to laugh. It had been Gianna who helpfully supplied the right answer. “Old people. Old people watch the news.”

Joel looked affronted as Riley excitedly dropped her hand on Gianna’s thigh and rubbed in appreciation. “Yes! It’s true. Less than twenty percent of adults ages eighteen to thirty watch their local news. Less than *twenty percent*.” She waved her other hand in the air to exaggerate her point. “Even people aged thirty to fifty, the number jumps to only about thirty-three percent!” Ridiculous. “Did you read the studies I sent you, about how conservative groups attract young members?”

She already knew the answer even before Joel had slowly, guiltily shaken his head.

“Algorithms. Online content. If we want to attract a younger audience and get them *really* informed, we need that! We need something different than what’s already out there. We don’t need Peter McCoughlan, *TV news anchor*. We need... someone, potentially, like Owen Grady.” Someone who was younger, attractive, personable, laid-back.

Since he’d been the official network pick a couple of months ago, Riley had been doing everything in her power to get him ready for what she needed him to be. She spent countless hours prepping him for the minor news stories he covered on the network.

They were doing everything they could, and Owen was – he was *all right*, but...

Owen cleared his throat, and Riley snapped back to attention. “Right,

“Sorry. What can I do for you?”

He looked at her expectantly. “I just wanted to talk about the human interest story.” He frowned at the notes she’d emailed him earlier. “Why’re we doing the short video that focuses more about Governor Spencer’s daughter than about the homes for the holidays initiative he’s working on? I have a good intro I want to try to use for him!”

Right. Work. Work, not googling how to make Gianna come.

The thought made her stomach jump, the knots tangling tighter as heat raced up her neck.

Work.

Riley nodded, regaining her bearings. “Yeah, Spencer’s initiative for winter housing to address the homeless population is obviously very important, and you can use your intro for him – after I vet it – in the longer video,” she directed, taking on what Joel referred to as her Scary Serious Producer Voice. “For the short video, we’re just trying to entice people. We need interesting and snappy and *human*, while keeping it local and informative. So, it’s going to be the part about Sutton Spencer and Charlotte Thompson. People love them, they have huge engagement numbers.”

It was true; the last time they’d featured the couple in a news article, leading into a political piece, the clicks had skyrocketed and subscriptions had improved hand-over-fist.

“But, it’s so much less... I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Serious.”

“It’s a good lead-in to the actual piece, while gaining younger interest,” she reminded him. For maybe the thousandth time. “Because Thompson’s working with Governor Spencer on the initiative.”

“Sure, but, *her* initiative is in New York. This is BostonNow. *Boston*.”

Christ. “And *she* is the one who responded to me and is going on-air in a few weeks for the interview. We’re going with Thompson.”

He acquiesced with a begrudging nod and a sigh, making a few notes to the report on his phone.

The quiet fell between them, and with it, her mind wandered back to tonight as her eyes landed back on her phone.

What should she wear? Like, they weren’t going *out*. This wasn’t a date. Should she wear something... sexy? In general, she enjoyed dressing up a little, especially at the start of something new. It made her feel sexier. Only, would Gianna even care about that? It wasn’t like –

“I didn’t see you at Gianna’s party last night.” Owen was looking back at

her again, previous professional agitation forgotten in his bright-eyed look.

Riley's pulse jumped, as if somehow Owen had read her mind. Which was *insane*, she told herself, shaking her head. "Right, yeah. I left early. Your Saturday schedule starts at noon; mine starts for the early morning broadcast." She frowned up at him in consideration. "I hadn't realized you were there."

Gianna didn't typically foster any sort of relationship with someone who had romantic feelings for her. It made her feel uncomfortable, and she said it gave people false hope. Owen very much fit into that category.

Riley had asked Gianna for a big favor when Owen had been hired – she'd asked Gianna to hang out with Owen for a few weeks. Assess his streaming appeal, his on-screen charisma, give him any tips and tricks for a successful digital launch.

Gianna being Gianna, had sweetly done this for Riley. At the end of a few weeks, she'd reported that Owen could use some work, but that she thought he was passable.

She'd also reported that Owen had ardently and excitedly asked her out, near-pleading her to give him a chance. Even if the chance meant just sex. "*He's attractive, I'll give him that. But that's about it. First and foremost, he works for you and I'm not going to put you in a weird position there.* Secondly, *he says he's totally fine with something casual,*" Gianna had dismissively informed her, her lips pursing as she astutely stated. "*But I know his type. Smooth-talking, good at getting what he wants. A part of him really believes that if we did something casual, I'd end up with feelings for him.*"

From there on out, Gianna and Owen hadn't seen each other more than a handful of times. But Owen's ardor for Gianna seemed as strong as ever.

"Well, I was having a dinner break with Joel a few weeks ago, and she came by to drop off dinner for you. We all ended up talking a bit, then the party came up." He nodded along with what he was saying, the casual tone he was using not being very convincing. It only lasted another few seconds before he broke, bending down so no one would overhear them. "Sorry to ask this at work, but..." Riley could hardly bite back a groan; she knew exactly where this was going.

"Has she, you know, mentioned me?" Owen looked down at her through his lashes as he explained, "We had a good time at the party last night; we did a duet of Jingle Bell Rock, and I have to tell you, I think there was a moment." His slightly crooked smile was bright and hopeful and handsome.

And in looking at it for just a moment, Riley was thrown right back into her current reality.

Here was Owen, desperately hoping to have a second chance at wooing Gianna at the Holiday Spectacular. But it was *her*, of all people, that Gianna had made plans to hook up with.

She could hardly look at him without letting out the strangled laugh that wanted to burst from her throat, at the irony of the situation. Owen, asking her about his chances to be with someone that Riley was going to be with, herself, in only a few hours.

It was madness. Absolute madness.

“I’m sorry. I don’t – I’m not...” She had to force in a deep breath.

The thought made her truly able to stifle her laughter as she looked back at Owen and managed a real, deep breath that somewhat stabilized her.

“First, I’ve told you before, your private life is not something I want to discuss at work. Second...” And infinitely more complicated, she silently added before she reached up and rubbed her temples. “Look. I know you know Gianna doesn’t really *do* dating or relationships.” She nailed him with a look. “I know she told you that.”

She’d heard the spiel Gianna gave to *everyone* before she hooked up with them. A very clear “this is short term, with no strings, and if you don’t want that, then we aren’t going to do this.” But said with a glint in her eye and an authoritative tone, with a smile that wrapped it all up in an enchanting look.

People very rarely did not readily agree.

“I know,” Owen acknowledged, rubbing his hand over his chest. “And I haven’t asked her out, since the first time. I just... I’m hoping...” He trailed off, that moony look in his eyes.

And Riley momentarily felt a small surge of sympathy for him. He was far from the first person who’d fallen for Gianna, despite Gianna warning that any such feelings would be unrequited, and she was one hundred percent certain that he wouldn’t be the last.

The look on Owen’s face when he talked about Gianna was the same one she’d seen on handfuls of men and women alike over the years.

What was new, though, was that it kickstarted a strange feeling deep in her stomach. This feeling that edged along the nerves that had kept her on-edge and daydreaming. An edge that was sharp with curiosity and anticipation in equal measure, one that had her stomach flip-flopping in a much more pleasant way than the anxiety.

After years of seeing this response from Gianna's romantic interests, Riley would see for herself what it was like.

And *that*... well, that was very intriguing, indeed.

CHAPTER 8



S ex.

Sex. With Gianna.

Riley was just repeating the words over and over in her head, bouncing them off each other as she let herself into Gianna's house.

"Hello?" She called out, worrying at her bottom lip as she peeled off her jacket. She took a deep breath, drawing in the home smell, and appreciated the minor work it did to dispel some of the nerves.

She nodded, hyping herself up. She could do this. She *wanted* to do this... at least, to try it.

That acknowledgement in and of itself was nearly enough to bring her to her knees in surprise.

She shook out her hands as that thought played through her head and down into her stomach. Did she want it? She wanted sex. She loved and trusted Gianna. Did her *body* want it? That was the question without an answer.

It was weird to admit that she now had this fascination with something she'd never thought about before only a day ago, but now, it was true.

"Don't overthink it," she whispered to herself, walking deeper into the house. "Just, do what feels good. If it doesn't feel right, you stop."

Just like Gianna had said: not take things too seriously and just have fun together.

Would Gianna be waiting in the bedroom...? For all she knew about Gianna, the literal exact details of what to expect for this moment in specific felt fuzzy.

"Hey!" Gianna shouted back, sounding close. Kitchen?

Her instincts had been right, as she turned into the large, open doorway of Gianna's kitchen. Remodeled to her taste – blue quartz counters with pristine white cabinets – the room was not one Gianna herself used often, which Riley took amusement in. But, as she'd pointedly stated to Riley, "Where would I have learned to cook? Boarding school? The summers in my childhood in Finland with my mummo? Do I have to remind you that Finland isn't known for its cuisine?"

Riley had laughed, because the truth was that it didn't matter to her if Gianna enjoyed cooking or not, because *Riley* did, and she got a lot of miles out of this kitchen. Gianna had pointed *that* out to her as well, victoriously, as she'd planted a smacking kiss on Riley's cheek and had stared down at the first dinner Riley had made in here.

"Just on the phone with Cora," she whispered when Riley walked in, waving said phone around a little. "She got the deal for the shoes all wrapped up today; I'll be done in a few minutes." She shot her an apologetic look. "I know I said I'd have my schedule cleared, though. I'm sorry."

Riley managed to let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She had no idea why she'd expected Gianna to act differently than normal; she'd suggested they fuck with a box full of sex toys and hadn't even blinked about it.

But still, her ease made Riley breathe a little bit easier. "It's totally fine, do whatever you need to do."

"I love Cora to death and, really, she's a dog with a bone when it comes to getting deals. But my god, she does love to tell me every detail." Gianna shrugged, leaning back against the counter, as she looked Riley over.

And Riley didn't ever think she'd flushed when Gianna gave her a once-over – which, she often did, as someone invested in clothes and shoes to the point of making a career out of it – yet, she was now.

She'd left work an hour early. Not only because she'd been unfocused, but because she'd needed to make sure she was ready for the night. Had to make time to get home and shower, shave, generally groom herself – she wasn't necessarily obsessive about these things before every time she had sex with a regular partner, but for the first time, she made an effort.

And would this be *the first time*? Implying that there would be more times? Gianna occasionally had repeat hookups with people, but there was never any guaranteed regularity.

But with the note on the card, Riley had to assume Gianna intended to do

this more than once. Unless she was thinking about having one seriously action-packed night. And the first time Riley was having sex with a woman? That seemed really ambitious.

She hadn't known what exactly to wear. If this was the first time hooking up with someone who, well, wasn't her best friend, someone who had pursued her because they desired her, she'd have gone the whole nine yards.

She enjoyed it; wearing sexy underwear, something that made her feel that extra *something*. Seeing the look on her partner's face when they saw her for the first time.

But, she'd stood staring at her wardrobe earlier, totally unsure. If this was, as Gianna had implied, the two of them just hanging out and having some fun, would it be weird to go the extra mile? Would Gianna care?

Riley had snorted at herself, then, because if there was something she knew about Gianna, it was that she damn well knew Gianna appreciated a well-crafted outfit.

She'd worn a green cold-shoulder sweater that deliberately left a decent portion of her pretty, lacy black bra on display, dipping low enough into her cleavage to show off her breasts, which she'd always felt were one of her best physical attributes.

"You look hot," Gianna finally commented, wolf-whistling.

It was far from the first time Gianna complimented her in such a way, but it was the first time the words made Riley's pulse jump.

She swallowed hard, drawing her eyes over Gianna in much the same way.

The crazy thing was that Gianna looked very much... normal. Dressed down in a way that Riley knew Gianna would only do in her own home. Clothing was Gianna's armor, and she very rarely allowed herself to be vulnerable in front of anyone.

With her hair tossed in a messy bun, minimal makeup, leggings, and a loose hoodie zipped over a bralette, Gianna hadn't "dressed up" but she'd dressed in a way that Riley knew she likely would never have dressed for someone else. Casual. The way she would only dress when she was going to be alone, or with the two of them together.

She looked damn good, if Riley said so herself.

And she did. "You do, too."

Gianna's smile flashed over her face, beautifully, before she exaggeratedly fluffed at her bun. "Yes, I know, very chic."

Riley laughed, sounding a little weird to even herself. Yeah, she didn't think that was going to go away. It was weird, right?

Gianna's smile morphed into a little frown, as she asked, "Did you bring the stuff? Did you pick what you wanted to do first?"

"Right... about that." Riley's nerves had rattled when she'd stared at said gift box and contents before she'd left, making the executive decision to *not*. "You know, for tonight, I just think... maybe it could just be you and me? That's it?"

All right, she could have brought the vibrator. But she knew for a fact Gianna owned several, including the exact model she'd given Riley.

"Okay, whatever you want," Gianna spoke slowly, her voice soothing. She stared at Riley, though, critically, her eyebrows furrowed. "Maybe that's for the best tonight. You really seem a little tense, so—" Her eyes lit up. "Massage time first."

Before Riley could say or do anything, Gianna seconded her own opinion. "You love a good massage. Here," she turned to grab one of her good cabernets from the wine rack. "You take this, go make yourself comfortable, and I'll be there in a minute."

Riley took the bottle, grateful, before absently reaching up and taking two glasses from the hanging wine glass rack. She could do with another minute of thinking this all through.

And a massage really, really did sound *amazing* right about now.

"Deal. And, you should probably get back to that," she teased, gesturing at Gianna's phone that she'd placed down on the counter, Cora's voice coming out of the speaker still. "Might be missing something important."

"Yeah, yeah." Gianna winked, before she grabbed her phone with one hand and used the other to make a shooing motion at Riley. "Go. And *relax!*" She called after her as Riley left the room.

"Relax," she repeated to herself, turning and heading up the stairs to Gianna's bedroom.

It was strange, not heading right to their usual spot on the couch on a night like this.

Those butterflies that faded somewhat in Gianna's presence came right back as she turned the light on.

It wasn't like she'd never been in Gianna's bedroom, before. Their shared dorm in college for two years, plus when Gianna had a much smaller apartment, they hung out in her bedroom relatively frequently. Here, in this

house, they *usually* stayed in the living room or laundry room or kitchen, and she usually slept in the guest room if she was spending the night. She'd been in Gianna's bed for a movie night once or twice, laid on it when discussing Gianna's outfits as Gianna worked her way through her adjacent walk-in closet.

Not like this, though.

She drew in a deep breath and poured herself a glass of wine. She looked over the room, moving slowly, trying to settle. From the artwork on the walls – mainly textured landscapes, as Gianna found them both beautiful and soothing – to the king-size four poster bed, unmade – typical Gianna – with gray sheets that Riley knew for a fact were ridiculously soft, before her gaze landed on the framed photos on Gianna's dresser.

Most of the photos featured her with Gianna – them skiing in Aspen, hiking in Yellowstone, lounging on the beach in the Bahamas.

It was just Gianna. It was just sex.

Two things she greatly enjoyed; it shouldn't be difficult to put them together. She nodded to herself, downing her glass of wine. All right.

If Riley was doing this, she was going to *do it*.

She had everything prepared, the nerves lining in her stomach, also riddled with anticipation, as she surveyed her handiwork five minutes later.

A glass of wine for Gianna on the nightstand, next to the massage oil Gianna had in with her toiletries, she'd found a stash of Gianna's candles and set them up around the room, shutting off the actual light. No, this wasn't a romance or even, necessarily, sex born of sheer desire. But it didn't have to be *nothing*.

And treating this like she would treat any other hookup, gave Riley a sense of control that she appreciated.

"Riley?" Gianna called out from what sounded like downstairs. "Where are you?"

"I'm up here," she shouted back, before she closed her eyes.

And made her final move – Gianna suggested they start tonight with a massage? Riley was certainly not going to object – she reached down and took her shirt off, tossing it onto the dresser, her jeans following it. She hesitated minutely when she was down to her bra... but Gianna had seen her without it before countless times. Sure, it was generally when they were changing, but if tonight continued the way it was supposed to, she'd be doing a lot more than seeing.

She took a deep breath through her nose, trying to dispel these lingering nerves as she put her bra down on top of her sweater, and climbed onto Gianna's bed in her underwear – that was a first. She settled on her stomach, just as Gianna pushed the door open.

"Are you in my bedroom? You—" Gianna's tone was questioning but entertained, and cut off quickly when Riley could hear her footsteps finally cross the threshold.

"I know we don't usually hang out in here, but I just assumed if we were going to do a whole massage, plus—" *everything else*, though Riley was anxious to see what that *everything* would end up being, died as Gianna interrupted.

"Yeah, right! Obviously," her voice was a notch higher than it had been before, then she cleared her throat. "No, it makes perfect sense. And... um, you – you took your clothing off." The words were barely audible, as if they were breathed out.

"Should I have waited?" Was that some sort of a faux-pas? If Riley was being honest, that kind of straight-forward decision making was very common for her during sex. But maybe –

"No! No. I'm the one who brought up the massage, obviously," Gianna spoke quickly, and judging from the lack of movement, she was still standing in the doorway. "Massage. Massage time. I should just grab... oh. You grabbed the oil! And you got the candles going... love the ambiance."

Gianna's typical, light tone finally returned, just the slightest bit off, making the tension Riley could feel moving through her loosen again. "Gi, you know that I don't really do this, so if you had something else in mind—"

"No, no, no. Just, you stay where you are. This is fine. This is good. This is optimal for relaxation."

Riley pursed her lips and blew out a breath, pushing her face against Gianna's sheets as she nodded. In a way, Gianna's sort of off-tone comforted her more than anything else. So, she was finally feeling that this wasn't their *usual*, either. Knowing that she was on the same page as Gianna, that they were both likely feeling the exact same things, that did more for making her relax than anything else might have.

Finally, Riley could hear Gianna move around the room. She heard her walk to the side of the bed with the glass of wine and the oil on the side table, and Riley turned her head to the side to peer at Gianna. Who had taken the wine and was gulping it much the same Riley had drunk her own, her hoodie

riding up her stomach as she tipped her head back with the glass.

A small smile played at her lips as she turned back to press her face against the bed. Yep, definitely on the same page.

She wondered if Gianna was also feeling this anticipatory electricity, too. The one that Riley usually felt when she caught wind of a story to pursue at the station – the wonder of *where will this lead?* It was definitely buzzing through her right now.

The bed dipped and she felt Gianna move toward her, feeling a little shiver move through her. It was just like that feeling. Would the lead turn into nothing? A dud story? Or would it lead to something exciting and worthwhile?

After a pause, she felt Gianna swing her leg over her, so she was straddling Riley's butt, hovering just a bit as she stayed up on her knees. Something she'd done before, whenever they'd done massages – in fairness, full-back massages like this weren't a super common occurrence, Riley didn't ever strip preemptively for them, and they weren't ever done in Gianna's bed with any mood setting.

She could hear Gianna rubbing the massage oil into her hands to warm it, before she placed her hands on Riley's mid-lower back, her palms together at her spine, long fingers curling just around her waist.

"Think of relaxing things," Gianna's voice dipped into a low octave, full of her joking tone. "Waves crashing on the shore. Your anchors listening to the things you tell them. The smell of a freshly baked cookie. Looking at your shoe collection and knowing you have a pair to match every outfit. Me, giving you a massage—"

Riley chuckled with it. "We're getting very meta with this."

Gianna slid her hands up Riley's back in a fluid, firm motion. "All right, well, I ran out of other relaxing things off the top of my head."

She worked the tips of her fingers, using the perfect pressure that Riley liked, down either side of her spine, before pushing them back up, and out toward her shoulder blades, where she dug in her thumbs. She used a lot of pressure, but then again, Riley liked it that way.

Gianna really did have wonderfully magical hands; Riley thought so every time Gianna gave her a massage. Right now, though, she was trying to stay in-tune with her body. With her body's reaction to Gianna.

And, it felt... normal. It felt like Gianna, her best friend, was giving her a massage. A wonderful massage that was already doing some lovely work on

her muscles, but still.

“Okay, I don’t want you in your own head,” Gianna spoke softly as she continued working at Riley’s shoulders. “Tell me... about what you were up cleaning last night while stressing over your life.”

Riley shook her head, brushing her forehead on the sheets. “How do you know I cleaned?” She countered, arching involuntarily up into Gianna’s hands. God, that was so good.

Gianna’s answering laugh was low, seeming to float through the room. “Gee, if only I knew you well enough to know that if you were up at two in the morning, you were power-cleaning something. Some news in the background. A little MSNBC? Maybe some CNN?”

“... CNN,” she admitted.

“Man, I am good,” Gianna laughed again, dragging her fingers down, high-pressure, all the way down to Riley’s lower-back. “Now tell me what you were working on at the station earlier? Anything juicy?”

“Not really,” she admitted. “I was just writing up—”

Riley cut herself off as Gianna slid her hands out from where they were, using a heavy – perfect – pressure, as she slid all the way down Riley’s ribcage. She used her thumbs to rub in circles as her fingertips brushed over the sides of Riley’s breasts, and a heat sparked through her, settling in her stomach.

Her head popped up from where she’d laid it, her heart starting to pound a little harder as she stared blindly at the headboard. “Do that again?”

“What? This?” Gianna repeated the motion, this time moving so her thumbs came all the way down to the sides of Riley’s breasts, rubbing there, as her fingers slid just under Riley. They pressed against the bottom of her breasts, circling over her ribcage, gripping there with a perfect pressure. “Here?”

“Yes. There,” Riley breathed, swallowing thickly.

“Strange place for you to feel tension, but who am I to argue?” Gianna murmured, using that same grip, her hands so warm and so soft as she slid them down from Riley’s breasts, all the way down to her lower hips. Her fingers were under Riley’s belly button, settling just over the top of her underwear.

Black, lacy boyshorts – to match her bra – did very little to disguise the warmth of Gianna’s fingers on her skin.

Her breath shuddered out, because... well, Gianna had never touched her

there. Not in a deliberate, lingering touch like this, and she *felt it*. Heat built in her stomach, not dissipating as Gianna moved her hands back to Riley's back.

And even as she continued the massage as *normal*, it didn't feel anything close to normal, now. She felt... aware.

Aware of how Gianna knew the perfect way to touch her. Aware of just how long her fingers were. Aware of every sliding movement, as she pressed down, all the way down to just above Riley's ass.

She gasped at the sensation, at the way Gianna's touch sent that spark right through her core.

Then she whimpered so softly, as Gianna slid her hands inward from there, along the top of Riley's underwear, fingertips *just* skimming over the material but not dipping under at all. When she got to Riley's sides, she arched her hips up, wanting to feel Gianna's touch, lower. Wanting to *know*.

It was the feeling of chasing down a lead on a story and just getting the first hint of confirmation that something really good was going to come of it. It was a high Riley chased at work, but in physical form.

Her breath left her on a sharp exhale when her arched hips pushed her ass up enough to come into contact with Gianna's center. Hot, even through her leggings, and knowing that? Feeling it, made the lust pulse through her veins, clouding over her thoughts.

Gianna coughed, pushing up higher on her knees to disconnect them as she slid her hands up Riley's back again. "I..."

"Why did you move?" She asked, breathlessly demanding.

She didn't want that. With the thick, hot *truth* of her desire for Gianna settling in, she wanted more than anything the knowledge that it was the same for Gianna, too.

"I didn't..." Gianna trailed off again.

"Don't," Riley told her, positive that the need building inside of her was clear in that single word. She arched her hips up again, wordlessly giving Gianna permission to press herself against her.

She waited, her blood thrumming in hungry anticipation for more, as Gianna slowly settled down on her knees. Truly straddling Riley's ass, pushing herself into her. And through the admittedly sheer underwear she was wearing and Gianna's leggings, she felt it again.

So much heat, and she could hear the low breath Gianna hissed out, and it made Riley's heart *race*. She was starting to feel nearly delirious with it, and

she arched herself up again, this time very much voluntarily.

She'd been worried about this all day. Stressed and anxious and worried that they would be in this position and that she wouldn't feel like this. That no matter how much she found Gianna attractive, no matter how much she wanted to have sex, that it – it wouldn't click.

She did nothing to stop herself from holding back the groan that escaped from the back of her throat as Gianna rested her hands, palm-down, spanning the width of Riley's back, just pressing down for a long moment as she wiggled her hips in a small movement.

Yeah, it was really *clicking*. She laughed, softly, at the wonder of it.

"Something funny, carina?" Gianna asked, the Italian endearment slipping off her tongue.

Gianna loved to refer to people, mostly Riley, with little sweet terms. Babe and honey most often, but if Riley was honest, she enjoyed when Gianna slipped into Italian, the cadence of her bella or carina always sounding inherently... sweeter.

Right now, with the throaty sound of her voice and how it sounded like she was fighting to regain her own breath, it wasn't sweet.

It was fucking hot, and Riley swore she felt it right in her clit.

She was so wet, and Gianna hadn't even *kissed her* yet.

Gianna continued to touch her again, her hands feeling less certain than they did before, as she seemed to struggle with how much to press herself into Riley.

But now, Riley was ready for that kiss.

She wanted it. She wanted Gianna's mouth on hers, she wanted to satisfy *that* curiosity now, too. She knew Gianna's lips were so soft and plush – she'd felt them on her cheeks or in other soft, casual touches, millions of times – but her own lips were tingling from the want to feel them.

She was ready, now.

Riley managed to wiggle – earning a choked whimper from Gianna, that shot through her like lightning – getting just enough leverage to flip herself onto her back, looking up at Gianna. She braced herself on her elbows to prop herself up, biting her lip as she felt Gianna now straddling her hips.

"What—" Gianna cut herself off, her throat bobbing as she swallowed. She darted her eyes down to Riley's chest, where her nipples were *so hard* already. She wanted to be touched, everywhere. "What are—"

"I think it was better to start this way," she stated, feeling her heart pound

harder as she looked into Gianna's eyes, her pupils blown. "You were right."

She didn't know how she would have felt had they started more typically, with a kiss. Maybe she would have gotten into it right away? Maybe she would have still been in her own head? Still, it didn't matter.

"I was..." Gianna still didn't finish a sentence, as she was staring at Riley, with unwavering wide eyes.

"You are definitely a lot more outgoing, usually," Riley whispered, and somehow, the dichotomy of that – that this was one of the only times she'd ever seen Gianna so reticent – made this moment somewhat endearing.

"I–"

This time, it was Riley's fault Gianna couldn't finish her thought process. She arched up and pressed her lips against Gianna's for the first time.

* * *

RILEY WAS surprised by Gianna's kiss, at first.

She loved kissing; there was something inherently so... personal about it, that Riley always thought the way someone kissed said a lot about a person. Everyone was unique in the way they kissed – from the way they tasted, to the feeling of their lips, to the sounds they made, the movements they made with their tongue, how they liked to touch and be touched as it progressed.

At first, kissing Gianna was nothing like Riley had expected it would be. Not that she'd put much thought into it before today, but Gianna was fun and flirty and playful and loved being physical. Riley had assumed that would reflect in the way she kissed.

But in the very start of their kiss, from the moment Riley's lips brushed Gianna's, her mouth – those sweet, lush lips – were still and firmer than she'd expected. She could taste the wine on Gianna's lips, as she darted her tongue out to get a better taste, sighing at it.

She tilted her head, wondering... was this always how Gianna kissed? She lightly pulled Gianna's bottom lip between hers, then brushed her lips over Gianna's again. It was far less assertive than she'd imagined, she thought, starting to frown as she pulled back.

Only an inch, hazel eyes blinking open, as she braced one hand on Gianna's bed and brought the other up, scratching down Gianna's neck. Just a questing, questioning touch against soft skin. "Are–"

That was all she got out, before a moan tore itself from Gianna's throat, and Gianna surged forward to connect their mouths, again. The sound was deep and guttural and almost helpless, was the best way Riley could characterize it, and it matched the new intensity in Gianna's kiss.

Riley found herself breathless, literally, as the momentum Gianna had used to push herself forward knocked Riley right off of the hand she'd been using to hold herself up, falling onto her back. She was dimly aware of the sound of Gianna's hands landing onto the mattress on either side of Riley's head, but she was mostly aware of the yes.

This was what she'd thought it would be like.

Gianna brushed her lips over Riley's as if tasting, savoring, twice, before coaxing Riley's mouth open and dipping in to taste her. Riley met her questing tongue with her own, breathing out a sigh as her lips tingled.

The heat that built between them, that sparked through her, only increased as Gianna's entire body pressed against her own, and Riley – she'd seen every inch of Gianna's body before, had cuddled and hugged her, but it didn't feel like this.

The way Gianna draped over her, shifting and pressing closer, so close, making another one of those little whimpers into Riley's mouth, tensing her thighs around Riley's hips.

After the last half hour, it didn't surprise Riley that kissing Gianna made the *want* pound through her even more intensely, and she pressed her hips up even harder into Gianna's, needing more.

The cold zipper on Gianna's hoodie pressed against her stomach, making her shiver, and, yeah, Riley was ready for this to be gone. She knew what Gianna looked like, knew the flat, toned muscles of her stomach, knew the curve of her waist, she *knew* it. But, fuck, for the first time ever she wanted to feel it. She wanted to see it like this, while she was hungry for her.

She reached up, not separating her mouth from Gianna's, landing her hand on Gianna's hip, before sliding it inward, searching for that zipper.

Her fingers connected with the metal, already warming from their bodies, and... she couldn't help herself from brushing the tips of her fingers against the soft, warm skin of Gianna's stomach, just under her bralette. She –

She was panting, confused and startled, as Gianna pulled back from her just as intently as she'd kissed her minutes ago. Blinking her eyes open, she looked up at Gianna, who was still hovering above her. Her eyes were open wide, the baby blue seeming so much darker right now, as she stared

questioningly into Riley's eyes, before darting her gaze down to Riley's lips, then down to the hand Riley still had on her hoodie.

Grasping, now, reflexively as Gianna had started to pull away. Feeling her heart hammering, her desire giving way into concern, she pressed that hand softly against Gianna's stomach. "Gianna?"

At the sound of her voice, Gianna pushed herself up completely, sitting back on her knees, her hand flying up to rest on her mouth. "What is happening?"

Baffled, Riley's stomach twisted. "I – was that not okay?"

"What?" Gianna rasped, still muffled behind her hand. As if Riley was about to attack her mouth or something. "Riley, you just *kissed me*."

Her tone didn't sound angry or accusing, but definitely as confused as Riley was starting to feel, and she stared at Gianna for several long moments from where she still lay on the bed. The intense heat between her thighs already started to cool rapidly at the shifting tone, and she reached back to use her hands to push herself upright again.

At her movement, Gianna seemed to become aware that she was still straddling her. Quickly, she scooted off, allowing Riley to fully sit up and face her.

"I... did," she agreed cautiously. "But, was that not supposed to happen? Is this like a *Pretty Woman* situation, without the money?" She tried to joke, but really, what the fuck? She tentatively tried to smile, even as her stomach churned and she really couldn't shake the awful feeling that she'd done something really wrong, here.

"What are you talking about!" Gianna's voice hit a nearly hysterical note, her eyebrows lifting high on her forehead. Her hand was no longer completely covering her mouth, as she dragged it through her hair, seemingly forgetting that she'd had her hair up.

She looked so overwhelmed, and Riley had no freaking clue what to do about it.

All she did know was that a sense of embarrassment was starting to creep up her stomach, a similar feeling of bewilderment clawing at her. She shifted to sit up higher so she could really get Gianna to make eye-contact. What if this had been the same thing for Gianna? If she hadn't been sure she'd have enjoyed tonight, either, and had suggested it, but then realized as soon as Riley had made contact with her that it wasn't something she wanted?

Her stomach sank with the thought, even as she tried to push it back and

away. Because even if it was the case, it definitely didn't explain everything going on. And she definitely didn't know how to manage the swift and unexpected disappointment that welled up at the idea that *she'd* been so into something that wasn't reciprocated.

"Gianna, the *gift*," she arched her eyebrows, knowingly. "The note you wrote me?"

"You didn't even bring the gift tonight! What in the world is going on?" Gianna demanded, but seemingly less demanding of *her*, and more, as she'd said, of the world at large.

Riley could only stare at her, like – was this some sort of insane joke?

"What does the gift even have to do with... this?" Gianna asked, gesturing between them, wide-eyed.

Riley's mouth fell open, incredulous. "You think I'd let you fuck me with a strap-on if we didn't even kiss?"

"What?!" The word *would* have been a scream, Riley knew it. If it didn't sound like Gianna could do anything more than gasp, that was.

They stared at each other in the candle-lit room, for several moments, Riley feeling... honestly, she wasn't even sure how to describe it all. Confusion topped the list, but nothing else felt good, either. Turned on, but that was rapidly fading, disappointed, a whole ugly tangle inside of her stomach.

"Well, okay, I don't know if you expected me to fuck *you* with it. I mean, I obviously assume the ties were for you and not me, because we both know I don't love that, but – Gianna, I wouldn't have wanted to do *that* without kissing first, either?"

Riley really hadn't known how tonight would have turned out, but in none of the scenarios that had been playing on her mind all day was it like this.

Gianna's mouth opened once, then twice, before she shook her head. "I didn't *get you* either of those things."

All right, now Riley's world felt like it was slowly tilting, as she mirrored Gianna and shook her head back. "No... you *did*. And a vibrator. And a blindfold. And–"

"Nipple clamps," Gianna breathed the word out, her face paling, then blushing. Vibrantly blushing, and Riley had never, *not once*, seen Gianna blush. "And I said..." She swallowed hard. "We should, uh, we should do it together."

"Yes! You did!" On the one hand made Riley feel like she wasn't going crazy, but on the other hand, the look on Gianna's face really wasn't making the sickening feeling working its way through her any better.

"Oh my god," Gianna slapped her palms over her face, groaning into them. "The fucking *gifts*!"

"What do you m—" She broke off, belatedly realizing what Gianna meant. She'd said right when Riley had arrived at her holiday party that the gifts had gotten mixed-up in transport. That she'd had to affix cards to different boxes, and – "You're kidding me."

"I'm really not," Gianna peeled her hands down, away from her eyes. "I... that box that your card was on, it was for Athena. Those... items... were for her."

Athena. The sex goddess. Yep. That made sense.

Riley's entire face, chest, and neck felt like they were on fire, and she stared back at Gianna.

In the darkened room, massage oil and wine on the table next to them, and... in tandem, they both broke down into laughter.

She couldn't handle it, really. She'd been *terrified* of this all day, and, "I was so confused," she admitted, barely able to breathe right from how hard she laughed.

"Me too! You were acting *so weird*." Gianna buried her face into her hands once more, her shoulders shaking with the giggles wracking her body.

"Can you blame me?" She shot back, sliding her hands up and down her thighs.

Her laughter subsided as she looked down at herself to be reminded that... she was fucking *naked*. As good as, anyway, in just some lacy underwear. That were soaked. Because she'd climbed into Gianna's bed and kissed her, and thought they were going to have sex, and she'd been on the journey of being very, very ready for that.

The reminder sobered her, and she shivered. From both the situation and starting to feel a little chilly now that they weren't touching and there was no heat sparking through her.

Gianna's laughter abruptly ended as well, and she shed her sweatshirt, handing it to Riley, as she looked down at Riley's body and then snapped her gaze back up. Just like she had, earlier. Only, now it made total sense why she wasn't looking. "Here."

Mortified, Riley took the sweatshirt and quickly zipped it, fingers toying

at the ends of the sleeves as a way to rid herself of this nervous energy.

“You kissed me,” Gianna repeated from minutes ago, this time soft. Her fingers went to her lips, like before, but instead of her whole hand covering her mouth, it was just her fingertips. Just her fingertips, shaking slightly, as they pressed against her bottom lip.

“I’m so sorry,” the words bubbled up, quiet and she *meant them*, because... “Jesus, I am so sorry, Gianna.” She reached out and laid her hand on the one Gianna had resting on her thigh, squeezing. Seriously, I – I never would have...” she trailed off, gesturing to, well, herself.

But, *fuck*, she’d stripped and laid in Gianna’s bed and pressed her ass against her and essentially made Gianna feel her up while she’d been giving her a massage, and then had *kissed her*? She’d violated Gianna, when it came down to it.

And that feeling, the horrible feeling, overtook her embarrassment, easily.

She tugged on Gianna’s hand, needing her to know how much Riley meant her apology. “But, seriously, Gianna, I... I wouldn’t have just done all that, without... I thought...” She trailed off, helplessly.

Out of the many, many situations she and Gianna had found themselves in over the last decade, something like this had never been on the list.

Gianna turned to face her, quickly, flipping her hand over to grab at Riley’s intently. “Riley, this is *my* fault, you shouldn’t apologize. I gave you the gift. I told you to come over. I offered the massage. *I’m* sorry. That’s – I – what you must have been thinking...”

She shook her head, eyebrows furrowing and setting into a deep frown. Which, Riley definitely did not enjoy. “Hey, at least after the... the kiss you looked as confused as I’d felt since last night.”

Gianna’s lips quirked into the smallest smile, underneath her fingertips, which were still resting on her mouth.

Riley couldn’t help but then stare at her mouth, then, once more. Thankfully, Gianna wasn’t upset about everything, and, thankfully, all that left Riley with was the embarrassment still lingering. She’d kissed Gianna – had been very, very into kissing Gianna, as a matter of fact. And not only that, but...

“You kissed me back,” she voiced the thoughts as soon as they hit her, breathing them out. Her gaze flew back to Gianna’s, questioning.

Gianna stared at her, eyes wide, and Riley could see her swallow hard, before she felt her hand squeeze Riley’s again. She swallowed again. “Yeah.

I did.” The admittance sounded shaky, light. As if she was confessing to something that Riley didn’t already know.

“Gianna Mäkinen,” Riley had always enjoyed stating Gianna’s full name, and right now felt like as good a time as any to do so, teasingly. Especially because Gianna seemed like she was confessing to a crime. “Are you attracted to me?”

Gianna’s eyes met hers again, something in them soft and melting. Still, though, she nodded. “I’m attracted to you, yes.” And with the words, she seemed to gain back some of her regular confidence, her shoulders straightening, some of that languid ease filtering back into her movements.

Which she loved to see. And even though *she’d* been the one to say it, Gianna’s ownership of her attraction made Riley swallow hard. More than anything, she was... kind of amazed, if she was being honest.

“You’re attracted to me,” she repeated, tasting the feeling of the words on her lips.

“Obviously,” Gianna said, her voice sounding much more confident now, the word rolling off her tongue as if Riley was a fool for *not* knowing.

She could only stare at her for several seconds. Gianna no-middle-name Mäkinen was *attracted to her*. Gianna, who Riley often thought of as, physically, a goddess amongst mere mortals, harbored an attraction to her? “You never said anything? For how long?”

Gianna’s smile was bright as she rolled her eyes. “At what point in twelve years should I have looked at you and said, *hey... I think you’re very fuckable?*”

Riley’s heart slammed into her ribs with the words, even as she choked out a laugh. “Okay, fine. I see your point.” She toyed with the sleeves of Gianna’s soft hoodie again, the niggling sensation tugging at her stomach about just how *weird* things had been for the last day. Weird in a way they’d never been, between them. And she just needed to make sure...

“Hey,” she spoke, her voice gentle. Gianna looked down at her. “We’re still us, right? Like,” she had to clear her throat as she used her free hand to gesture to the bed and then to herself. “This doesn’t change anything?”

The immediately ludicrous look that crossed Gianna’s face was entirely genuine, and went a long way to soothe that worry away. “Come on, you can’t really think it would.”

Riley shrugged, the uncertainty of it settling, mostly. “I mean, not really.”

And, she didn’t. Because if there was a certainty Riley just *knew*, it was

that if Gianna ever called, she would answer. If Gianna needed her, she'd be here. Even if she didn't ask. And she didn't believe for a fucking second it wasn't the same for Gianna.

Still, she stared doubtfully at Gianna, biting her own lip as she pointed out. "You're still touching your lips, though."

And Gianna was. That touch, the one that looked so delicate, just pressing at the plush center of her bottom lip was still there. It had stayed there even as she'd spoken, as she'd laughed. Almost like she wasn't even aware she was still doing it, and yet, there she was.

Gianna made a little show of quirking her eyebrow and dropping her hand into her lap. "Riley... nothing is going to ever change you and me. Not even this. Not even..." was Gianna blushing *again*? Twice in one night? Then again... Riley was still pantsless and could use a different pair of underwear so... she could give her a big pass. "Not even if we'd had sex. Nothing."

The *passion* with which she said it mirrored what Riley herself felt about it, and she let out a deep breath, her shoulders relaxing. "Okay. Thank god. Who else would do my laundry with me?"

"Who else would let me steal their sweatshirt?"

"I don't *let* you."

"You don't really *stop* me," Gianna pointed out, and – fine. She had a point there. Riley didn't ever *really* try to stop her.

They leaned in together, the way they usually did when they sat close together and just *talked*, their shoulders pressing together, Riley's bare thigh pressed against Gianna's legging-clad one. And there was such a comfort in it.

It was only in that moment, where things felt like they slowed down enough for her to *think*, that she realized...

"So, what was in my actual gift?" She turned to look up at Gianna, curious.

"Huh?" Gianna asked, blinking down at her, as if she'd also been in her own head. Which was fair, given... everything.

"I mean, this happened because you gave me a gift," Riley explained, feeling herself annoyingly blush again, even as she let out a little, embarrassed chuckle. "So, I just thought – what was the real gift?"

Understanding dawned on Gianna, as she nodded. "Oh. Right." A sweet, charming smile slid over her face as she looked at Riley. "It was just the stuff you'd mentioned last week. A starter sewing kit, a sourdough starter, an

appointment to take pictures for a custom Christmas card. I found a place for us to even try skydiving together. In better weather, obviously," Gianna elaborated and shrugged, her shoulder jostling into Riley's with it. Her grin turned wry, teasing. "As I said on the card and via text, I was trying to make you feel *heard*."

Riley laugh-groaned, her stomach easily twisting into knots again at... everything that had happened from those messages. Then she frowned as she realized, "Gianna! All of that stuff must have cost a *fortune*. Skydiving?!"

"You weren't upset about the cost of the sex toys and those are some high quality items!"

"Because I was too preoccupied to consider the cost," she retorted, dead serious. She'd been very much not in the headspace to consider that when she'd been googling how to make Gianna come.

"Riley, babe, let me treat you to some things, okay? What's the point in being successful if I don't get to shower you in luxury with me?" Gianna reasoned, giving Riley those big, imploring eyes that... fine, she couldn't be upset at, not really.

She was still smiling as she turned to look at Gianna, shaking her head. "Okay. It's kind of difficult to argue with that." She was quiet for a moment before she pointed out, "Although... if we stick to the no gift rule – none of it would have happened."

She didn't expect the snort of laughter that escaped Gianna a second later, the sound light and vibrant and already making Riley smile, then laugh herself.

They giggled together, falling into one another, before Gianna gasped and snapped her head up.

Alarmed, Riley's laughter died off as she asked, "What's going on?"

She lifted her hand back up to cover her mouth as she started to laugh again, her eyes meeting Riley's. "Oh my god. Athena opening *her* gift might be even more confused than you were."

She pictured it, and... yeah, her own laughter burst from her as she fell into Gianna's side.

Thank god that things could still be normal.

CHAPTER 9



*F*ebruary, Freshman Year

GOING cold turkey from being a Mean Girl wasn't the easiest thing in the world, but Gianna was making a concentrated effort.

And, true to form, Riley was with her every step of the way.

She offered to have meals with Gianna all of the time, so Gianna wasn't alone. And Riley always seemed to have a good time with Gianna, so she never actually felt like it was a pity-invite. She helped teach Gianna how to do her laundry, because, "All right, it's not, like *mean* that you pay the girl down the hall to do your laundry, but... it's weird." She went to the library with Gianna and helped her work out a study schedule.

It wasn't exactly *easy* to change a lot of facets about her life so quickly, but Gianna found that... she wanted it.

She liked it. She liked the way she felt about herself, when she did something nice.

And she really liked the way Riley looked at her, too.

She clung to that, whenever she bit back a rude comment or when she wanted to resort to flirting a little to manipulating a situation. She clung to the bright look Riley gave her.

All-in-all, Gianna was doing well, if she did say so herself. She followed Riley's lead, and her instincts, and everything made sense.

Except for right now.

"Riley, why are you trying to hand me those sweatshop-made cheap

cotton blends?” Gianna grimaced down at the clothing Riley was holding out to her. She narrowed her eyes, looking closer. “Is that… a *sweatsuit*?”

A shudder came over her with the words.

Riley laughed even as she rolled her eyes. “Honestly, you’re welcome. This is a pre-emptive gift that you’re going to thank me for, later.” She, again, pushed the clothing toward Gianna.

Thank her? Gianna fucking doubted that. She stared down at the clothing skeptically, still not touching them.

“What do you want me to *do* with these… garments?”

Riley stared at her, dubiously. “Wear them.” She gestured at herself, as she wore her own maroon Boston University sweatshirt and black joggers. “You know, the way one does. With clothing.”

Gianna blanched, looking at her wardrobe, longingly. “Riley, what is hanging in my closet is *clothing*. What these are…” she trailed off with a shrug.

But Riley didn’t give up, pushing the clothes at Gianna. “Do you realize that every time we spend a night in, you always wear your real clothing? Like. You wear jeans or slacks and the admittedly very fashionable clothing in your closet, all night. Even here, in our own room, when it’s just the two of us. Which,” she gave Gianna a beseeching look, “is the case almost every night, these days.”

Riley wasn’t *wrong*. Gianna diligently spent most evenings hanging out with Riley, here. They watched shows together, did their homework together. Sometimes Gianna would attempt to teach Riley either Finnish or Italian, and they would laugh about that, together.

“I just want you to actually be *comfortable*,” Riley insisted, pushing the sweatshirt and joggers at Gianna, again.

“I’m comfortable in my clothing,” she pushed the clothing gently back toward Riley.

Who sighed, pursing her lips as she eyed Gianna closely. “Do you own anything that isn’t so… form-fitting?”

“I have a great form,” she shot back, holding her head high. There was nothing wrong with enjoying her body and wanting to dress well. In fact, Gianna would say it was one of her best qualities.

“You do,” Riley agreed, easily. “But don’t you ever just want to, like, veg out?”

Gianna instantly frowned at the term. Ew.

Riley laughed again, bright and unstoppable. “Just wear them this *once*. Just tonight, with me. No one else will see you. I won’t try to sneak a pic and sell it to the highest bidder. If you totally hate it, you can go back to wearing your designer, form-fitting clothing, even when you’re alone, watching a movie in bed.”

She inhaled, slowly and deeply, mulling over Riley’s words. Riley hadn’t led her astray yet, she supposed, and reluctantly took the clothing. “Just this once,” she warned.

She put the clothing down gingerly on her desk as she stripped off her shirt and then her pants.

“Bra, too,” Riley advised.

Gianna paused, critically eyeing Riley’s chest. “Are you not wearing a bra under there?”

Riley merely shook her head. “If we’re just hanging out here, alone, and I’m wearing my comfy clothing, usually no.”

Interesting, because she’d made note several times since living with Riley that Riley’s breasts were a little larger than Gianna’s own. Very supple, very generous. Huh.

All right, then. Gianna took her own bra off, too.

She tugged on the sweatpants, before reaching for the shirt. And she grimaced again at the feel of it. The cheap fabric was new, a little scratchy against her fingers.

She cut her eyes back to Riley, taking in the Boston University sweatshirt adorning Riley’s body. Riley wore it often, and it certainly *looked* very soft. Far softer and more comfortable than the one Gianna was holding…

“Trade me?” She requested, eyes wide and hopeful as she offered Riley the new one. “Yours looks more comfortable.”

Riley’s expression slid from incredulous to confused to resigned within seconds, before she reached down and pulled her top off.

Gianna couldn’t help but glance, and – yes. Riley was, indeed, bra-less under there. The sight made her throat run dry.

Only for a few seconds, before she blinked herself out of it, and traded shirts. “Not sure if I’ve ever told you think, but you have *great* tits,” Gianna said, as she tugged Riley’s sweatshirt on.

Riley huffed out a laugh, pulling the sweatshirt she’d bought for Gianna down onto herself. “Coming from you, whose body looks like it was sculpted by gods, that means a lot.”

A pleasant, heady warmth settled through Gianna with the compliment. It wasn't like she hadn't heard similar, many times, but... it meant more from Riley.

"Well? How do you feel?" Riley prompted, gesturing at Gianna's new outfit.

"Weird," she admitted, honestly, as she wiggled her arms in the sleeves of the sweatshirt.

The truth was that she didn't remember the last time she'd worn something so... loose. The pants had an elastic waistband for Christ's sake. She couldn't help but look behind Riley, into the full-length mirror they had between their wardrobes. The sight made her frown; she looked weirdly shapeless.

"Bad weird?" Riley asked, sounding cautious.

Gianna held back the automatic *yes* that tried to come out.

She tilted her head, considering herself in the mirror. Maybe it wasn't too bad.

Especially, as she cut her gaze to Riley, because Riley was wearing the same thing. And she often did, on nights she spent just hanging out in their room. And she never thought Riley looked bad.

In fact, as she studied Riley, she looked cute.

Riley's sweatshirt – the one Gianna was wearing – was a size bigger than the one Riley had purchased for Gianna. But the one she bought for Gianna still sat a little baggy on her frame, with the sleeves pushed up to her elbows, and she looked – adorable, frankly.

Gianna turned her gaze back to the mirror and herself, lips tugging to the side in thought.

Yeah, she didn't see the same thing as she saw when she looked at Riley – she definitely didn't think she wore *cute* the same way. But... "It's not horrific," she allowed. She wiggled her arms again, nodding, "And it *is* comfortable."

Taking Riley's sweatshirt had been a good call; it was extremely soft. Even if she didn't love the way it looked, she did think she loved the way it felt. And it smelled great, too, so that was a bonus.

Gianna nodded. She could – potentially – get used to that. On nights in, just the two of them, of course.

Riley's smile was victorious. "Okay, now, for the makeup."

Baffled and appalled, Gianna reared back. "Excuse you?"

The bafflement on Riley's own face was clear as day. "Gianna, *why* should you wear a full face of makeup while we're sitting in our room, by ourselves, in sweats, watching movies together?"

"Why are you so judgey about it?" She shot back, feeling inexplicably but strongly defensive. "I literally see you put on makeup every day, and..." She eyed Riley's hair, knowing she had a winning card up her sleeve. It was luscious and thick and looked incredibly soft, but that wasn't the point. "I know your hair is naturally curly and that you get it done at the salon to straighten it into submission. So, I know you're not, like, all about *only natural* beauty, or whatever."

"Yes, I wear makeup and I get my hair done; I'm not being *judgey*," She acknowledged, arching an eyebrow at Gianna. "I think doing those things can be fun, they make me feel good; it's *good* to do the things that make you feel confident."

Gianna gestured at Riley, silently stressing, *Exactly*.

"But," Riley switched into her softly stern voice. Almost like a lecture, but more personal. "I don't do it when we're here, just you and I, having a night in to watch tv. Do I?"

Gianna looked closely at Riley, even though she knew Riley was telling the truth.

"All I'm saying is, when you're going out or even just going to class, dressing in whatever you want to wear and wearing however much makeup you want – is great. You should do that." Riley's eyes were wide, demanding Gianna get lost in them, as she said, "But when it's only us, hanging out together, here, we can just *be*. The most basic, natural forms of ourselves."

Gianna stared at Riley, feeling strangely moved by her words. Like... like she wanted to be able to just *be*. Or to at least see what it was like. She then angled her head again to see herself in the mirror. It wasn't like she caked on makeup; she wasn't an amateur. She expertly wore her foundation, mascara, eyeliner, and lipstick – subtle enough that it accentuated her features without being obvious.

Just the way her mom had taught her when she'd been eleven and desperately pouring over all of her cosmetics Gianna had stayed with her parents for a few weeks that summer. And she'd worn it ever since. It was a form of armor, she'd learned growing up so adjacent to the fashion world.

The idea of someone – anyone – seeing her entirely bare, without any of her makeup, any of the enhancers she'd been taught to use, any of her *armor*

made her queasy.

Then again, she nodded at herself, maybe that was why she needed to do it? That's what she was all about now, right? Growth?

She bit the inside of her cheek, took a deep breath through her nose, and nodded.

Riley led her to her vanity and guided her to sit down; somehow, without words, Gianna felt like Riley understood how big of a deal this was for her.

With gentle movements of her makeup wipes, she removed the makeup from Gianna's face.

And... it felt... *strange*. Terrifying yet comforting, all at once.

Riley's fingers on her jaw were warm and firm without being commanding. The hand she used to wipe Gianna's makeup off with used soft strokes, and she'd smooth her fingertips lightly over her clean, bare skin as she went. Delicate touches over Gianna's cheeks, her jaw, her eyelids.

It felt – so – so nice, in a way that she didn't think she'd ever felt before. Not in a very long time, anyway.

Riley's touch was so soft and sweet that it made her – ridiculously – want to cry.

Because it was very apparent to Gianna in this moment, that there had never been anyone else like this in her life. There hadn't been anyone who'd been so deliberate and careful with Gianna in *years*, not her friends, not boyfriends, not her parents.

"There," Riley said softly, stroking her hand gently down Gianna's jaw, before stepping back.

Gianna sniffed and breathed in and out several times to pull herself together, because she *refused* to shed any real tears over this.

She braced herself as she opened her eyes, squinting at first, from the raw nerves. She couldn't remember the last time she'd taken off her makeup for any other reason than to sleep, and even then, she wore a moisturizing face mask.

There hadn't been a time since she'd become a teenager that she'd had any plans to spend time with *anyone*, including herself, without her armor on.

But she couldn't sit here like a fucking moron with her eyes closed anymore, either. Slowly, she blinked them open.

She knew what she looked like, obviously – she *did* see her own face every single day, as a blank canvas before applying her makeup. It wasn't like she was a beast; Gianna knew she was attractive.

It just felt... strange. It went against everything she'd believed about herself, the entire image she'd built for the last seven years.

Riley now stood behind her, stooped down so that her head was angled over Gianna's shoulder.

She smiled sweetly, triumphantly in the mirror at their reflections. "Not too bad, huh?"

Gianna moved her gaze from her own face to Riley's.

She saw Riley without makeup regularly, because – hence this exercise – Riley didn't wear it if she was just spending time in their room. But Gianna didn't usually take a close look – honestly, because she normally put a lot more stock into how *anyone* looked when they were going out and put together.

But... Riley looked good. Really good.

No, the hazel of her eyes wasn't as accentuated as it was when she had on her smokey eyeshadow – which, for the record, Gianna admired and appreciated that Riley knew her best colors and how to properly apply it. And yes, the sharpness of her cheeks was lessened a bit, just a little rounder, without the helpful contour of foundation. Her lips didn't *pop* as they did with her typical gloss, but – they looked so... soft. Maybe her lips looked even better, now. Gianna wasn't sure.

"Not bad at all," she murmured.

Riley's smile was so bright in the reflection, Gianna refocused to take them both in, and she found herself truly, genuinely smiling back.

CHAPTER 10



“Owen’s done in five, then we’re cutting to traffic,” Riley muttered under her breath, keeping a peripheral view on the mainstage as she started sifting through her emails.

On one hand, being super busy throughout the holidays could be annoying. Missing or being late to family/friend events, having to work at the station on literal holidays because the news waited for no one, having to cover new stories about horrific things happening to people while much of the population was having a great time.

On the other hand, being super busy continued to be a blessing; she was still too occupied by work to actually deal with any developments in her personal life.

For example, if she’d nearly hooked up with her best friend three days ago and they were still recalibrating back to normality.

And, it *was* normal, Riley assured herself, with a slight nod to bring her back to reality, as she opened an email to draft a response regarding an upcoming story.

Gianna had texted her Monday morning – totally casual, typical – making a joke about one of the guys they’d gone to college with who’d reached out to Gianna in an attempt to have her advertise his new cologne brand. “It smells like... pennies,” Gianna had said, and Riley had dissolved into laughter.

They’d talked Tuesday on the phone for an hour, through Riley’s lunch, because she’d needed to work through her meeting with the network execs who were giving some pushback against her social media launch, and no one gave her feedback the way Gianna did. Ellie was, admittedly, not a great barometer for interpersonal meetings, Joel didn’t work well in wheeling and

dealing with higher-ups and could be a little too pushy. Gianna walked a perfect line of being honest with Riley, but supportive at the same time.

It was all – blessedly – *normal*.

Gianna made not one reference to Riley's Great Misunderstanding. Well, in fairness, it was technically *both* of their misunderstandings. Given that Gianna had been the one to give her the box of assorted sex toys and a card that implied they use them together, and all.

Riley scoffed an unstoppable laugh under her breath. So ridiculous. They'd *both* just been idiots the other night.

Which was such a relief. It was a relief that they were good enough friends that they could just walk away from that night with a laugh and a good story and – well, and the knowledge that Gianna was attracted to her, but that was neither here nor there.

Everything – work, Gianna, life – was good and normal.

"Hard at work, as always," Gianna's voice came to her, teasing.

Riley jerked her head up from her computer, surprise and confusion tangling together, as she swiveled to face where her voice had come from.

And there she was. Striding right across the floor, looking flawlessly wind-tousled in her wool Burberry trench. Unerringly, Riley found herself smiling in spite of her confusion. Because it *felt* normal, seeing Gianna.

The typical happy, calm feeling.

What a fucking relief.

"What are you doing here?"

Gianna neglected to answer the question. "For someone who loves to give her sister shit about working too much, *you* have been at work for over ten hours today." She placed her Birkin bag on Riley's desk, before she nudged it to the side with her hip and settled onto the edge, herself.

"It's that time of year," she countered. "The holidays truly bring out the best in people and the news never sleeps."

And she had her social media launch coming alarmingly fast, the face of which was seeming increasingly incapable of handling the matter with success, all the while she was still managing day-to-day operations in her purview.

"Be that as it may, you still need to eat." Gianna gave her a look of mock-disapproval as she reached into her purse and pulled out a paper bag, crisply folded at the top.

It wasn't until that moment that Riley actually *felt* hungry, and she flicked

her eyes to the clock on her computer screen.

“It’s after six. I’d be willing to bet you worked through lunch, so you haven’t eaten since...” Gianna pursed her lips together in thought as she unpacked the food, pulling out a couple of containers from Zhao’s, their favorite Chinese place. “You ate... cereal, this morning?”

“A breakfast burrito from the café downstairs,” she conceded, brandishing her fork at Gianna. “I ran out of Cheerios two days ago, and haven’t had time to refill.”

Normally, she made regularly planned trips to the grocery store. Once a week, usually on Sundays.

She’d been a little pre-occupied on Sunday.

“Luckily, you have me to bring you dinner.” Gianna opened the container with the soup dumplings, which Riley gratefully took as she felt her stomach rumbling.

Gianna waited for her to take a bite before she said, “After all, I take half of the responsibility that you didn’t get your Sunday shopping done.”

Riley choked on her dumpling, laughter and embarrassment both welling up, as she pushed at Gianna’s leg.

She had to take a few extra seconds to chew properly before she *really* choked and she nodded. “Right, so you came all the way here to bring me dinner and make jokes about my grocery shopping habit?”

At first, Gianna levelly held her gaze. “Maybe I did.”

Riley stared back, narrowing her eyes and studying Gianna until her friend conceded on a lofty sigh.

“Okay, not *just* for that, detective,” she admitted. “First priority was to bring you dinner – that’s true. Second priority was to bring our little tech nerd that camera I’ve been having problems with, so he can fix it while I’m away.”

Away? Riley paused mid-bite, staring at Gianna as she attempted to fill in the dots. It dawned on her a second later. “You’re going to L.A.”

Gianna broke out in a grin as she nodded. “Nailed it. Rubbing elbows with the big-wigs over the holidays.”

“Mhmm, being such a big-shot,” Riley agreed as soon as she finished her dumpling.

She’d known about the trip since it had been scheduled, a couple of months ago. Riley had encouraged Gianna to go, despite the fact that they typically spent the holidays together ever since college. It made sense, given that Gianna’s parents lived in a different continent and didn’t ever try to

make an effort with Gianna, anyway.

“Cora is just dying for me to *strengthen my West Coast connections*, despite knowing how resolute I am to being an East Coast woman,” Gianna recited, pulling a face at the thought.

While Riley very much appreciated the care and dedication with which Cora approached Gianna’s career, she did not love that ever since she’d started working with Gianna six months ago, Cora was also very interested in getting Gianna to relocate to the West Coast.

Riley wanted the best for Gianna and her career, and if that meant the West Coast, Riley would do her best friend duty and support her. More than anything, though, she was grateful that Gianna seemed to have no interest in leaving.

“You said you were excited for some of the holiday parties,” Riley countered. Gianna *had*, which had been the main reason Riley had encouraged her to go.

The term *holiday parties*, however, gave Riley pause, awareness shooting down her spine as she thought about the last holiday party she’d been to. Just like that, she couldn’t hear a word of Gianna’s response as the blood pulsed through her veins so strongly, it was all she could hear.

It took her several seconds to be able to push out, “Do you want my... gifts back?”

Gianna paused, tilting her head to the side as she stared at Riley over her lo-mein. “Huh?”

Refusing to elaborate in detail, because Riley knew for a fact that someone was always listening at the station, she stared intently into those big, blue eyes. “My *gifts*,” she emphasized. “Do you want them back? To give to Athena? Given that we – *I*,” she quickly corrected, strange nerves fluttering through her stomach, “Didn’t, uh... use them.”

“Ohhhh,” Gianna drew the sound out slowly, before she tapped her chopsticks against her lips. The motion drew Riley’s gaze, though, as if a moth to a flame. The way the wood pressed into her bottom lip, leaving the perfect indentation in such a full, supple mouth.

Gianna shook her head, breaking the magnetizing hold she’d clearly been unaware of having over Riley in the moment. “No. You keep them. Those are universal gifts.”

The slow smile that curled over those full lips drew Riley’s eyes again, as if they had a mind of their own. It was decidedly... sensual, she thought, as

she stared. Gianna's mouth looked alluring as her lips formed the words. As soon as the thought consciously registered in her head, alarm echoed through her. *What?*

She quickly diverted her gaze to the food, as if that had been where she'd been looking all along.

"Right," she belatedly agreed, realizing after several seconds that she hadn't spoken, shaking herself out of it. She had to run through the last comment Gianna had made, thinking more of the words and less of the way they'd looked on Gianna's lips.

It seemed like a normal reaction, she reasoned, as she kept her gaze resolutely on the food as she took another bite. This was the first time she had seen Gianna since she'd kissed those lips and experienced the way they felt against her own. Objectively, Gianna had been a great kisser, and she'd seen many people felled by Gianna's kiss over the years. She understood all of that, now.

Objectively.

"Yeah, I mean – you can enjoy what I gave you..." Gianna's lips pulled into a thoughtful pout, pronouncing that ridiculously plush bottom lip even more and Riley couldn't for the *life* of her look away. "Most of it, anyway. If I know you as well as I believe I do."

At the obvious innuendo in Gianna's tone, Riley finally managed to look her in the eye and force out a laugh. *Get a fucking grip, Beckett.*

"There are things in there that *you'd* probably prefer, if I know *you* as well as I believe *I do*," she snarked back, feeling good about it. There, that was normal and easy.

That deviously playful look that Gianna was so stupidly good at appeared as she pushed herself slowly up from Riley desk, uncrossing her legs as she did so. Riley's gaze dropped to them, her throat feeling a little dry as Gianna braced her hand inches away from Riley's on the desk and leaned down. Alarm bells started to distantly ring in her ears as that lavender-vanilla scent Riley was so familiar with encompassed her, Gianna's hand curtaining around her face so it was all she was breathing in.

Gianna whispered, "The thing is, babe, that you *do* know me that well."

The lips Riley had managed to stop fixating on, pressed against her cheek, then. Soft and slow and lingering for a beat – not abnormal for a goodbye or a greeting between them at all. In fact, it was extremely normal.

What wasn't normal was the way Riley's stomach completely bottomed

out with the kiss she'd received hundreds – maybe thousands – of times in the last decade. Or the way her breath shuttered out at the softness she found herself acutely aware of.

The shock of it, of the attraction she'd felt days ago in Gianna's bed, trampled right back through her. As if it had the objective right to steal her breath away despite this having been a platonic gesture between them for years.

Her hand shook, forcing her to drop the chopsticks right back into the container.

Gianna didn't seem to notice. Riley couldn't have been more grateful for that, as she felt her heart hammering in her chest.

"I should find Joel, given that I'm technically here for him and all," Gianna said, all traces of sultry banter disappearing from her tone.

Her grin was bright and utterly normal as she straightened up and gathered her hair over her shoulder.

"Enjoy your dinner; don't make me fly back here to take care of business," Gianna warned as she grabbed her purse. "Because I *will* drag you home if I have to, you know I can." She flexed her arm, even though she still had a jacket on, so Riley couldn't see the muscle there.

But, she could picture it perfectly. And that did nothing to help her sort through the red flag emergency feelings erupting inside of her.

"Yeah, I'm aware of the personal trainer," she managed to get out.

"If work gets stressful while I'm away, you always have some new items at home to help work it all out." That cheeky tone was, again, so *normal*.

And between that and the warm smile and little finger wave Gianna gave her before she squeezed Riley's shoulder and strutted away, it was abundantly clear that Gianna wasn't feeling *this*.

This – this – this awareness, that had been shocked to life and buzzing through her veins.

She turned to stare at Gianna as she walked away, unblinking as she tried to process it.

Only to snap her gaze back to the food Gianna delivered when she realized her gaze had fallen to her friend's ass.

... oh, no.

That was decidedly not normal.

CHAPTER 11



Oery few things felt big enough to truly rattle Riley. The things that came along and shook her entire world until everything had to slot into place and re-shape the other aspects around it. Her dad dying had been a big one, one that shaped her family life into what it was.

Ashton cheating on her less than a month after he'd proposed to her, that had been another one. As the only person – both before and after – that she'd ever fallen so deeply for, that betrayal cut deep. Right out of college, when doors were starting to crack open for work, and life felt like it was *starting*, the sting settled somewhere inside of her, somewhere unreachable.

Discovering an attraction to her best friend of over a decade was most definitely rattling.

She obsessed over it.

It was how she found herself swiping through the camera roll on her phone at a restaurant as she and Ellie waited for their mother to meet them for Christmas dinner.

She'd had to go through her phone like this multiple times in the last four days, ever since seeing Gianna at the station earlier this week. Ever since the realization that her attraction wasn't just a side-effect of their ill-fated almost hook-up, but had decided to crop up in real life.

The majority of the pictures were of herself and the people in her life – Ellie, Mia, Joel, Gianna. More than half were either of or with Gianna, throughout the years. Which made sense, she reasoned. Mia, had joined the group as Ellie's friend – now partner – only a few years ago, so she was in the least. Ellie had been with Riley since the day they were born but she didn't love to go out on adventures or to parties and didn't enjoy being in

pictures when she did. Joel preferred to be behind the camera.

And Gianna – well, Gianna was the star. Which made sense, given that she loved being in pictures and videos and she was the person Riley spent the most time with. They had weekly routines together, tried restaurants together, vacationed together, served as plus-ones for each other.

Riley must have scrolled through her photos so many times in the past without even a second look at them, beyond the memory held within.

Right now, as light holiday music played through the four-star restaurant, she was staring. Staring and feeling more than the memory.

She felt like she'd been given new eyes, almost. Even though she'd always had 20/20 vision, she felt like she'd now received corrective surgery. Like she was seeing the world freshly.

Only it wasn't *the* world; it was just *her* world.

"I didn't tell her about the conference I went to in Switzerland. You didn't, did you?" Ellie's anxious voice broke into Riley's very concentrated thoughts.

Riley blinked and looked up across the table at her twin. Who was looking very intently back at her.

"I'm sorry, El. What did you say?"

Ellie tapped her fingers anxiously against her glass of water. "Mom. Did you tell her about my conference last month?"

Riley drew in a deep breath, working through her conversations with their mother. Then she winced, before admitting, "Uh, yeah. I did."

Ellie's eyes, the same hazel as her own, widened. "What? When? Why?"

Riley put her phone down. Normally, this avenue of conversation was one she disliked going down, but right now, she was thankful for the distraction.

"Because, when I called her on Thanksgiving, she asked where you were," Riley explained. "I wasn't going to lie to her. Especially not when you were at a kick-ass conference for being a genius. That's *amazing*. And Mom wants to know that stuff."

Ellie's forehead crinkled in disbelief, the look on her face pure skepticism.

"She does," she insisted, because it was the absolute truth. As always, she did her best to keep her exasperation at bay.

Because while Riley knew that their mom did care and did want to know, she also knew that she was... intense. And that, given she was a scientist as well, she'd always been very exacting of Ellie.

While Ellie was emotionally very sensitive to their mother's expectations, their mother was very sensitive to Ellie's lack of communication with her. They both took any slight – real or perceived, minor or major – from the other, to heart. They always had. And it had only gotten worse when Ellie and Riley's father had died, leaving Riley as the only mediator.

She liked to think she did it well. At the very least, she did her best.

"Listen. We both drove an hour and a half to meet halfway tonight for dinner. She's probably going to ask about the conference," Riley allowed, holding her hands up to stop Ellie from a rebuttal, yet. "But we'll only be here for a couple of hours, tops, and I know you can talk about work and science-y stuff for much longer than that."

She arched her eyebrows, daring Ellie to disagree.

Her sister didn't. Instead, she looked back down at her own phone as it buzzed. "I wish Mia could have come."

Mia had to work at the fire station tonight, given that she'd taken Thanksgiving off to travel with Ellie for the conference last month. But Ellie had been regularly talking to her throughout their drive, which Riley hadn't minded, as it had given her time to mull over her own thoughts.

Her own phone lit up where it sat in front of her on the table, as if telling Riley that there was no way she would be escaping this train of thought for long.

Gianna – 5:07PM

Christmas is a little weird this year, huh?

Attached to the text were a handful of pictures of the holiday decorated yacht Gianna was on today, with the final one being a selfie of Gianna smiling brightly with the sun and water behind her.

It was almost as if Gianna could read her mind, as if she knew she'd barely left Riley's thoughts since she'd been gone.

She snorted at herself, derisively. As if she and Gianna didn't text several times every day, anyway.

Riley smiled at the picture instinctively, as she always would have. Her stomach swooped down low at the sight of Gianna's vibrant grin, and... yeah, she still wasn't used to that.

Riley – 5:08PM

*I'd say so. But you look like you're having fun,
so I won't complain*

Before Gianna could text back, Riley locked her phone and put it face-down on the table, as she bit thoughtfully down on the inside of her cheek, observing Ellie.

Holding in this development – this huge, rattling, insane – development in her life, was not normal for her. She *wanted* to talk it out, to gain a little more perspective, instead of keeping it circling around in her mind.

Ellie's eyebrows were furrowed as she typed something on her phone. Maybe a work email, Riley supposed.

Riley didn't often turn to Ellie when she had to discuss her dating life. Mostly, because for most of their lives, Ellie herself didn't date and never initiated a conversation about her love life or anyone else's. Then, when she'd fallen in love with Mia, she was in a very regular state of stress when it came to her own feelings, and not only did Riley not have many big updates in her own romantic life, but even if she did, she wouldn't have wanted to bring it up to Ellie if she thought it would have stressed her out further.

She'd lived her adult life carefully constructing their relationship so that she never added undue stress in Ellie's life.

Ever the logical scientist, many people who didn't really know Ellie assumed she wasn't very emotional or that she felt less, somehow, given her lack of expression. Riley, however, knew that while Ellie sometimes had trouble figuring out her feelings or expressing them, she felt very deeply.

She would never, ever forget going to visit Ellie a few months after their dad died. Riley had still been living with their mom in Vermont, finishing her senior year of high school. Ellie, the veritable genius, had graduated a year early and had been living at and attending MIT.

And when Ellie hadn't visited home and their conversations became erratic and short, Riley had made a surprise visit. Because she could *sense* that something was wrong.

She'd been right.

Her sister had been sleeping less than four hours a night, barely eating, and was working herself to the bone.

Riley had never in her life been more scared, which remained true to this day.

That trip had been the moment her priorities had taken hold. Their dad used to be Ellie's primary emotional support, and with him gone, Riley knew it would be her job, now.

That system had worked well in the years since. The only time she'd ever

had any true concerns had been when Ellie had fallen for and thought she'd been rejected by Mia, which had resulted in burying herself at work and moving back into her shell a bit.

At the end of the day, even though her love life likely wouldn't give Ellie any real stress, Riley had never seen any need to drag her into it.

... especially because she'd always had Gianna to talk to. Gianna was always interested in talking and knowing more about everything in her life.

This thing, though, this one huge thing that was shaking up everything she thought she knew in her adult life, just happened to have Gianna at the center.

She took a deep breath, tapping her fingers against the table as she nodded to herself, determined, and made her decision.

“Can I talk to you about something?”

Ellie finished typing whatever she'd been writing, eyebrows furrowing as she lowered her phone. “Sure?”

She looked into her twin sisters' eyes. She knew they were identical to her own, *technically*. In color and shape, the way they set into their face. But to Riley, she felt like she could catalogue every minute difference between them.

Ellie's eyes were expectant. Waiting. Confused.

And for once, Riley found herself hesitant to discuss her personal life. Which was never remotely a secret, even if she didn't typically turn to Ellie for a sounding board.

“I...” She cleared her throat, mustering the wherewithal to confess the thought that had only existed inside of herself. “I think I'm attracted to women.” Yeah, no, that didn't even feel like it came close to what she was feeling. Her stomach felt like it twisted in on itself as she corrected, “I *am* attracted to... a woman.”

Ellie's hazel eyes were so wide as they stared at her, growing wider by the second, and Riley felt like she could *see* Ellie's brain as she tried to process through what she'd said.

Honestly, given the lack of precedence for this, it seemed understandable.

“I know it's – it's new. And kind of out of left field.”

“*Kind of?*” Ellie's eyebrows were so high on her forehead, Riley was convinced they would lift above her head, if it was biologically possible.

“Fine, it *is* out of left field!” Riley rubbed over both of her eyes with her palms, feeling both relieved that she'd actually spoken the truth into

existence, while also hating the uncertainty that ate at her along with it.

When she looked at Ellie again, her sister wasn't looking at her, but was instead staring down at her phone, where an incomplete email looked back at her. But Riley knew she wasn't thinking about work. No, the cogs in her sister's giant brain were thinking about her.

"I know it's... surprising," she allowed, a dry laugh escaping her. "Trust me, I wasn't expecting it, either."

There was no fucking way she could have ever predicted this situation.

Ellie slowly turned to look at her again. Her eyebrows were now deeply furrowed, so low over her squinted eyes, as she clearly tried to make sense of the situation. "Are you gay? Um, a lesbian? Bisexual? Pan?" She reached up and rubbed her temples, clearly trying to figure this all out into the world in which she was familiar. "It's – it's fine to come out, later. Obviously." She gestured at herself, self-deprecatingly.

Riley found comfort in it, affection sliding through her and bringing a small smile. "Yeah, I know."

Because Ellie hadn't realized she was completely and totally a lesbian until a couple of years ago, when she'd met Mia.

Riley's smile faded a bit as she shook her head. "But, no. I'm not a lesbian."

She knew that. She'd loved Ashton, for better or worse... well, definitely for worse. And she knew she was attracted to and enjoyed relationships with some other men she'd dated, too. "I don't know if I'm bi or pan or if it's just – I don't know."

She dragged a hand through her hair, chewing at her cheek as she admitted to her thoughts. "I've always found women *attractive*, but I don't think I've ever clocked an attraction *to* them." That was one of the harder things for her to figure out in the last few days, if she was being honest. "Maybe I have been attracted and wrote it off, because I was attracted to men? Maybe..." She trailed off, dropping her head back on a heaved breath. "I don't know."

Ellie's expression was still the picture of confusion.

"I know, you love to fit this stuff into boxes that make sense," Riley teased, before sobering just a bit as she repeated, "But I just don't know."

Ellie shook her head, reaching out to put her hand on Riley's arm across the table. "No! I mean, yes. I do," she admitted with a crooked smile. "But, when I came out, I did a lot of reading."

“Of course,” Riley allowed, laughing.

“And I know that labels aren’t important to everyone in the same way. Some people find comfort and identity in them and some don’t. What’s most important is that you find a sense of yourself that you’re happy with, regardless of label,” Ellie stated, so factually that Riley knew that was likely word-for-word from something Ellie had read on her own self-discovery journey.

Her lips ticked up into a smile at both the thought and the words. Sometimes Ellie’s consistency was comforting in and of itself.

Ellie studied her. “So, you’re okay? You’re not struggling?”

Riley sat with the question for a moment, appreciating the care behind it, as she sifted through her feelings. Through the many thoughts and feelings she’d been consumed by since Wednesday. Essentially ever since Gianna’s party, when she’d opened that veritable Pandora’s box of sex toys.

“Not with my sexuality,” she said after a few moments, and felt very comfortable with the words. No, being attracted to a woman didn’t upset her or throw her into a tailspin, like it had with Ellie. Sexuality was a spectrum and regardless of where she fell on it, she was fine.

Her gaze landed back on her phone, though, as her heart rate kicked up.

It was that she was attracted to *Gianna*.

“I am struggling,” she said, reluctantly. “A little.”

She wasn’t sure if struggling was the right word, exactly. She just knew that she was confused and working through something very unfamiliar yet very personal.

The hand Ellie had placed on her arm that had previously been resting there, slack, squeezed a little bit. Comfortingly. Comfortingly enough for Riley to look at her again and tell the full truth, “Because I didn’t just figure this out randomly or meet someone new or something. It’s... *Gianna*.”

Whew. There, *everything* was out in the open, then. That, on one level, felt good.

What did *not* feel good, was Ellie’s mouth falling open or her grip tightening on Riley’s arm. “What!?” Her voice was nearly a full-on scream, the handful of people seated around them in the charming B&B restaurant turning to look at them.

Okay, not exactly the reaction she’d been hoping for.

Riley gave an extremely forced smile to the other patrons, waving off their concern, before she turned back to her sister, knowing her face mirrored

the alarm she was feeling. “Shh! Jesus, it’s not like I murdered someone.”

“How – what? What *happened*? Did she, um, did she...” Ellie trailed off, clearly shocked and grappling for something that made sense, unaware of the attention she’d just garnered.

Riley could definitely relate, as she shrugged, throwing her free hand into the air. “She didn’t do anything! Except,” Riley took a deep breath and just, let it spill out. “Okay, fine. She *did* give me a gift box full of sex toys at her Holiday Spectacular. That’s what got it all started.”

Ellie’s mouth fell open, silently moving, seemingly unable to find words.

Fair enough, given Riley’s reaction to the gift, herself.

“She didn’t mean to,” she rushed to add on. “She meant to give them to Athena, but, there was a mix-up. Not a big deal. Or, it wouldn’t have been.” She rolled her lips, debating how much to tell Ellie, given that she already looked like her eyes were about to fall out of her head. “Except, it kicked off these – these *thoughts* that I’ve been having.”

Ellie still only stared at her, unmoving.

The look prompted Riley to explain herself, further. Especially, she found, now that it was coming out, she didn’t want to stop it. She wanted to discuss these thoughts and feelings and review them; that had been the whole point of veritably coming out to Ellie, wasn’t it?

“And it also kicked off Gianna and I almost having sex,” she gave in, needing to air it all out.

“What?!” Ellie’s shout made her wince, as well as drawing every eye in the room yet again.

Riley grabbed her hand and leaned in across the table. “El, I get that this is surprising, but we *are* in a restaurant and our mother *will* be here soon.”

Ellie leaned in as well, hissing back her own whisper, “Well, perhaps this wasn’t the best place for you to tell me that you almost had sex with Gianna, because – hey, surprise! – you’re not straight.”

Riley couldn’t even hold onto the scolding tone she’d used, as she broke into an uncontrollable laugh. “That’s a good point.”

She took in a deep breath, trying to tame the unexpected amusement at her... situation.

“I didn’t think that much of it,” she explained as she sobered. “The almost-having-sex thing. Other than it just, made sense in the moment.”

For a few seconds, they only stared at each other. As Ellie studied her, baffled and incredulous and wondering, and Riley stared back. Honest and

reeling.

“What about that made sense?” Ellie spoke carefully, as if picking through her words, blessedly making sure to keep her voice down. “And, um, what did Gianna say? About it all?”

“She said that she was attracted to me, too.” Even saying the words brought that rush of sensation with them. Which seemed so silly, because she knew how important she was to Gianna and how much Gianna valued her.

But there was something unduly intoxicating knowing that the most gorgeous person you’ve ever known was attracted to you.

“We *didn’t* have sex,” Riley clarified. “For the record.”

Ellie’s breath blew out on a hard exhale, looking strangely relieved.

Which made Riley question herself before she admitted the part of all of this that was the most pressing. “But I think I might want to.”

She could tell she was due for another Ellie shout, and she reached out and put her hand over her sister’s mouth before it could happen. “Let me explain! There are a lot of very logical parts to this.”

She kept her hand there over Ellie’s mouth, even as Ellie stared at her as if she were legitimately out of her mind. But *logic* was where Ellie excelled. So maybe in that respect, Ellie could be the best person to talk to about this.

Riley made sure to keep her voice down, very conscious of their location as she explained, “First, it’s been forever since I’ve had sex. And I miss it, Ellie. I *want* it.” God, she really, really did.

Even more now than she had before, when she’d talked to Gianna about it. Because, good fucking god, had she enjoyed what happened that night. Even doing her best *not* to think about it and to be normal... well, that seemed entirely out of the window, now that she was thinking about how fucking attractive she found Gianna.

“Second, I’ve had such bad luck in dating lately that I’m not even sure I can stomach going on another date with a guy for months. At least. And third, if Gianna and I have sex, it means that I get to have fun, explore this whole side to my sexuality, and not worry about anything.”

Terrifyingly and quite possibly insanely, the more she said it aloud, the more it seemed like a legitimately good idea. Maybe she *hadn’t* thought through all of the nuts and bolts of it, before this conversation, but it did make sense.

It made a lot of sense.

“It really kills two birds with one stone. I trust her, she respects me, and

vice versa.” Those had been Riley’s biggest issues when it came to having sex with someone she wasn’t in a relationship with, in the past. Could she trust them to be honest and respectful when it came to their bodies and communicating needs? Usually that was a very difficult thing to figure out. “I don’t have to worry about feelings or navigating that aspect of a relationship,” which was also a headache when it came to keeping things casual, in Riley’s experience, “Because Gianna doesn’t ever do the feelings part. We already have an established relationship, anyway.”

It was a little overwhelming to think about, still. And who knew if it would ever go anywhere or become a thing, because she’d yet to fully figure it out herself. But maybe there was something to it, especially after last weeken—

“No!” Ellie reached up and pulled Riley’s hand away from her, vehemently shaking her head. “So, you don’t have feelings for Gianna and you want to – to just start having sex with her?”

“I mean, I don’t know if that’s what exactly would happen,” Riley tried to explain herself, feeling the tumult from the last few days creep right back up. “I’m just trying to say that – we’ve established an attraction, we love and respect one another, and neither of us is looking for a relationship, anyway. And when it almost happened, it was... good. Really good.”

The way Ellie continued to vigorously shake her head, as if her head were an etch-a-sketch and the last few minutes of this conversation could be erased, made a niggling feeling of doubt start to eat away at the feeling like she’d been onto something.

Horror, was the only way Riley could think of to describe the look on her twin’s face, the more the idea sat with her. “You *cannot* do that.”

“I’ve had casual sexual relationships before,” she justified, a little baffled at Ellie’s turn in feelings on her and Gianna sleeping together. Apparently, her sister’s very strong feelings. “And that’s *all* Gianna does with anyone.”

Ellie was alarmingly adamant, “Riley, you *can’t*. It’s not the same thing as your other casual sex partners,” she insisted. “It’s your best friend. That’s – if you don’t have feelings for her, how is that supposed to end?”

Defensive, Riley shrugged. “I haven’t thought through all of the moving pieces, Ellie. I’ve clearly only very recently started feeling this way.”

Her own weakened tone seemed to take some of the wind out of Ellie’s sails. Her shoulders lost a touch of their rigidity, but there was still a clear concern throughout her body. “Sorry. I’m – I didn’t mean to come off crazy, I

just,” Ellie rolled her lips in thought as she took a breath. “I think that isn’t a great idea – actually, no. It’s a really bad idea,” she corrected herself, sternly.

“Gianna is your *best friend*. Unless you are both totally and completely on the same page, it could get really complicated and someone could get hurt.” Ellie’s gaze was intent and intense as it locked onto Riley’s. “Seriously hurt.”

Riley held Ellie’s gaze, taking in what Ellie had said. Getting her perspective was one of the main reasons she’d talked to Ellie about this in the first place; she couldn’t discount what her sister was saying just because it wasn’t necessarily what she wanted to hear.

Honestly, though, Riley didn’t even know what she wanted to hear.

Ellie wasn’t wrong. Annoyingly, for most circumstances in their lives, when it came to anything from a logical and sensical angle, Ellie was rarely wrong.

It wasn’t as though Riley had really thought this through, anyway. It had just been an idea. Something that had taken seed in her mind and clearly had been starting to grow. Seedlings didn’t have to go anywhere, necessarily. Not unless they were nurtured and fostered, and Riley – she didn’t have to nurture this.

Realistically, her life would probably make more sense and go back to feeling far more normal as soon as she let it die.

Besides, she absolutely didn’t care for how wound-up Ellie seemed about this. There was no need to push this any further.

She conceded. “You’re probably right.” A tiny chuckle pushed past her lips as she shook her head. “I did get a little carried away, I think.”

Ellie watched her carefully, but seemed to relax at her words. She opened her mouth to speak, before her gaze snapped to something over Riley’s shoulder. “Mom’s here.”

She could see how Ellie’s posture straightened, bracing herself to put her best foot forward for their mother, and knew her dilemma was pushed to the back of Ellie’s perfectly organized-by-priority brain.

She did her best to do the same, even as she glimpsed back down at her phone.

Gianna – 5:08PM

I am having fun. But I miss you

Gianna – 5:21PM

Merry Christmas <3

CHAPTER 12



M arch, Freshman Year

GIANNA STARED in critical disbelief at Ellie, as she circled the *91* that she'd just written at the top of Gianna's practice test.

"You're fucking with me," she stated, staring at the grade, wondering if she was misunderstanding the number *9*.

She was almost too afraid to touch it. *Almost*, because she snatched it from Ellie's hands as soon as Ellie slid it over, and brought it up, right under her face to greedily take it in. "Ellie, I know you're not like, super into joking, but if you decided this is the moment that you're revealing how much of a comedienne you are, I'm going to go absolutely buck wild in here."

She gestured around the MIT library, where she'd taken to meeting Ellie for tutoring.

She'd been meeting with Ellie at least twice a week for nearly a month, and her Intro to Physics midterm was now right around the corner. When they'd started her tutoring, the first practice test Ellie had given her resulted in a *69* – which, for the record, Ellie did *not* find as amusing as Gianna had.

This *91* meant everything to her, because if she didn't get at least a *90*, the only way she would be able to pass given the quality of the work she'd handed in for the first couple of months, was if she aced *everything* for the rest of the year. A highly unlikely feat.

Given her *F* in astronomy, this was a need.

She'd expressed her distress to Riley last month, as she'd tried to make

heads or tails of the take-home quiz she'd been given. She'd groaned, throwing her hands up in the air, not able to give a shit that they were in the library – there was no one sitting near them, anyway. "Maybe flirting with and manipulating people and making deals to get cheat sheets and copy classwork is technically wrong, but I'm *never* going to pass a damn science class by myself. I'm a fucking idiot! And I'm never going to need this in my life, anyway, so – what's the point?"

She'd shoved the book away from her in irritation.

Riley watched her, studying her carefully, before she offered, "I can ask Ellie to tutor you. If you want."

It was so simple, such an easy offer. Like *no big deal*.

Gianna could only stare at her, skeptically. "A few months ago, you didn't even want to tell me you had a sister. Now, you're offering her to tutor me? What gives?"

The look Riley gave her was soft but exasperated, as she answered, "I think we both know you're not necessarily the exact same person you were a few months ago. A few months ago, I would have been worried you'd make fun of Ellie when she nerds out on a too-long explanation that's not really relevant, but she *has* to say it, because she's excited about it. Or that you'd snap at her when she explains something to you as if you're five and looks at you like she is confused as to why *you're* confused – which," Riley nailed her with a serious look, "She *will* do, both of those things. But, she will also make sure you pass."

"She'll probably give up on me when she realizes nothing related to science clicks in my fucking brain," she could hear her own sullen, self-loathing tone.

Riley tossed a pencil at her, just had enough that it hit Gianna's chest, before falling into her lap. "Your brain is a complicated but wonderful place. You understand social and societal etiquettes that Ellie never will. And Ellie understands science and math in a way that you never will. You're both brilliant. And Ellie doesn't give up on people. Especially because she thinks science is amazing and she wants everyone to love it like she does."

Even though Riley delivered the words in a manner that was so matter-of-fact, they still perked Gianna up. Riley didn't say things that weren't true, which meant that she really believed Gianna's mind was a wonderful place.

"And... you're not worried about me spending time with her, anymore?" She ventured, studying Riley's face, looking for any doubt.

“No. I think you and I *both* know you better, now.”

And, much to Gianna’s relief, Riley was right, about everything.

Ellie had taken the exorbitantly long route to explain something that she then summed up in a two minute TL;DR. She would slow down and talk to Gianna as if she were in kindergarten when she realized Gianna wasn’t following what she was saying.

But Gianna *didn’t* feel any urge to roll her eyes at Ellie or lash out because Ellie was making her feel dumb. Growth.

And damn if it didn’t work, as evidenced by her ninety-fucking-one!

“I’m fairly certain no one would accuse me of being a comedienne,” Ellie stated, dryly.

“Well, you know what you are? The *best*. Has anyone ever told you that?” Gianna would reach out and place a smacking kiss on Ellie’s cheek, but she was fairly certain Ellie wouldn’t appreciate it.

“My professors,” Ellie answered, straight-faced, as she started flipping through her very organized papers for the next practice test – she’d told Gianna that she would give her two *just in case*, given that her midterm was next week.

Gianna delighted in the answer, chuckling at Ellie brightly.

She’d never interacted with identical twins, before. But it had been an interesting adventure spending time with Ellie, to say the least.

Physically, they were obviously identical in their facial features, their skin, hair, and eye color – and good for them, Gianna acknowledged. She appreciated beautiful people, and the Beckett sisters were double the beauty in this world.

Gianna thought that even more now than she did last semester, and she’d thought Riley was beautiful, then, too.

She’d been able to tell from the single night she’d met Ellie, that she and Riley were very different people beyond the genetically physical components.

Ellie was very down-to-business, very direct, far less coaxing, and made basically no small talk.

Where Riley was fluid movement and softness, Ellie was reserved and at times, rigid. They were both kind, they both cared, but they showed it in different ways.

They were both honest, but Riley had a lot more tact. They were both funny, but Ellie was much more unintentionally and dryly so.

Gianna decided she really enjoyed Ellie, after their second tutoring session, when she'd dropped her head back against the library chair and groaned. "What the hell am I going to do when I can't pass this gen ed? For a *second* time."

And Ellie had answered promptly. "Either have to take an extra semester of school or drop out, I suppose, if you can never pass."

Gianna snapped her head up to stare at her, only to be met with a look that said *it is what it is*. "Rhetorical, Ellie."

"Ah. Okay. I'll work on that, while you work on physics," she'd said, tapping her finger against the study guide she'd made for Gianna.

Gianna did a little dance in her seat, reverently touching the 91 – a grade she'd *earned* – at the top, as she sipped at her still-warm drink that she'd grabbed from the coffee cart outside while Ellie had graded her test. "A fresh cappuccino, an A, I'd say—"

She abruptly cut herself off, as a man walked close enough to kick over Ellie's backpack that had been perched on the ground. *Maybe* she could understand that as an accident, but he then kicked the leg of Ellie's chair and shot her a snide look. "Wow, sorry, Einstein. I guess my *special reasoning* is still a little off."

Irritation flared through her as she watched him cross to the other side of the library, before he joined a group of other men. She snapped her gaze back to Ellie. "Do you know that shithead?"

Ellie hunched her shoulders into herself, in as she shrugged, looking embarrassed. "That's Greyson. I dated his best friend, Phillip" she answered, pointing at the man now sitting next to the dickwad who'd just interrupted them. "But, he broke up with me, a couple of months ago, when I beat him and his friends at ICEC." She gestured to the table, where Gianna presumed one of the other men studying was Ellie's ex.

"ICEC?" She echoed.

"International Collegiate Engineering Conference," Ellie explained, looking at Gianna as if to say *how could you now know?*

"Of course. Forgot to get my ticket last year."

Ellie's eyes darted to his table before she leaned in closer to the table. "Um. Their project and mine were the top two, but I went through the manual they presented and noticed that the math they had was slightly skewed, which meant that their equation was incorrect. Which meant they were disqualified." Her voice got small as she shrugged. "I wasn't even *trying* to

disprove their theory; he never let me see what they were working on and I was curious.”

Gianna sent the table a dirty look. “So, what, now they’re being typical douchebags and giving you a hard time?”

Ellie was quiet for a few seconds, clearly deliberating what she wanted to say, before she confessed, “They call me a know-it-all bitch, and make it difficult to get a partner in some class projects. Which is fine, because I would rather do them all, myself, anyway,” she added, not bragging, but matter-of-fact.

And yet... there was something else under her cool exterior. An edge, a jerkiness. A *hurt* that existed perfectly under the surface that she wasn’t putting into words.

“Shouldn’t the brain trust here at MIT be, you know, above that kind of crap?” Gianna asked, pissed on Ellie’s behalf. She had no problem putting it into words.

Ellie scoffed out a laugh. “I don’t think most people are above that kind of crap.”

Gianna pursed her lips, righteous anger pushing through her, and she nodded to herself. “I’ll be right back.”

Because Ellie was right; most people *weren’t* above that kind of crap. Gianna should know; she’d been one of them, and she was still in her growing era. She also knew, now, that she wasn’t going to let it fly, especially not when it was outright bullying someone that she gave a damn about.

She ignored Ellie’s quiet protest, as she slid her shoulders back and sauntered to their table. As soon as she was about five feet away, she deliberately let out a quiet sigh, tossing her long hair over her shoulder.

Yep.

The two men sitting across from Greyson and Phillip, who were facing her, predictably took notice. They stared, and with their attention and the way one of them not-so-subtly gestured at her, Greyson and Phillip also turned.

She added a little extra flair to the sway of her hips as she walked.

She heard one of them swear, and she rolled her eyes – men. They were so, so simple. There hadn’t been a hetero man Gianna hadn’t been able to read like a book and manipulate with very little thought since she’d been fifteen.

The dark-haired guy who’d bumped into Ellie watched her, wide-eyed,

clearly both nervous and excited as she came to stand next to him.

She took a sip of her cappuccino, knowing her lip gloss was perfectly imprinted on the cover as she put it down in front of him, and she watched as he stared at the mark.

So fucking simple.

“Greyson, right?” She asked, coyly.

He nodded, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. “Uh, yeah, right. H-hey, um, hi.”

“When I first saw you earlier in here, I hoped you were free this weekend?” She kept her voice deliberately low. Promising.

All of the other men leaned in from where they sat, as if they wanted to be in on it, too. Greyson’s eyes widened. “I’m – free, yeah. You want to... go out or something?”

Gianna reached out and traced her fingertip over the edge of the table in front of him, smiling sweetly. “I thought it could be fun.”

“You did?” He asked, blushing and clearing his throat as Gianna slid her hand up, touching his arm.

“Mhmm.” She deliberately hummed out the sound, knowing it sounded sensual, before upping the ante on the brightness of her smile, feeling the razor edge of irritation cut into it. “At least, until I talked to my friend, Ellie Beckett, over there.” She lifted her eyebrows, sparing him a look of utter disdain, then glancing at Phillip to include him in it, too. “And I found out what insecure, petty, red flag losers you are, who resort to bullying women who are smarter than you, to make up for your obviously undersized dicks. *Maybe* you’d have already had date plans with a woman this weekend, if you weren’t such a raging asshole.”

As she stood, she deliberately bumped her hip into her coffee cup, sending it into his lap. It wasn’t full and it wasn’t scalding hot, but it was damn sure going to be uncomfortable.

“Oops. I’d apologize, but I think that’s the most action you’ve gotten in a long time.” She paused, cutting him as he opened his mouth, clearly pissed. “And if you even *look* at Ellie Beckett the wrong way again, I promise you will regret it. Women talk. And I have a very wide network.”

She arched an eyebrow at him sharply, before turning on her heel and walking away. She could already hear the ribbing and mocking he was receiving from his friends, making her feel victorious and proud.

Sliding into her seat, she looked expectantly at Ellie, who stared at her

with wide eyes. Gianna recalled what Riley had said, before, feeling the power in it. “People are *my* kind of science, Ellie.”

* * *

GIANNA SET her bag down as she entered her dorm room an hour later, holding up her hands defensively at the way Riley immediately turned to face her.

“I’m sure you already know what happened, and I know that what I did was maybe, technically classic Mean Girl. And you’re my moral compass spiritual mentor, so I don’t want you to think that I reverted back to my ways or anything. I *swear*, they deserved it.” She’d practiced that on her way home.

“First of all, as I’ve said before, I’m not your moral compass guide or whatever.” Riley waved her hand dismissively. Gianna didn’t argue the matter, especially not right now, but she had definitely started to think of Riley as such. “Secondly—” she cut herself off, giving Gianna the biggest, warmest smile and then she practically threw herself at her, wrapping her into a hug.

A full-bodied, gleeful hug.

It settled through Gianna. The warmth of it, how she could *feel* Riley’s happiness somehow, and it made her feel happy, too. Which only compounded when she realized she was the cause of it.

CHAPTER 13



Riley waited at Logan airport, craning her neck to try and spot Gianna in the crowd.

And there *was* a crowd. It was the weekend, the day after New Year's Day, and everyone seemed to be returning from their holiday excursions.

Gianna's flight back from Los Angeles had landed on the tarmac almost twenty minutes ago, and Riley was waiting near the baggage carousel for her flight.

It was a tradition that they'd started four years ago, nearly at the exact same time of year – the dead of winter – when Gianna's status had started to really gain traction. She'd collaborated with and promoted several brands, already able to make a living by doing so. But she'd just hired Cora earlier that year, hadn't yet hit macro-influencer levels, and she'd been working on only doing her own videos remotely or with local brands.

When she'd soared even higher, though, making bigger and better brand partnerships, travel became more of a central component in her life.

She stayed in Boston most of the time still, with semi-regular short trips to New York, able to fulfill the majority of her obligations while on the East Coast. Now, she made four or five trips every year to L.A. for work or networking or other events, but Riley had been there since the very first one.

"Who knows? They may want to recruit me to be a true California Girl," Gianna had said on that fateful trip, where she was being flown out for a potential partnership.

She'd winked, pouting her lips into a picture-perfect kiss as she struck a pose in the passenger side of Riley's car, parked in the departures drop-off. "I think I could make a wonderful Malibu Barbie."

Riley had laughed, giving her friend a faux-considering look. Gianna was the *embodiment* of exactly what Riley imagined a lot of brands would want to represent them, especially with a product made for sunny, beachy fun.

"I'm actually positive that is exactly what your manager would want," Riley confirmed, as she turned in her seat to really look at her. Gianna was very rarely nervous, especially when it came to meeting new people or charming them.

But this was new and bigger, and it *meant* something to her. It wasn't meaningless interaction. In a way, managing people was second-nature for Gianna. In entirely other ways, in the very rare moments she was worried that people might try to look past her shiny bravado, it was unsettling.

Gianna took in a deep breath, the only physical sign of doubt or skepticism or nerves were the two minuscule lines between her eyebrows as she stared straight out the windshield. Very easy to overlook.

But they screamed out to Riley like a flashing neon sign.

She'd reached out and landed her hand on Gianna's knee. "They're flying you out there to meet you; they want you already, because why wouldn't they? You have all the power in the room."

"You know I love that," Gianna admitted as she turned back to face Riley. The lines were still there, but so was a small smile.

Riley dropped her jaw in faux-shock. "No! You?!"

Then Gianna genuinely laughed, dropping her hand to cover Riley's. Her hand was about an inch longer, completely enveloping Riley's in warmth as she nodded. "And if it doesn't go well, I'll just come home to you. And we'll go out, have a cocktail, and get so much Chinese food that when we wake up in the morning, we will have to question what the fuck we were thinking when we ordered it at two in the morning."

Riley wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or groan at just how accurate that description was, but she did both as she flipped her hand over to properly hold Gianna's, lacing their fingers together. "Deal. I'll be here when you get back."

Gianna's hand squeezed hers. "Deal. You'll be right here."

"Literally *right here*." She used her free hand to gesture at the cars and people around them. "Who doesn't love the lawless chaos of the airport?"

Gianna's soft chuckle filled the car as she leaned against the passenger seat and rested for a few seconds, routinely squeezing Riley's hand in hers as if using it to gather strength. Finally, she tapped her other hand against her

thigh. “All right; I have to check in. Thanks for the pep talk, babe. I’ll see you when I get back.”

“And text me when you land,” she reminded.

“And video-call you from the beautiful sunny beach to remind you what warmth is,” Gianna volleyed back as she brought Riley’s hand up and gave a smacking kiss to her fingertips, before she let it go and opened the door.

She stepped out, the biting cold infiltrating Riley’s Nissan Rogue as she stretched her legs. Gianna then stooped down and hefted up her Louis Vuitton carry-on to rest on the seat she’d just vacated.

“I totally forgot... I have a good luck charm to bring with me already.” She unzipped the bag a couple of inches.

Just enough for Riley to see the scarlet red of – “My sweatshirt!” Her mouth fell open as the bafflement zipped through her. “How? I just wore that yesterday when I was lounging around the house.”

“And you left it hanging over the back of your couch when we stopped by earlier for you to pick up your work badge.” Gianna tutted, blue eyes glittering in amusement as she hefted the bag up. “You know you love it.”

Riley couldn’t do anything but laugh and groan again. Because she *did* love it. And, if she was being truthful, she was glad Gianna would have a piece of home – of her – for this trip. She hoped it would bring her comfort.

“Your sweatshirt and I will see you soon! Thank you. For everything,” Gianna added, sincerely.

“Always. And don’t you dare rip off my sweatshirt sleeves to make it a beach top!” She’d called out as Gianna swung the door closed.

Even though she’d known Gianna hadn’t actually meant that she’d believed Riley would be there, literally *at the airport* when she got back, she’d shown up. Just to remind Gianna that she would, really, always be there.

And the sheer appreciation and joy that had laid over Gianna’s face when she’d seen Riley at the luggage corral, then how tightly she’d hugged her, had meant *everything*.

So she’d done this ever since. Even if she couldn’t always coordinate to bring Gianna to the airport, she always wrangled the time to pick her up, even though her best friend never asked.

Riley had been reliving that memory a lot ever since the Realization. She’d been reliving *a lot* of memories, actually. Deliberately combing through them, especially after her conversation with Ellie before Christmas

dinner.

Trying to remind herself that this attraction didn't have to mean anything.

Riley had found herself attracted to a lot of people over the course of her life. She'd worked with several, both academically and then professionally, and that attraction had never been an issue. It hadn't even really served as a distractor. It was just a fact. An awareness that she registered but barely ever thought about.

She'd taken the last week, while she didn't have Gianna with her face-to-face, to really take that in. It had rattled her because it was a new component of one of the most settled and solid relationships she'd ever had.

But now that she'd had a little bit of time to process it, Riley was convinced everything would be normal. She wasn't an animal or a teenage boy, driven by hormonal lust. She was an adult woman, very capable of being rational and –

"Riley!" Gianna's delighted shout made her presence known as she came bounding toward where Riley stood.

Luminous smile, skin glowing, her hair in a fishtail braid over her shoulder, in designer jeans and a jacket – Riley hardly had time to take Gianna in, before she was on her. Literally.

Long, strong arms wrapping around Riley's back and pulled her in close. Gianna's hugs – the excited, exuberant ones – always yanked Riley right up to her tiptoes, as she wrapped her own arms around Gianna's back, tightly holding for both balance and connection. At five foot seven, most women Riley knew weren't that much taller than she was, but Gianna was an exception.

She could feel their hearts beating in tandem as she breathed in Gianna's scent, and her stomach devolved into a swarm of butterflies despite her resolve to be normal. Still, she tightened her arms. Attraction or not, she'd missed Gianna.

"You're here," Gianna said through a laugh into Riley's ear, that sent goosebumps skittering down her spine, then a whole-body shiver.

Jesus.

"I always pick you up," she managed to get out, tucking her head into Gianna's shoulder, deciding that she needed another moment to gather herself before she looked into her best friend's observant gaze.

Gianna rubbed her hands up and down Riley's back, unquestioning the length of their hug, still laughing. "I know, but the day might come when—"

“Please,” Riley cut her off, taking a deep breath – full of *Gianna*, which in a way was both comforting and thrilling – before she pulled back. “We have a deal.”

“And Riley Beckett never welches on a deal,” Gianna added, eyes glittering as she brought her hands up to Riley’s shoulders, giving her a quick once-over. “Have you grown? I feel like it’s been forever.”

She rolled her eyes as she snorted, reaching out to push Gianna back, but pausing right before her hands made contact, a second guess she’d never once had before. Instead, she dropped her arms to her sides. Safer that way.

“Even though I don’t really care for Christmas as a holiday, I have to admit, I did miss our things. Listening to Joel compare versions of *I’ll Be Home for Christmas*, watching Ellie fastidiously decorate a tree so that the ornaments are all equidistant. Watching Mia watch Ellie with love goggles. You, sitting next to me on the couch, having at least two news reports on while we wear matching socks,” Gianna listed off as she slung her arm comfortably over Riley’s shoulders.

Clearly, Gianna was experiencing none of Riley’s tactile distress.

“Then maybe you’ll be happy for me to confirm we didn’t do any of it this year,” Riley said, even though she knew Gianna knew that. She and Ellie had gone to dinner with their mom, Mia and Joel had both worked. Once Gianna had informed her that she was going to California, Riley hadn’t felt the need to try to make Christmas *special*; if Gianna was missing, the specialness wouldn’t have been the same. “Next year.”

“Next year,” Gianna agreed, grinning brightly down at Riley.

And even though she was smiling back, even though she *meant* the smile, her stomach clenched so hard, she could barely breathe through it.

She hoped to whatever higher power there could be that she would stop feeling like this by next year.

CHAPTER 14



“*A*fter that time I tripped and accidentally ruined the set, I *never* thought I’d get to go to one of Gianna’s photoshoots again!” Joel’s excitement was palpable in both his voice and the way he was positively vibrating next to her.

“In fairness, that wasn’t a Gianna rule,” she pointed out as she walked through the door into the building that Gianna had given them the address to, to meet her for the aforementioned photoshoot. She hit the button to call the elevator, as Gianna had instructed them to go to the top floor. “*You* decided that maybe you shouldn’t join in on those photoshoots.”

Which, also in fairness, had been a wise choice on Joel’s part. Though Gianna never seriously held it against him, when he’d tripped into the background set – which had then needed to be completely redone – it had set Gianna’s advertisement shoot back several days and several thousand dollars.

In the three years since, he’d kept his distance.

“Well, yeah. I mean, it was partially because of the whole tripping-thing. But also because Gianna’s photoshoots became one of your *things*,” Joel explained, as they got on the elevator.

Riley arched an eyebrow at him. “One of our things?”

Joel nodded with a *duh* expression. “Uh, yeah? One of the things you and Gianna do, where everyone else who’s around feels like a third wheel. Like that time I met you guys at the laundromat. Or when I came over to watch *The One*,” he said, referring to the reality dating show they’d started watching together when it had premiered two years ago.

Riley felt herself flush, even as she cleared her throat. “You’re not third wheeling.”

It was the best defense she had, and it felt weak to even her own ears.

She and Gianna did have a propensity to speak in shorthand and to lean into each other. The only person who'd never commented on it or appeared bothered by being the "third wheel" was Ellie, and mostly, Riley believed it was because her sister didn't notice.

Joel shrugged. "It's cool. You two are, like, the best of best friends. I get it. I'm just excited I get to come to *this* shoot! I almost pissed myself when you asked me earlier."

She laughed as she pushed at his shoulder with her own. "Gross."

But the shoot really was a big deal. A huge deal, even.

Because it was the first official advertisement for Gianna's own lingerie line. She'd handpicked the team working on the ad campaign for her, from set designers to the director to the photographers and videographer. And the videographer, in particular, was one of Joel's artistic techie heroes.

Therefore, it had made sense to invite him, Riley reasoned with herself.

... it also made sense because Riley was nervous, and she would admit that only in the depths of her mind.

In the last week, ever since picking Gianna up from the airport, Riley had learned, unfortunately, that her stomach tying itself in knots whenever Gianna was near and feeling heat streak through her veins at her touch, was not dying easily. It was, in fact, demanding to be felt.

Riley was an adult woman, who was very capable of being rational.

This was true.

She had felt sexual attraction to people she had no intention of ever sleeping with or dating or even making a move on.

This was also true.

But what she *hadn't* thought about in all of the pep talks she'd given herself about dealing with this attraction to Gianna, was that she didn't have the kind of relationship with any of those people that she had with her best friend.

It became devastatingly obvious as soon as Gianna was back and they'd resumed their life together.

How often Gianna kissed Riley's cheeks. How often Gianna wrapped her arm around Riley's back or waist. How often they hugged and held hands.

Gianna was tactile with everyone. But especially with Riley.

The last time she'd seen Gianna had been for laundry night two days ago, and Riley found herself *gripping* the edge of the table as Gianna had so

casually touched her thigh and leaned in to tell a story about her day, laughing as she'd shared the anecdote.

Riley had no idea what the fuck Gianna had said that was so funny, because the *want* had slid through her so headily with Gianna's warm breath on her neck, and it was all she could do to not show any reaction.

The thing was, Gianna wasn't Nolan, the guy she'd worked with a few years ago who was so ridiculously attractive, Riley would have jumped his bones given the chance, had they not worked together. Riley had managed her own drooling over Nolan and had acted accordingly and professionally, even when he'd flirted with her.

When she heard Nolan was going out to drinks with the crew, she turned down the invitation, *just in case*. She didn't engage in any situation where they could potentially do something they'd regret.

Riley couldn't remove herself from experiencing situations with Gianna. Or, even if she *could*, she didn't want to. Attraction didn't mean that Gianna wasn't her best friend, anymore. It didn't mean that she was going to cancel being Gianna's plus-one next month to Worthy's Valentine's Day launch party. It didn't mean that she was going to uninvite Gianna from BostonNow's anniversary celebration. It didn't even mean she would stop doing their laundry together.

She wouldn't give an attraction that kind of power; she was in charge of her body and her actions.

It was just that... she had no idea how to make herself not feel her chemical reactions so strongly. She had no idea how to mask them, or most importantly, how to make them fade to the background.

She thought – hoped, had to believe – that eventually, this attraction would be something she would get used to and that it would fade into something far less intense. Into normality.

That's exactly what had happened with Nolan. Even though she'd been in a sexual dry spell and even though she'd had several fantasies, eventually, it faded. She'd still found him attractive, sure, but the intensity and infatuation of it all faded within a couple of months and everything became business as usual, the same as it was with anyone else.

She couldn't take personal space and time away from Gianna, without it becoming a Thing, without it altering both of their daily lives.

So, for now, the only solution she'd thought of was to bring Joel as a chaperone. Someone to join herself and Gianna, to give Riley some breathing

room and split the focus. Diffuse any tension. There was no way she could feel heart-poundingly aroused if Joel was next to her, rambling about the camerawork, right?

It made her feel lecherous and weird and unsettled, but it was the only answer she currently had.

Especially for something like this. This photoshoot, the first one for Worthy, was something that Riley couldn't miss. She wouldn't miss it, for anything. She'd been here since literally day one of Gianna's journey; she'd been the very first person Gianna had told, in an uncharacteristically nervous whisper, about wanting to design her own lingerie.

She'd been the person who'd taken Gianna's hand and encouraged her to *do it*. "Like you can't do everything you set your mind to," she'd said with as much conviction as she felt.

That had been four years ago. And it all culminated into this, she thought, as the elevator doors opened and they walked into the large open space, with a highly vaulted clear glass ceiling.

She and Joel both paused, taking it in.

It was mid-January, and the ad campaign would launch at the end of the month. Gianna planned on offering a series of debut sales leading into Valentine's Day, which was the theme of the shoot. Amidst the crew bustling around, were a handful of models, all in silk robes – all a part of the Worthy line – as the principal photography hadn't yet begun.

Riley knew the whole concept Gianna had created with the team she'd hired. She and Gianna had worked through it, themselves, months ago. The models would all be in various scenes, going about their everyday lives, until they were hit by Cupid's Arrow. In the final scene of the ad, they would all be in their homes – but unlike most Valentine's Day ads, Worthy was going in another direction.

There would be no couples featured during that final shot.

It was all of the women, by themselves, having a romantic evening in, treating themselves and fucking loving it, while wearing their lingerie.

"This Valentine's Day, fall in love with yourself."

Riley not only loved the concept and the message, but she loved that it felt so purely *Gianna*. Why would Gianna try to market her product to couples, when she had no interest in being a part of one? Gianna loved lingerie, she loved to look good, and she loved doing it for herself.

"You made it," Gianna's voice pulled both Riley and Joel out of their

admiration of the scene before them.

Riley braced herself as she turned to face her, and... yep. So far, she hadn't found a way to truly prepare for Gianna's impact. And most certainly not at this moment.

Because, as she strutted right toward Riley, she was wearing hand-stitched red lace cheeky briefs with the matching bra – and that was it.

What did she expect, when Gianna herself was going to be Cupid in the ads?

Riley's throat ran dry as she kept her gaze trained firmly on Gianna's face. Her perfectly made-up face that – from whatever product she'd used – was literally emanating a *glow*.

Her entire body emanated that glow, actually, Riley realized as her treacherous eyes dipped lower.

She swallowed tightly. Good lord.

"Riley!" Joel yelped.

Grateful for the break to her reverie, she snapped her gaze to Joel, then down to where her hand was gripping his. She hadn't registered how tight her hold had become, and she immediately released him.

"Sorry," she murmured, as meaningfully as she could through how hard her heart was beating in her chest.

"I'm so glad you got here before the actual shoot began!" Gianna exclaimed as she approached, a bright smile on her face.

Riley could see how she started opening her arms, coming in for her customary greeting hug, and every alarm bell went right off in her brain.

She did the only thing she could think of.

She grabbed the coffee from Joel's other hand and hastily offered it out in front of her. "We brought you this." She moved her hand out just a bit too far in her haste, the backs of her fingers brushing against the soft, firm skin of Gianna's bare stomach, sending the electricity up her entire arm.

Gianna abruptly cut herself off from going in for her hug, arms falling to her sides as she looked down at the large iced coffee – made to her specification from her favorite coffee shop – pressed against her stomach.

The smile on her face became no less genuine, if visibly puzzled.

She reached up and took the coffee from Riley, though, the confusion fading as she gave them both a grateful look. "Thanks. Believe me, I need it."

"I knew you would."

It was currently 5:30 in the morning, and Riley knew Gianna had been

there for well over two hours already. Several of the shots they wanted to use were going to include the dawn sky, through the ceiling windows, so everything had to be set up and ready for sunrise.

"Oh, holy shit." Joel garnered both of their attentions, his voice utterly thrilled as he stared across the floor at the cameras being set up. "Did you get—"

"Yes, I got the newest model of the cameras you suggested," Gianna cut in, confirming. "Thanks for the advice."

Joel looked at Gianna, sincere smile in place. "Of course. Yeah, thanks for asking me. You won't regret it; the quality is unparalleled. Even on the model we have at the station, which is almost five years old."

Gianna quirked an eyebrow as she sipped her coffee. "Well, you're the tech expert. Seems like it's in my best interest to use your knowledge."

He nodded distractedly, as his gaze tracked back to where one of the photographers was working. "I don't even know where I should start: checking out the camera or talking to Trey Edison?!"

Gianna lowered her voice as she leaned in close, "From what I've heard around set, he's got a deal with 3G to shoot their next music video. *And* that he and his boyfriend broke up."

Joel's mouth dropped open, "No way!" He whisper-shouted.

Gianna settled back on her heels, lifting her eyebrows. "It's what I heard," she repeated.

"I gotta go over there." He glanced at them both, hopeful. "If that's okay...?"

Riley, personally, wanted to tell Joel that was *not* why she brought him here! In fact, it was the opposite reason. "Traitor," she whispered unthinkingly under her breath, before she caught herself and snapped her mouth closed.

Thankfully, neither of them appeared to have heard her, as Gianna was rolling her eyes at Joel. "Yes, we are not your keepers. But we will be if you don't watch your every step. I've forgiven the Great Set Debacle, but I will never forget it."

Joel flashed a grin and a salute, as he started walking – carefully – to where the cameras were set up.

Riley watched him go, in part because of the betrayal he didn't know he was committing, but mostly to give herself something to look at that wasn't Gianna.

Gianna, who hummed quietly. Thoughtfully. “You brought Joel.”

Riley slowly turned to face Gianna, filled with trepidation.

She was giving Riley a quizzical look over her coffee cup, head tilted to the side. Her hair fell over her shoulder in a waterfall, shimmering in the lighting and Riley let herself focus on that rather than on the confused expression on Gianna’s face.

What could she say to her *best friend*? That she’d tried to bring their other friend with her to see if it would help keep Riley’s thoughts purely platonic?

That for the first time in twelve years, Riley didn’t know how to simply *be* with Gianna? That she felt every casual touch as though Gianna was made of lightning and Riley was a conductor, electrified?

“Um... yeah, he was really excited about it, so...” she trailed off, gesturing to where Joel was clearly geeking out over the camera, with Trey.

Gianna didn’t look away from her. If anything, she seemed to study Riley even closer. “Sure.”

Riley could *feel* her pulse speed up under the scrutiny, could feel how her palms were sweaty. Like she was some middle schooler talking to the prettiest girl in the class.

Only, she wasn’t twelve, and the prettiest girl in class was actually a woman, standing mere inches away from her, smelling divine, while wearing the bare minimum amount of clothing a person could wear to not be considered naked.

“He is,” she defended.

She was telling the truth, but the desire that melted through her veins mixed incongruently with the unpleasant feeling she got when she told a lie.

And that was the other feeling she’d started having when she was with Gianna, which was nearly as uncomfortable as the lust. Since the faithful night that she credited with them becoming friends when she’d returned from winter break in freshman year, she’d cherished her relationship with Gianna as one of honesty. Where they could both be their true selves. Where they didn’t have to hide anything.

Pretending that she wasn’t feeling something so intense around Gianna wasn’t just difficult; it felt like an outright lie with how much work she had to put into not acknowledging it.

“Yeah, I can see that Joel’s excited to be here,” Gianna allowed, taking another sip of her coffee, not taking her eyes away from Riley. “But he would be excited to come to any photoshoot, and you typically don’t ever bring him

along.”

“This one’s special,” she said, and that, at least, felt more truthful. Because it was special, and she latched onto that special feeling as she brought herself to reach out and touch Gianna’s hand that wasn’t holding her coffee. “It really is.”

It was the first time she’d initiated contact with Gianna since the great Realization, and her stomach flipped with it, but she held firm.

The speculation in Gianna’s expression faded slowly into a smile. It was both proud and sheepish, a Gianna specialty and one that was reserved typically only for Riley.

Gianna flipped her hand over to hold Riley’s, the move practiced and familiar and casual.

Riley allowed one squeeze, feeling flustered with the spark at the simple touch, before she tugged her hand back, knowing the move looked as awkward as it felt. She busied herself in making it seem like she was using both hands to hold her own cup of coffee as she brought it up to her mouth.

She willfully avoided Gianna’s stare, because she knew the imploring look she’d find if she met her eyes.

“Gianna! We need you over here!” A woman called from the main area of the shoot.

Riley presumed she was the director, and she’d literally never felt so saved by the bell in her entire life.

She blew out a relieved sigh as Gianna hummed quietly again, that simple sound laden with suspicion.

“All right, looks like it’s showtime. Wish me luck?” Gianna asked, before she gamely pulled at the straw in her coffee to finish it.

Riley very deliberately was not looking at the way her lips looked as they wrapped around the straw. She held Gianna’s gaze, that sheer pride she had in spades for Gianna ballooning up enough to give her some normality, as she asked, “Since when do you need luck?”

The cheeky smile that slid over Gianna’s face was devious and luminous and perfect. “You’re right.”

Riley reached down and caught Gianna’s hand again before she could walk away, despite any conflicting feelings. She held onto those long fingers, tangling them with her own. “It’s not like the time you worked with the shitty photographer who got the job because his uncle was working with the product team or like the director who tried to grab your ass during that

athleisure-wear gig. This is *all you*. No luck required.”

There. *That* was why she was here. Because Gianna was her best friend, and they supported each other, no matter what. It felt good to be able to do it, despite the tingling in her hand.

It felt especially good when Gianna’s smile melted into something incredibly soft. “Thank you. And thanks for coming here at the crack of dawn.”

“It’s not even the crack of dawn,” she corrected, relaxing minutely. “And I picked up Joel on the way, so I think I maybe should have taken your coffee as my own second cup.”

This was good. This was normal.

Gianna’s eyebrows arched as she leaned in closer. So close her hair fell over Riley’s shoulder, as she whispered, “I don’t know how to tell you this, babe, but *you* made that choice all on your own.”

“Gianna, we have less than ten to get the dawn shots,” the woman called again.

“Go be fabulous,” she choked out, before clearing her throat, teasing, “Show off that ass for the camera.”

In the Before Times – nearly four weeks ago – she would have tapped Gianna on the ass, too, for good measure. And Gianna would have laughed and put in an extra sway to her hips as she sauntered away.

Riley could see it play out in her head.

But she kept her hand stiff and clenched at her side. She wasn’t quite *there* yet in figuring out this new normal. Not even close.

Still, even without a playful tap, Gianna *did* flaunt and sway her hips as she walked away, laughing light-heartedly as she did so.

And as much as Riley desperately tried not to, she watched. She watched and felt that insane desire flood through her veins and mix with the feeling of guilt that she was acting so weird, then the guilt doubled at realizing how much she was objectifying her best friend.

Gianna gathered her hair over her shoulder and adjusted the fabric of her underwear so it sat perfectly on the curve of her ass, grinning over her shoulder at Riley as she caught her eye.

Yeah, she was going to have to figure something out. Fast.

* * *

BY THE TIME Riley made it home from the photoshoot that afternoon, she was fried.

No, she hadn't done any work. The people involved in the shoot – all of the crew, the models, Gianna – they'd all worked a full ten-hour day, and it was barely even dinner time. And the shoot had gone fabulously.

But Riley *had* been there the whole time, as she'd promised Gianna she would when she'd started this adventure. And she hadn't expected, when she'd made that promise, that she'd be in this predicament.

She had believed, months ago, that she would spend the entire ten-hour shoot feeling thrilled and impressed at what her friend had managed to create and pull off – which she had. And she'd loved being there for it.

She *hadn't* predicted that she would also be feeling a steady flow of arousal throughout the entire shoot as well. How the hell could she?! Sure, she'd known Gianna was going to be spending the day in literally designed-and-made-for-her-body lingerie, but...

Riley blew out a breath as she stared up at her living room ceiling.

She couldn't live like this.

That was the conclusion she'd reached. She couldn't keep this colossal secret from Gianna. That's what it was, she thought. And maybe she thought that because she was desperate to find a way to cope, but it was all she had.

The longer you kept something locked up that wanted – or needed – to come out, the worse it would be. Riley felt like she had more than enough proof to stand by that belief. She curated so many news stories that could have been handled so much better, had people just confronted the truth sooner. Even when it came to Ellie and their mother's relationship – at this point, there was so much unspoken between them, Riley had no idea how it could all be resolved unless there was a catastrophic meltdown.

Riley very much did not want to have a meltdown of any sort, and certainly not with Gianna.

She had to bite the bullet and do exactly what she preached as a living: go straight to the source.

She picked up her phone from where she had it perched on her stomach, unlocking it and pulling up Gianna's text thread.

And she proceeded to simply stare at it, trying to figure out exactly what she needed to say as uncertainty moved through her.

As if summoned, Gianna messaged her first.

Gianna – 4:34PM

You hightailed it home today. Are you sure you don't want to grab an early dinner?

Riley tapped her thumb against the side of her phone as her stomach flip-flopped.

Riley – 4:34PM
Yeah... sorry, I'm not super hungry

Screw this.

Gianna was her person. They would survive this confession – they'd survived the literal almost hook-up! It was a can of worms that Riley needed to open, and they'd be fine. Eventually, they would even laugh about it.

Probably.

She had faith in them. In their closeness, their love for each other.

Gianna – 4:35PM

Are you not super hungry because of how weird you've been lately?

Riley felt like her breath was stolen right from her lungs.

She knew she was on the cusp of acting insane – maybe not to someone who didn't know her the way Gianna did, but if Riley could tell how off she was, she damn well knew Gianna noticed it, too.

So, she didn't know why she was surprised that Gianna was commenting on it.

She didn't get to formulate a response to *that*, either.

Because her phone started ringing and she nearly dropped it right on her face when Gianna's picture popped up.

She'd never once screened Gianna's calls, and she wouldn't start now. Not even as she was still trying to figure out how to tell Gianna that she was so out of her mind lusting after her, she felt like a perv.

"Hey," she answered, proud of herself for that. Normal.

Gianna's voice was much more commanding than normal. "I'm at your door. Let me in."

CHAPTER 15



Riley shot up from where she'd been collapsed energy-less on the couch, suddenly buzzing with liveliness as she dropped her phone to the cushion.

She walked to the door, filled with a nervous trepidation she'd *never* experienced from Gianna coming over. Then again, Gianna hadn't surprised her with one-on-one time since Riley's new lease on life.

She only took a momentary pause, just one breath, before she pulled the door open.

And found Gianna standing there in her doorway, arms crossed, an expectant look on her face. Like a very agitated goddess.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" She asked, clearing her throat at the way her heart leapt from the sight of her.

"Am I not welcome here?" Gianna challenged.

She wasn't *angry*, per-se. But she was... uncertain, Riley thought, as she studied her, biting at her cheek.

And when Gianna was uncertain, especially when it came to something she was usually certain about – like Riley – she snapped a little.

Riley took a deliberate step back, encouraging Gianna to enter. Because the knowledge that she was causing that uncertainty, that vulnerability, in Gianna was all the push she needed to get the fuck over herself.

"Don't be ridiculous. You know you can always come here."

"I did find the place for you, after all," Gianna offered her a small grin with the words, as she brushed by Riley.

Gianna *had* found the apartment for her and Ellie, nine years ago. She'd had a class with the daughter of the super for the building and had gone over

to their home to work on a group project. While there, she had talked Riley and Ellie right into the lease.

And even though this had been Riley and Ellie's apartment – while Gianna had moved into her own, more spacious place for their senior year – Gianna had spent so much time here in the time since, sometimes it felt to Riley that she'd continued to have Gianna as another roommate.

Having Gianna in here, in her space, was second nature for Riley. Gianna's familiarity was clear in the way she tossed her jacket over the hook in a practiced move, how she didn't have to look where she was going before she rounded the corner into the living room.

"Come straight to the source," Gianna said, parroting Riley's own thoughts as Riley followed her.

Gianna turned on her heel seconds later, forcing Riley to come to a stumbling stop to avoid bumping into her. She folded her arms over her chest as she stared Riley down.

"It's a life lesson from Riley Jane Beckett herself. When you're confused or when you need answers, you go right to the source. So, that's what I'm doing here," Gianna explained, unnecessarily, uncrossing her arms to gesture around the room.

Riley's heart thumped in her chest, hard and fast, her throat running dry.

"You've been acting so... so *weird*," Gianna seemed to struggle to find the word that encapsulated exactly what she wanted, her face scrunching up adorably.

Even *that* face made Riley want to kiss her.

And that thought, that desire, spiraled through her, stealing her words.

Gianna seemed to find them.

"I mean, bringing Joel with you today? Whatever. It was fine; Joel can hang out with us, obviously." Gianna shook her head, letting out an exasperated breath. "But it's like you're trying to pull away from me? Which seems insane, and I've been trying to tell myself that you would never do that. That you've never *done* that. And yet, it keeps happening."

She dropped her searing gaze back to Riley's, as if daring her to disagree. She didn't even give her the chance to, though.

"So, bringing Joel along today," she listed, holding up one finger, then a second as she added, "You cut our laundry night on Friday short. You *barely* finished folding your clothes before you practically ran out. Like, what was that?" Gianna put up a third finger, "You didn't sit next to me when we

watched *The One* last week. You sat on the other couch! Like I had cooties or something? You made me feel like I should have been wearing a mask.”

If Gianna had been wearing a mask that night, Riley wouldn’t have been so distracted by the ruby red lipstick she’d been trying out and therefore wouldn’t have been so distracted by her lips. So, the mask actually didn’t seem like that bad of an idea.

It wouldn’t be that bad of an idea now, either, Riley thought as she stared up, helplessly captivated by Gianna. Her cheeks were flushed from her impassioned speech and her voice ticked into that little accent that she got when she was upset – something that wasn’t quite Finnish or Italian, just the littlest hint on her words when she was worked up that let you know English hadn’t been her first language.

While she’d noticed it many times, she had never found it hot before.

And now, she did, while also feeling so ridiculously *guilty*, and there was no way to keep the lid on this, not even if she wanted to.

“Are you going to pretend that I’m making this all up in my head?” Gianna pushed, staring Riley down as she set her jaw. “Because if there’s one thing you aren’t, Riley, it’s a liar.”

“I think it’s the right amount of weird,” the words pushed out of her lips before she could really think about them.

It was exactly what she’d said the night this had all started, and she still stood by it.

Her answer seemed to take some of the wind out of Gianna’s sails. “What?”

Riley rolled her lips and gathered her courage enough to say, “I – I haven’t been trying to pull away, Gianna. Not really.” Because she *wasn’t*. That was the thing. She didn’t want their friendship to change or to suffer.

It was the most stable part of her life.

She knew Gianna could tell she was being entirely honest, as all of the fight seemed to exit her, shoulders slumping, and she held up her hands to gesture around them, seeming lost. “Then, what—”

“I think I’m being the right amount of weird,” she repeated, clenching her fists against the incessant nerves running rampant through her. “For someone who nearly had sex with her best friend a few weeks ago.”

Gianna stared at her, seconds ticking by, as disbelief seeped into her expression. “Is that what this is all about? It was just a *kiss!* It – it wasn’t a big deal. We laughed about it, after.”

The words *stung*. Riley couldn't hide the wince on her face at the way Gianna's casual dismissal of that night seemed to bruise something inside of her.

But it was fair; this was what happened when you wanted real honesty. It might even be exactly what Riley needed to hear right now. Maybe those would be the magic words for her to be able to put this attraction to rest.

"I didn't realize it in the moment, Gianna, but it *was* a big deal. To me," she admitted, her voice hoarse. Her blood was pounding in her veins, rushing through her ears, and it was nerve-wracking but also a relief to admit it.

There was no hiding from Gianna. No lying to her, no secrets.

It was liberating, really, to give in to the truth, no matter how scary.

Gianna's mouth hung open as she stared unblinkingly at Riley. There was no hiding her shock.

Which made Riley laugh, absurdly. "Yeah, believe me, I was surprised, too. But, I can't stop thinking about what almost happened that night," she confessed, the words leaving her throat feeling raw. "And I'm trying to not let it change anything, but it's hard."

Gianna closed her mouth. Then opened it again, then closed it and rolled her lips tightly.

All the while, Riley felt so thankful that the truth was out while also being unable to calm the pounding of her heart, and the combination made her feel a little lightheaded.

"Hard... in what way?" Gianna finally asked, as she inhaled deeply, and then held her breath.

Waiting. And staring at Riley with a laser-focus that only made Riley's heart beat harder.

Riley stared back, incredulous, as everything inside of her screeched to a halt. "You're really going to make me say it?"

She felt like she'd said more than enough in the last few minutes.

Gianna took a step closer to her. "Yes. I want to know exactly what you're feeling, because – you're making me think... and I want to make sure I'm not misinterpreting?"

That was so Gianna. She would want this admittance of wild attraction spelled out for her. She would *love* something like that. Riley could imagine it already, the teasing way Gianna would smile after, how she would fan herself at an imaginary blush.

Something about that, though, made it easier for Riley to say the words. It

was, after all, just *Gianna*.

“All right.” She gave in. If Gianna wanted it, she would get it. “If what you interpreted from that was that I’m attracted to you, then you’re right. As in, really attracted to you. As in, it wasn’t just a thing that night. As in, it’s *all of the time*,” she annunciated each word, before dragging her hands through her hair as she laughed, wildly. “If you interpreted that I can’t stop thinking about the way your lips felt on mine or the way your body felt against me, then you’re right. If you interpreted that every time we’re together, now, I think about having you in that way, you’re right.”

Gianna watched her, so intently, her eyes so – so sharp. Riley hadn’t ever seen Gianna look at her the way she did, right now.

It made her stomach tie in knots, and she was rooted to the spot, caught in that stare.

Gianna stepped closer to her. One step, then another.

“You think about having me, in *what way?*” Gianna’s voice was dangerously throaty.

It sent a shiver arcing down Riley’s spine, landing between her legs, as she swallowed hard.

And she still couldn’t move. Not a single inch. Not even as her heart raced so quickly, she’d have been extremely concerned if she had a vascular condition.

She could only look at Gianna, right into her eyes, searching. Searching, because those words, said in *that* tone, were asking for a very specific answer.

Gianna had to know what she was asking Riley to do, what she was asking Riley to say. She *had* to. She might not have ever been in this situation one-on-one with Gianna before, but she knew enough about Gianna’s sex life to know...

There was a hunger in her eyes, something wanting that sparked all of those desires Riley had been trying to keep at bay, as she stood only inches away from Riley. Close, but not touching.

Everything in Riley’s body was fine-tuned to Gianna right now. Yearning and needy. So *needy*.

“I think about you, in the way that...” She licked her lips, mostly because of the images she had in her mind. All of the images she’d very much tried *not* to think about in the last couple of weeks. But also because she didn’t miss the way Gianna’s eyes tracked the motion.

And she really, really liked it.

"I want you," she admitted, the words a promise she didn't even understand, but she knew she was making it. "Every time you touch me, I think about it. It's like I'm cursed now in our everyday life because of that night. Because I know how you feel when you're touching me. When you're kissing me. And it feels... unfulfilled."

Her words were barely a whisper, but loud enough to echo through the room.

"What feels unfulfilled?" Gianna swayed the slightest bit closer. Close enough that Riley could reach out and touch her if she wanted – if she dared – but she didn't yet. Not even as her fingers itched for it.

"That we never... finished. That I never got to actually touch you. That you never really touched me. I wanted it. I wanted to feel you, to know what it was like. I wanted exactly what the gift you gave me promised, when we were in bed together."

"What, exactly, did the gift promise?" Gianna murmured the question, her tone seeming earnest. Like she actually wanted Riley to answer.

"Gianna," Riley bit out, a mixture of impatience and arousal and exasperation all mixing together inside of her.

Because Gianna was a tease; that didn't shock her.

How much she liked it, though, that was a little more surprising. And the fact that it wasn't as overt as Riley might have imagined, was a little strange.

"I'm just curious," Gianna whispered, her voice so throaty as she came to stand only mere inches away from Riley, her warm breath hitting Riley's cheek. Still, she made no move to touch Riley.

Riley's final straw – whatever vestige of control she was maintaining – snapped.

She thought she might be able to hear it shatter, as she reached both hands out and grabbed Gianna by the waist, pulling her the extra few inches so that her body was pressed right against Riley's own.

It was almost *too* natural, she thought in the back of her mind, as she lifted her chin as Gianna's hands cupped her jaw in one swift movement, holding Riley in place as her lips connected to Riley's.

She felt herself shudder into the connection, tightening her grip on Gianna's waist. And then she groaned, helpless, into Gianna's mouth as she realized that in Gianna's cropped sweater, her hands were actually *on* Gianna's body. Her skin was so warm and so soft and she slid her palms

down just enough to have both hands entirely against Gianna.

Gianna slid her tongue against Riley's, whimpering into the kiss as Riley stroked her fingers from her hips to her waist, stopping at her jeans, before moving back up to just under her shirt.

And, *fuck*, she loved the way Gianna kissed.

It was even better than she'd thought about in the last few weeks, in the uncontrollable times that her mind *went there*. Right now, it felt like kissing Riley was all Gianna cared about in the world.

The intensity of her lips as they moved against Riley's was bruising. Blistering and hot and messy. Just the perfect amount – not sloppy at all, but like her passion was utterly uncontrolled.

She sucked at Riley's tongue after toying with it, then pulled back just enough to tug on Riley's bottom lip gently with her teeth. Only to release her and dive back in for more. She kept Riley right there, right where she wanted her, both of her thumbs tracing lines up and down the column of Riley's throat, sending sparks everywhere she touched.

Riley slid her hands around Gianna's bare back and dug her fingers in, and she wondered if she did that, too. She wondered if Gianna felt those sparks when Riley touched her.

She thought, from the sounds coming from the back of Gianna's throat, that it was probably similar.

And *fuck*, those sounds. She pressed herself closer, arching her hips into Gianna. She was still wearing her leggings and Gianna was still wearing her jeans, and she got hardly any friction from it, but she needed it.

God, after the last few weeks, after the torment over wanting Gianna, she needed it.

It was raw passion and every sensation felt like it ramped up *everything* Riley was feeling. Every lustful, needy, aroused feeling she'd tamped down on for weeks came rearing back.

Gianna slid one of her hands down, long fingers sliding over Riley's neck, before moving to her chest, and then dipping underneath the neck of her sweater. And she wanted it.

She wanted *more*.

She wanted to know what sex with Gianna was like.

And despite it all, despite the attraction and the desire, the fact that *sex with Gianna* was something that might happen – soon – made Riley break the kiss, tilting her head back to end the contact.

She panted up at the ceiling, trying to regain any of her faculties, as they paused.

Quite literally paused.

Gianna stayed where she was, her hand resting on Riley's chest over the insane beating of her heart, her own breath rough and so hot, against Riley's neck. She shivered with it, and the confession seemed so simple, now.

"I really, really want to have sex with you." Riley managed to take in a deep breath as she straightened her neck and stared Gianna right in the eye, neither of them moving back.

Gianna's eyes were so dark and so wide as she held Riley's gaze with her own. Searching, clearly thinking this through, but not speaking.

And in the seconds beat by without Gianna saying anything back, Riley took that as her cue to keep talking. To lay it all on the table.

"That's what the promise of the gift was," she recalled their conversation that could only have been five or ten minutes ago – she frankly had no idea how long they'd been entangled. "That I told you I wanted to forgo dating and romance for now, and just have sex."

Gianna slowly nodded and still – so, so strangely for her – didn't say anything.

Riley could feel her own heart leap at that fact, and she knew Gianna could feel it, too. She started to realize, only in this moment, how *different* this situation was from the Riley-and-Gianna she was used to, and she started to shift back.

In a flash, Gianna dropped the hand that she'd still had loosely cupping the back of Riley's head, to wrap that arm around her waist, keeping her exactly where she was. Right where their bodies still pressed entirely together. Fitting unreasonably well.

"And you want that?" Gianna asked, seeming to finally find her voice. "You want to forgo dating and romance and have sex. With me."

Her voice that seemed so throaty – so unfairly enticing – as she studied Riley's face. So, so closely, as if needing to find any sign that Riley didn't know what she was trying to sign on for.

Riley thought, annoyingly and jarringly, of her sister.

She could perfectly picture Ellie's horrified look and the strength of her conviction in telling Riley about how opening this can of worms could really fuck something up.

She could hear Ellie's warning, she knew how against what was

happening between herself and Gianna Ellie was. And she knew her sister wasn't wrong; that doing this could potentially mess something up in a friendship.

But she also didn't think the same rules applied to everyone.

She and Gianna, they weren't like *everyone*. Their friendship was that strong. That special.

She could feel it, even now, even like this. In the total comfort she had, even in this brand-new embrace. She could feel it, knowing that if she said no, Gianna would release her and they could have dinner together, and Riley would have to work her attraction out in some other way.

Some other far, far less fulfilling way.

And she really *didn't* want that.

As she pictured what their night would turn into, and how she could perfectly see how their friendship would continue as normal, without ever knowing what it was like to satisfy this attraction, it seemed like the very molecular makeup of her body rejected that idea.

It was settled, then. Her mind and body agreed.

"I do," she confirmed, grateful her voice sounded as confident as she felt. "I trust you more than I trust anyone else," she admitted, stroking her hands down Gianna's back, finding comfort in the motion as she settled her hands right over the waist of her jeans.

And it would be the biggest lie of her life if she tried to say that the way Gianna's mouth fell open, her breath escaping her as if Riley's touch forced it out, didn't send another thrill through her. Falling right through her body to settle between her legs, where she was already alarmingly wet.

"I trust you and I respect you and I like you and I love you. I know you feel the same way about me," she only paused for a second, but Gianna was already nodding in affirmation. Pleased, Riley continued, "I don't want to date. You don't want to date. I've been in your life for so long that I already know your whole speech by heart."

"My speech?" Gianna's voice was both incredulous and amused, so soft it was barely a whisper.

"Whatever variation you give to the person you're sleeping with before you have sex," Riley elaborated, playfully pinching at Gianna's hip under her fingers. Gianna jumped at it, but didn't pull away. She just stared at Riley, her mouth falling open.

Riley merely matched the look, lifting her eyebrows.

“The speech about how under no uncertain terms does having sex mean we’re dating and it might happen again, it might not, but even if it does, it means no strings and if this isn’t what you want, then I understand, but we can’t go any further and if you do develop feelings, we need to cut off the sexual part of our relationship and I’m saying this because I don’t want anyone to get hurt and I just want us to be honest,” Riley recited with the confidence of having the upper hand.

Gianna laughed, but it was caught between being one of her real, genuine laughs and something almost nervous. “That’s not what I say...” Her smile turned from sheepish to coy. “Verbatim, anyway.”

Riley laughed, herself. “Exactly. But my point is,” she flattened her fingers out along Gianna’s back, then scratched lightly. The touch both felt natural and normal, but the way Gianna arched impossibly closer was intoxicatingly new, “I already know the agreements, here. And I... I want it. So unless you don’t, then I can’t imagine any reason why we *shouldn’t*.”

She held her breath, the moment pausing as she waited.

Gianna held the pause, though. Maybe it was only for a few seconds, but it felt far longer, as she examined Riley’s face. Her eyebrows furrowing together, lips pouting, like she was working through a thought.

“If you want some time to think about—”

“I want it,” Gianna cut her off. It wasn’t tentative or questioning, either. Her words were strong and sure and she nodded with it as she murmured, “I really want it.”

Riley didn’t know what she would have said next – something that conveyed her relief, something teasing, something clarifying – but it didn’t matter.

She yelped in surprise as Gianna used the arm around her waist to yank Riley up to her tiptoes; she obviously knew Gianna was incredibly fit, even knew the extent of her workout routines and schedules.

But fit enough to essentially be holding Riley up before she caught her bearings was a surprise.

It thrilled her, though, and only served to fan the flames already rekindled inside of her, especially as Gianna’s lips descended to hers again.

Yes. God, yes.

It was as though they hadn’t stopped at all; if anything, Gianna seemed more ravenous for anything Riley could give her than she’d been before.

She slid her hands up Gianna’s back, under her sweater, stroking her

thumbs at the bottom of her bra. It was the same red lace one she'd been wearing earlier, Riley could just *tell*, and something about that turned up the heat.

Maybe it was how the turn of events was happening. Maybe it was that even though she couldn't yet see Gianna, she already knew what she looked like under her clothing. She didn't know exactly what it was.

But she knew she wanted so badly, she could hardly stand it.

It only multiplied as Gianna used her hold to walk Riley backwards, Riley hardly supporting herself. Instead, she slid her arms tightly around Gianna's waist, and trusted Gianna to bring her wherever she wanted to go.

Apparently, it was right against the doorframe to her bedroom. Her breath left her in a rush as Gianna pushed her against it, caught between the firm wall and Gianna's body holding her up against it.

And she loved it.

Which was interesting, because Riley didn't ever love the feeling of being smaller or weaker than her past partners – all men. She liked to feel in control as much as possible.

But this... as long as Gianna was against her, she didn't care.

She broke their kiss just long enough to pull Gianna's sweater off, pausing for just a moment to make sure she threw it to the couch and not the floor; she knew how deeply Gianna cared about her clothing.

Gianna took advantage of the moment to tug Riley's shirt off, too. She lifted her arms to help with the process, Gianna's hips still pressing into hers.

When she had the shirt in her hands, Gianna paused, running her fingers over the fabric. "Cashmere. Nice."

"I wasn't going to show up to your first Worthy shoot and embarrass you," Riley panted back, before she took her own shirt out of Gianna's hands and tossed it to the couch with far less care.

She ran her eyes down Gianna's body, letting herself actually enjoy it. For the first time today, Riley let herself take in the way Gianna looked. How hard her nipples were, already pushing against the fabric. How full her breasts were, as she breathed fast and deep, almost like they would spill over the top of the cup at any moment. But they wouldn't, because Gianna tailored this bra to her own body.

Something about that in and of itself sent another rush through her.

She let the hook of *want* sink right into her, sliding down between her legs.

And she realized then, as she dragged her own eyes up to Gianna's face, that they were only not kissing because Gianna's gaze was centered on Riley's chest.

"You can touch me." She meant for her words to be strong and sure, because she *felt* so certain that she wanted it. But her voice was reedier than she could have anticipated, especially as she felt her nipples harden under Gianna's gaze.

They'd stopped before any *real* touching, when they'd kissed at Gianna's, during the Great Misunderstanding.

Gianna slid her gaze from Riley's chest up to meet her eyes, and Riley could see how hard she swallowed, before she licked her lips. Seemingly out of desire, but also maybe... nerves?

In spite of the heat surging through her, Riley made herself slow the fuck down. Even if it felt impossible, she forced in a deep breath through her nose, then out of her mouth, just to gather herself.

Because she wanted this. She'd had more than enough time – weeks of it – centered around how much she wanted this.

But if it wasn't mutual, then – "You don't have to," she whispered, and reached out to cup Gianna's cheek. A contour her hand knew so well, as she tilted Gianna's face to look right at her own. "We don't have to."

She was positive that Gianna could see everything. Could see how wrecked Riley already was for her, for this. Still, she ticked her lips up into as much of a comforting smile as she could.

Because while Riley knew Gianna in every way *except* for this one, she felt pretty sure that she knew her well enough to know that this hesitation felt a little out of character.

Gianna stared at her for what felt like forever. In fairness, Riley was also certain that every second ticking by also felt like a lifetime for her in this moment.

"We are," Gianna murmured, seconds before Riley nearly pulled out of her grasp.

And Gianna's mouth descended to hers, even hungrier than before.

Starved, might be appropriate, she dimly thought, as Gianna slid a hand up and fisted it in Riley's hair, pulling her head back as she kissed Riley like her fucking life depended on it.

Yes. *This* was the certainty Riley needed. The certainty she would expect from Gianna in the bedroom.

And then they were in the bedroom, she vaguely realized as Gianna spun, using her arm bracketing around Riley's waist again to pull her along for the ride.

She moved with Gianna easily, instinctively, not wanting to lose even a second of contact. Not as Gianna's bare stomach pressed into her own, her skin feeling feverishly hot and ridiculously *good*.

Even better when Riley realized that Gianna had unhooked her bra. She helped slide it off, uncaring what happened to it next, then dropped her head back as Gianna cupped her breasts.

They both moaned at the touch, Riley's guttural, Gianna breathless. But she couldn't help it. She couldn't stop any of the sounds escaping her, not when Gianna's hands – so much softer and exploratory, as they cupped and teased at her nipples – felt better than anything she'd ever felt before.

She arched her hips into Gianna's, feeling the goosebumps on Gianna's back as she scratched down – then hit Gianna's jeans.

And she wanted them gone. Off. The urgency with which she wanted that sluiced through her, and she slid her hands around, keeping her fingertips in Gianna's waist band, dragging along the top of her underwear.

She both heard and felt Gianna's sharp intake of breath at the back of her knuckles against her stomach, as she undid the button, then the zipper, deliberately running her hand down, tracing over the outside of Gianna's underwear.

Fuck, it felt good.

It felt even better to hear Gianna whimper with the light touch and the way her fingers tightened on Riley's nipples, pinching harder.

Gianna didn't pause, this time.

Instead, she moved, quickly and decisively. Pushing down her own pants, before kicking them down with a lack of care for her designer jeans that Riley found shocking. Or, she would have found it far more shocking, if she wasn't so busy stepping back and taking Gianna in. Completely and totally in.

Everything about her body, from the luscious curve of her hips into her waist, all the way down her long, toned legs. Then back up, slowly dragging her eyes up as she licked her lips.

The raw desire to touch and taste shouldn't have surprised her, given this obscene attraction she'd been reckoning with. But she wasn't prepared for just how strong it was in the moment of having Gianna standing in front of her, nearly naked.

Even though she'd seen Gianna like this all day – even though she'd seen Gianna in so many states of undress in their lives – this was so, so different.

This was full of possibility.

A possibility that, admittedly, left Riley reeling. She *wanted* to touch Gianna. But, she'd never touched a woman before. She'd never even really thought she'd be in this situation, so –

"You can touch," Gianna parroted Riley's words back to her, low and teasing.

She reached out and hooked her fingers into Riley's leggings – and her underwear, too, Riley realized, as she felt Gianna's touch right under her hips.

"But, I'm going to touch first," she added in what nearly sounded like a growl, tugging Riley's leggings swiftly down before encouraging her to get onto her bed.

She obliged quickly, so ready for everything that was going to happen.

Riley loved sex, she really, *really* did. This urgency and neediness right before was its own aphrodisiac for her. This primal part, where you wanted someone and they wanted you, and you both were ready.

In that moment, caught up in the wanting of it all, she didn't let herself go down any rabbit holes in her mind about being with a woman, or that woman being Gianna. It was less in the details, now, and in how badly she wanted this connection. How wet she was, how attuned she was to her body.

How incredible it felt to be kissed like this, pressed into her bed, hips pushing into her own. Rolling into her own, finally giving her *something*.

How sensual it was, to have warm, soft lips trailing down her neck, pausing at the hollow of her throat, then nipping lightly. Right where it made her gasp, then groan at the spark of the feeling.

It was like her body was an instrument and Gianna was playing her like she'd practiced her entire life. How she was sucking at Riley's nipples, alternating between soft pressure with her mouth and firmer pinching and tugging and rolling the other with her fingers.

She dug her fingers into long, soft hair, and found that she really loved it. Being able to grasp onto her partner – really hold onto them, in a way that she couldn't do with past partners and shorter hair.

Riley was panting already, even before Gianna pressed her thigh between Riley's legs and slid against her. Sliding right against Riley's hard clit, sending shocks through her.

Yes, she thought, as she stared up at the ceiling, crazed with the inferno that was burning hotter and higher inside of her with every rock of Gianna's thigh, every stroke of her tongue, the way her hands couldn't seem to hold still.

She touched every part of Riley's body that she possibly could, leaving her both satisfied and wanting more.

Yes, it was good, but she wanted – she *needed* – more.

And she wanted it now.

She reached down to her own hip to where Gianna's hand was stroking over her skin, her hand shaking, as she lifted her head to look down and meet Gianna's eyes as she kept her mouth on Riley's chest.

She shifted her hips up, "More. Touch me."

It was both a plea and a command, and Gianna's mouth opened on a whimpered moan as she obeyed.

She slid her hand between them, rubbing Riley's clit between two of her fingers, and – "Fuck," Riley dropped her head back, uncontrollably. The only motion she felt she could control in this moment, was how she rolled her hips harder and faster against Gianna's hand.

It still wasn't enough. It felt perfect, but it wasn't enough, and –

"I know what you want. I know what you like," Gianna's voice was so rough, so familiarly unfamiliar, it beckoned Riley to look back at her.

Heart hammering in her chest, she didn't stop pressing herself against Gianna. "Wh – what?"

"I think there's a benefit to how well we both know each other," Gianna said, swallowing thickly, as her warm breath washed over Riley's chest.

Riley could only agree wordlessly, a whine in the back of her throat at how Gianna was rubbing circles around her.

"I know your favorite thing is someone going down on you," Gianna murmured. "How many times have we talked about it?" She dragged her teeth teasingly over Riley's nipple, making her hips jerk and another curse fall from her lips. Still, she couldn't look away. "How many times have you bemoaned how your partners didn't *really* know what they were doing and rarely wanted to take direction?"

God, she didn't know how. She didn't know how it happened that she had let herself not fixate on the fact that this was *Gianna*. Gianna, whom she'd talked about sex with so many times. Gianna, who knew exactly what Riley was missing in bed with past partners.

Gianna, who was now working her way down Riley's body, kissing and licking as she went. She left no spot untouched, to the point that Riley was a quivering, aching, dripping *mess* by the time Gianna settled between her thighs.

"You can give me direction. I know how to take it... really, really well." Gianna's gaze was laser-sharp on Riley from down between her thighs.

Her words, both the sentiment and the seductive tone, sent another shudder through Riley.

She reached down and grabbed Gianna's hair, enjoying the handful even more right now.

Gianna moaned against her at first contact and Riley moaned, too. Loudly. Uncontrollably. God, it was good. Almost *too* good, the way she licked at Riley's center, before wrapping her lips around her clit.

It became apparent very quickly that despite her comments, Gianna wasn't going to need any direction.

Not when Riley was unable to string together any thoughts or feelings or words or anything other than digging her hands into Gianna's hair, one of her heels against her back, as she rolled her hips into her face.

"I'm – Gi – yes. Just—" She choked on her words as her orgasm hit, everything else working out of her throat in a wordless moan as the pleasure rocked through her.

Gianna didn't stop, didn't move. She worked Riley through every wave, every aftershock. She'd never come so hard in her fucking life.

She had no idea for how many minutes she laid there, totally boneless on her bed, before the blood stopped roaring in her ears and her heart rate returned to something that resembled a healthy human.

And she registered a few things, when she came back to herself.

That Gianna was still on top of her, but she was bracing herself up on her elbows on either side of Riley's head. That Gianna angled one of her hands to be stroking through Riley's hair in a way that Riley had always enjoyed, finding it both pleasurable and relaxing. That she could feel Gianna's heart, pounding in her chest, from how close they still were.

She blinked her eyes open, finding Gianna smiling down at her. It was a smile she liked, not that there was one she *disliked*. But out of them all – a blinding smile for something funny, a polite smile for fans, a teasing smile, a rare shy smile to name a few – this one was just, soft. Sweet. Quietly beautiful.

"You really know what you're doing there," Riley whispered. She didn't mean to whisper, but her voice was so hoarse, her throat raw.

"Well, it helped that I've known about your sexual preferences for the last decade." Gianna slid her hand closer, through Riley's thick hair, to be able to touch her scalp.

The contact made Riley shiver, but not relax. In combination with what she'd said, it made energy pulse through her.

Because – Gianna *did* know just about everything Riley liked in bed. It only seemed to reason that Riley should be able to use her own knowledge of what Gianna liked when it came to sex. Frankly, Gianna shared far more than Riley did.

The idea that she could give back exactly what she'd received, regardless of the somewhat daunting fact that this was her first time with a woman, surged through her.

She bent her legs at the knee, bracing herself, before she flipped them. Satisfaction slid through her as she found herself spread on top of Gianna. Gianna, who stared up at her, soft smile gone.

It was replaced with a look Riley could only call desperate. Her eyes were dark, her hands were braced against Riley's bed, and her hips moved subtly up into Riley's.

Gianna released a low, slow breath, before she shook her head where it rested on Riley's pillow. "You don't have to—"

"I'm going to," she cut Gianna off, drawing her gaze down the lines of the perfect body sprawled under her, but not before she both watched and heard the catch and release of Gianna's breath in her throat.

She was in no way *not* going to take advantage of whatever insanity had come over the two of them tonight.

"I'm not shocked that you were decisive, when it comes to sex or what you want," Riley found herself saying as she shifted up to her knees to be able to really look down at Gianna.

At a body she theoretically knew almost as well as her own, in terms of the way it looked. But she hadn't ever really been able to appreciate it, beyond objectively seeing that Gianna was gorgeous, until very recently.

She could appreciate it, now. All of the soft skin and luscious curves and the wanton way Gianna was moving against her.

She moved her hand up, hesitating for a second before making contact with Gianna's bra-clad chest. In her hesitation, Gianna reeled up and quickly

disposed of her bra, before laying back down and watching Riley's every move.

And Riley's heart *pounded* as she stared at Gianna's bare breasts in front of her.

It was so insane, really, because she'd seen them before, naked. But she'd never thought about them or really admired them. The sight of Gianna's pink nipples – so, so hard – had never made her lick her lips. She'd never once even thought about how soft they might feel. Wonder if they felt the same as her own or different.

"It's so fascinating," she husked out, trailing her fingertips up over Gianna's stomach, enjoying the fact that she could see the goosebumps form, following her touch. "I've just never thought before, about how responsive women would be. Or, I guess, how responsive *you* would be."

She could see the flexing of Gianna's muscles, the tensing, as Riley took a deep breath and cupped Gianna's breasts in her hands. Though Gianna had just touched her and made her come, this felt different. Like any and all of Riley's remaining lines had been finally crossed, as *she* initiated touching Gianna in an entirely new way.

She shifted, pressing herself down against Gianna where she straddled her hips. Because even though she'd come – hard – and was so sensitive still, she liked feeling Gianna like this.

She splayed her fingers over Gianna's breasts, before sliding them over her nipples. And at the delicious catch of Gianna's breath, at the way Riley could *feel* Gianna's heart pounding under her hands, she found herself shuddering.

She toyed with Gianna's nipples, pinching and tugging, experimenting with pressure. Experimenting with how responsive Gianna truly seemed to be.

At how wildly attractive she found it.

"No wonder so many people fall at your feet," she murmured, meeting the consistent rocking of Gianna's hips with her own. "Especially after they experience this."

Judging on Gianna's reactions so far, she pinched harder.

A throaty cry left Gianna's throat as she arched into Riley, shivers popping up all over her body.

She'd never been with someone so incredibly responsive to her touch. Maybe it was that Gianna was a woman and she'd never been with one,

before. All she knew for certain was that it was so incredibly heady, she felt intoxicated by it.

“You know what I like,” Riley was able to speak several seconds later, after she got over the initial rush.

She pushed Gianna’s hips down hard with hers before tugging at her nipples a little rougher again, satisfaction coursing through her when she got a similar reaction. Desperate and wildly needy.

“But I know what you like, too.”

She’d never once thought that all of the sharing Gianna did about her sex life would serve an actual purpose.

But she *did* know. She knew Gianna liked being more submissive. She knew she liked harder touches, liked to be thoroughly *fucked*.

Just the thought of it all was so sexy and stimulating and edged on overwhelming but never moved too far.

Riley slid her hands from Gianna’s breasts, scratching lightly down her stomach as she shifted so that she was straddling Gianna’s thigh.

Gianna’s legs opened, quickly, spreading to make room for her.

“You’re so wet,” the words were rough as they left her, but also wondrous.

Because Gianna was still wearing her lingerie, but she’d soaked through them, very obviously.

“Yeah,” was all Gianna breathlessly said in agreement, her outspoken personality that Riley knew falling far to the wayside.

There was something about *that* that made Riley burn even hotter, and she quickly tugged Gianna’s underwear down, and then had to take a moment to simply – look.

Especially as Gianna’s legs opened again, wider, beckoning Riley to touch.

She drew her fingers up Gianna’s inner thigh, before sliding two fingers lightly over her core. It was one thing to *see*, another thing entirely to feel the way Gianna coated her fingers, and she gasped, snapping her head up to look at Gianna’s face.

Only to find Gianna watching her, eyes dark and heavily lidded and intense, her chest rising and falling so quickly as she dug her hands into Riley’s duvet so hard, her knuckles were white.

“Gianna...” she breathed out, before she slid her fingers up, seeking her clit. She just wanted to know what it would feel like.

It was hard. So fucking hard, and Riley started rubbing it in circles as she tried to figure out exactly what she should do next –

Gianna arched her back, hips jerking against Riley, her nipples pebbling impossibly harder. She moaned, long and loud and unrestrained as she grinded down into Riley's hand.

Riley could only stare, her throat dry, transfixed, as Gianna seemed to melt into the bed, panting. "Did you just come?"

She'd never thought it would be so easy; it definitely wasn't that easy for *her* to come. And she'd heard so many stories about Gianna's sex life over the years, but she didn't think she'd ever heard one that ended like that.

Gianna arched her hips into Riley's hand again, breathing still labored as she demanded, "Do it again."

* * *

RILEY LAID in her bed in the aftermath, heartrate finally returning to normal.

She'd had sex. With Gianna. Her best friend. The first time she'd ever been with a woman. And it had been fucking incredible.

She'd had sex, with Gianna, her best friend. And the world hadn't ended.

In fact, everything seemed to be spinning on its normal axis. The world felt *normal* in a way that it hadn't in weeks.

Somehow, bringing their attraction to the surface instead of trying to act like it wasn't there, seemed like it hit a reset inside of Riley. There was something very... peaceful, she decided was the right word, about this.

About laying with Gianna under the duvet that she'd tugged over both of them after she'd made Gianna come a second time. No, they'd never cuddled up entirely naked before, but laying together and talking or scrolling on their phones or watching a movie was very typical.

"I don't feel awkward," she said, clearing her throat through the dryness, as she sorted through her thoughts.

She reached over for the bottle of water she kept on her nightstand, unscrewed it, and took several gulps before handing it to Gianna, who propped herself up on an elbow and took the water from her.

"Me neither," she agreed, before sipping the water and arching an eyebrow. "Should we?"

"Well, we did just have sex," she said. And then she settled to mirror

Gianna, “Huh. We just had sex,” she repeated, just to really take it in.

Gianna was quiet for several moments, studying Riley closely, before she echoed, “We just had sex.”

“And we didn’t even use one of the gifts,” Riley joked, gesturing over her shoulder at the gift box.

Gianna laughed, handing the water back. “Well, I hope this satisfied your craving for some fulfillment, either way.”

It took Riley a second to register that Gianna was referencing the conversation from last month, that had accidentally opened this door. How she’d just wanted to have some good sex and not have to go through all of the work of dating for it.

And she did feel incredibly satisfied, that fulfilled and sated and utterly pleased feeling still coursing through her veins. “You know what? It really, really did.”

“Yet another reason why you should always come to me when you have a problem.” Gianna gestured up into the air as she took on a faux-haughty tone.

“I usually do,” she pointed out, deadpan.

“Fair point.” Gianna dropped her hand to land on her own hip. “Once again – *should* we feel awkward after sex?”

“I mean no, we *shouldn’t*.” Riley frowned, trying to figure out how to explain herself, drawing little patterns on the blanket with her fingertips. “It’s just... that initial feeling I get sometimes after the first time I have sex with someone. Like, what’s going to happen now? How do I look? There’s usually enjoyment, but then I’m also *thinking*. Because it’s new. And then I can’t help but comment on it, just to address it. Like I’m doing now.”

“Of course you do,” Gianna murmured, her voice full of endearment. She held Riley’s gaze as she nodded, “And, conceptually, I understand what you’re saying. Even if it’s not usually my experience.”

Which made sense, given that Gianna had had more sexual partners than Riley had and they were never long-lasting, so there were a lot more *first times*. Plus, Gianna was by and large, not an awkward person, anyway.

“But this doesn’t feel new,” Riley whispered, as she gestured between them.

The sex was brand new. The attraction – at least on her end – was still relatively new. Both of them naked only inches from each other when they weren’t changing clothing or trying something on, new as of minutes ago.

And yet, it felt easy. Gianna’s tousled hair fell to Riley’s pillow and she

had soft eyes and Riley was certain her own hair – which she had to go get straightened soon – was looking more than a little tousled.

But they felt normal.

She didn't quite understand that.

Then again, maybe she did. Why should she feel weird with Gianna, when she never had before and there were no secrets anymore? All was right in the world.

Until Gianna reached up and lightly pushed Riley's shoulder. "By the way, you are *awful*."

Insulted and confused, Riley caught herself before she fell onto her back. Then pushed herself up, staring down at Gianna in offense. "Excuse me?! You – I just made you come tw–"

Gianna's teasing smile fell and she sat up quickly, shaking her head. "No! Not at *that*." She reached out and put both of her hands on Riley's shoulders. "You're awful, babe, for making me think for like a week that something was really wrong, when you were just attracted to me."

Just? There was no *just* about how much Riley wanted Gianna. About how electric she found even the slightest touch. How she even reveled in this contact, Gianna's hands on her shoulders, rubbing circles with her thumbs.

"I've lived with my attraction to you for *years*," Gianna said with an air of superiority, jokingly shaking Riley. "And I've still been a normal person."

"We can't all be gods strongest soldiers," Riley shot back, but, admittedly, Gianna made a good point.

Then again, it wasn't exactly the same. Gianna knew she was attracted to women, so Riley wasn't some anomaly. It hadn't been this latent desire, only popping up years later for her, either. She'd had time to deal with it, for it to become normal.

Plus... Riley couldn't help but sigh as she looked at Gianna's face, then trailed her gaze freely down over her collarbones and then her chest, where the blanket cut the rest of her view off. Riley was a pragmatist. She, herself, was not an unattractive person. But she wasn't exactly Gianna.

There was very little probability that Gianna could be the same level of attracted to Riley that she was to her.

"You want to get something for dinner?" Gianna asked, stroking her hands lightly down Riley's arms, then back up, and she shivered with the coaxing touch. "You hardly ate today at the shoot, I definitely didn't have time to eat. And I want to celebrate with my best friend."

Riley sat with it, thinking about how Gianna had posed the same question to her hours ago, when they'd been leaving the shoot.

She'd said no, her stomach tied up in knots.

But she felt good, now.

Satisfied and *normal*, and, "I'm starving."

CHAPTER 16



*M*ay, Freshman Year

GIANNA EYED the clothing hanging up in her closet, then longingly out the window. Then back, again, pushing out a heavy sigh.

“What is it?” Riley asked from where she sat at her desk, finishing up an assignment for her journalism class.

Gianna opened her mouth, then shut it. Then shook her head. “Nothing.”

The music pumping in through the window – the weather was finally starting to be nice, again. Not cold, not rainy – made her sigh. Again.

Riley pushed back from her desk, staring at Gianna as she asked, full of exasperation, “Gianna, please. What is it?”

She didn’t want to say it. She’d been trying valiantly to disregard this urge.

But, it was still very present inside of her and not going away, and Riley was looking at her, demanding answers, and –

“I miss going out. I miss partying,” she confessed, quickly explaining, “And not, like, going out with my old... friends.” She was hesitant to use the word on them. None of them had reached out to her after she’d kicked them out of her room over winter break, and now she had Riley, and she knew what it felt like to have a *real* friend.

What it felt like, to have Riley.

She crossed the room to stand in front of her closet, gesturing at the many dresses she had. Beautiful, perfect dresses, that were simply collecting dust.

She stared at them, longingly. “I miss dressing up. And I miss flirting and dancing and getting a few drinks.”

Hastily, she turned to face Riley. “Don’t get me wrong, I love hanging out with you, I *do*,” she stressed, before her eyes turned soft and she looked back at her closet. “But...”

“Gianna, there’s no reason why we can’t do that,” Riley informed her, sounding confused.

Gianna spun around to gape at her, baffled. “But! You’ve had me all – laundry nights and makeup free and wearing sweatshirts and studying. We’re *building character* or whatever.”

Riley laughed as she came to stand next to Gianna. “Yeah, we are. But, dressing up and looking hot and having a few drinks and dancing, flirting... none of that is bad.” Riley shook her head in gentle rebuke.

“Then, why haven’t we done it all semester?!” Gianna had none of that gentle patience, right now.

“Because...” Riley bit her lip, before she let out her own sigh. “I was concerned, last semester, about how frequently you went out and came home, drunk. It wasn’t even just on the weekends.” That concern laced through her words. “I just wanted you to see that there’s another side of life. That... we can drink without needing it to bury our problems in.”

Gianna’s cheeks stung with shame and embarrassment, because... Riley was dead-on.

“That’s *not* a judgment,” Riley was quick to add, holding eye contact. “I’m not judging you. I care about you.”

Gianna forced herself to push past the uncomfortable squirming feeling in the pit of her stomach, swallowing down any denials or defenses. “You’re right. I *did* use going out as a crutch.”

There. She took a deep breath. She’d admitted to it. And Riley was grinning at her, proudly.

“Want to go out tonight?” She asked, and hell yes, she did.

* * *

THEY STUMBLED back into their room after midnight, and Gianna felt high. Not literally, because they hadn’t smoked any weed tonight. Just, *good*.

She’d drank a little less than she used to – pacing herself – but it also felt

fucking awesome to know that she was with someone who wasn't going to disappear at any point through the night.

A totally new experience, to go out and have it only be about her, about the two of them, just enjoying themselves. Her and Riley. Where there were no undercurrents of bitterness or underhanded comments about anyone's looks. Where they'd been entirely unpreoccupied with what anyone else out at the club was wearing.

Where she'd asked Riley where she'd wanted to go, and Riley shrugged and said that she didn't care, as long as they were hanging out together.

Her head spun, so pleasantly, as she and Riley giggled, and she shut the door behind them. As she turned around, she saw Riley settling herself on the ground, laying on the plush area rug they had. "Come here," Riley urged, waving her hand at Gianna.

She obeyed without question, settling down on the floor next to Riley. Her face was warm – but not in a bad way – and she was so comfortable and, it was so different.

"You're so different," she heard herself say aloud.

She turned to lay on her side, staring at Riley.

At the way her beautifully thick honey-colored hair splayed out under her head like a halo. At the delicate curve of her jaw. At the rosiness in her cheeks. At how *soft* her cheeks looked, especially as they were flushed the same way Gianna imagined her own were. At the way the middle of her bottom lip seemed to just... *give*. It was so lush, especially right there in the middle.

"Different than what?" Riley asked, turning to look at her.

Gianna ran her eyes over Riley's face all over again, as if she hadn't just studied her. As if she didn't already know exactly what Riley looked like. As if they hadn't lived together for almost a whole year at this point.

She'd already – obviously – known the shape of Riley's eyes, the natural heavy lid of them, but they looked alluring right now. She'd always known the small, delicate slope of her nose, but it looked so *cute* right now. Maybe it was because she was tipsy, and she had no filter over any of her thoughts.

But, she sighed with it. Riley was so...

She slid her eyes up to meet Riley's and was surprised by the intent look Riley was giving her. "What?"

"You said *you're so different*," Riley reminded her. "Different than what?"

Oh, right.

Gianna settled more comfortably onto her side, sliding closer to Riley. Riley always smelled so good; Gianna found it comforting, and found that she enjoyed when Riley's scent was left in her bed after they watched something there. "Different from... everyone. Everything."

"I'm not," Riley disagreed. "There are a lot of people very similar to me. I think you just knew a different kind of person."

Gianna frowned, vehement disagreement sliding through her. "No." Well. She sighed, heavily. "Fine, yes. I did. But. You're... different," she insisted.

She couldn't describe it, and in her current state, she didn't want to have to figure out exactly how. That wasn't really important. What was important, was letting Riley know.

She couldn't help herself from reaching out and brushing her fingertip over Riley's mouth, the touch feather-light. Right in that spot. She needed to feel it. To feel if her mouth was as soft as it looked.

It was, she realized, humming with it, as she pressed her fingertip against Riley's lip a little more.

Riley question her or move away.

She did flick her tongue out and lick at the tip of Gianna's finger, before she giggled again.

Gianna pulled her hand back quickly, her fingertip tingling, her face running hot. Eventually, though, as Riley continued to giggle, she joined in.

They both ended up on their sides, facing each other, and Gianna felt so... peaceful. Just, *happy* and peaceful and, "Do you want to live together next year?"

"Huh?" Riley's laughter faded, confusion taking over as she squinted at Gianna.

"Live together. Again. Next year," she repeated. "I got the reminder email that we have to sign up for student housing again for next year." That uncomfortable feeling slithered through her stomach, and she shook her head. "I mean, it's fine if you're going to live with your sister or something."

She hadn't even thought about it before now. About what she was going to do next year, without Riley. What she was going to do if she and Riley didn't see each other regularly. And, she realized as she stared at Riley, not because she felt like she needed Riley as her moral compass, but because she just wanted to see her. She liked the life they had, now. She didn't want to lose it.

She tried, then, to stave off those thoughts and the alarming feeling that came with them, because if she hadn't processed that sober, yet, then she sure as fuck didn't want to do it while drunk.

"No," Riley blessedly cut into her thoughts. "Ellie has a full scholarship for room and board at MIT." She smiled – so fucking *sweetly*, and Gianna loved it. She loved that smile. She was concentrating on it, when Riley reached down and linked their fingers together.

It was a hold Gianna quite liked, and she squeezed Riley's hand in her own. Solid. Steady. Consistent. Soft. Real. Riley.

"Let's stay together," Riley murmured, nodding to herself as she rolled onto her back again and closed her eyes on a quiet hum.

The words swiftly ended any lingering concerns that Gianna had from moments before.

"Let's stay together," she echoed, squeezing Riley's hand again, feeling her heart beat a little faster, a little harder. It was nice, though; she liked it.

She didn't turn onto her back, like Riley did. And she didn't close her eyes, either.

She watched how the moonlight filtered in through their window and over Riley, illuminating her, and she didn't want to move a muscle.

They were going to stay together.

CHAPTER 17



K eeping secrets or lying about events in her life was not Riley's strong suit.

This very basis was the reason why, two days after she and Gianna had sex, she was carefully cleaning her apartment before movie night with Ellie, Mia, and Gianna herself. Stress cleaning was very real.

She paused as she hurried, small vacuum in one hand, out into the living room, and checked her phone for an update on everyone's arrival.

MIA SHARPE – 5:17PM

*dragged Ellie out of the lab at a reasonable hour.
picking up dinner then we'll be there*

RILEY CHECKED THE TIME. 5:52. She'd gotten home just after five and had started this cleaning kick.

Though she didn't typically discuss her love life with Ellie unless there was an actual partner for Ellie to know about – a rarity – there was a difference between not discussing something and deliberately keeping something hidden because she knew that Ellie had very strong negative feelings around Riley embarking on a sexual relationship with Gianna.

Not that they really had a sexual relationship. They'd had sex, just the one time.

Owen Grady – 5:34PM

I went over some of the tech prep with Joel earlier, but I have some notes. Should I review them with you or him?

Joel Masterson – 5:36PM

Owen spent the afternoon trying to lecture me about camera angles. I'm going to end it. We should have had Peter McCoughlan!!!

Riley pointedly ignored Owen's message as she checked her phone, then fired off a quick message to Joel where she acknowledged that she deeply understood where he was coming from.

Gianna – 5:43PM

Be there soon! Don't let Mia and Ellie pick a weird movie please <3

Gianna's very casual, very normal, very simple message was in-line with everything else they'd exchanged in the three days since they'd had sex.

It was all run-of-the-mill. All very normal Riley-and-Gianna. They'd talked about Gianna turning down a sponsor offer to focus on Worthy going wide on Monday afternoon, about Riley's work stress Tuesday morning, about what Gianna had gotten for dinner when she'd gone out with her agent last night, and then confirmed movie night plans earlier today.

Couldn't be more normal. Anyone reading their texts would never know that they'd had the best sex of Riley's life over the weekend.

Their Sunday evening had ended after they'd gone to Gianna's favorite Italian place in the North End for dinner, then had just walked around a bit, meandering back to Riley's in the cold evening air.

Maybe it *was* a testament to them and this foundation they'd built, that they slipped right back into normal friend life. Maybe it was a testament to the fact that sex wasn't necessarily this mystical be-all-end-all of relationships and chemistry, even when people sometimes treated it that way. It didn't really have to be any different than the two of them exploring anything else that was *new*, together. Like when they'd tried tandem biking when they were on vacation two years ago.

... all right, she laughed to herself as she finished tidying up the living room, it wasn't *exactly* the same, given the orgasm of it all.

Still, though. Gianna had walked with her back to the apartment, had kissed her cheek – throwing in a little bonus nuzzle – before she'd thanked her. "For being such an honest and hospitable host, earlier," she'd said with the most serious and sincere expression she'd clearly been able to muster, before she broke down in laughter.

Riley had joined her, before bumping her hip into Gianna's as the Uber Gianna had called pulled up at the curb. "I'll see you in a couple days."

"Have a good night, carina."

Riley's stomach, admittedly, fluttered at the name. Just a little. But, she reasoned, she had always gotten a little enjoyment from that.

"Text me when you get home!" She'd regained the presence of mind to say, as Gianna opened the door to the car.

Gianna turned, her hair falling over her shoulder as she shot Riley a small smile. "Don't I always?"

"Except for when you get side-tracked," she arched her eyebrows knowingly as she leaned back against the wall to her building.

Gianna's grin fell into a look of offense. "That's only happened *once* in ten years, and I had no idea I was going to get caught up in a game of life-size Jenga that people had set up in the public garden!"

She only shook her head, leaning back against the wall to her building as she crossed her arms and watched Gianna go, the car pulling away from the curb long before she'd opened the door to her building.

But it was the first time they'd be seeing each other since then, and they would be with Ellie and Mia. And Riley just needed it all to be normal, still. For Ellie to have no idea what had happened between her and Gianna.

She started, a thrill of one part nerves and two parts excitement, when she heard a knock on the door. Which was fine, she reasoned, as she was often excited to see Gianna, long before this shift had happened between them.

Still, she slowed as she walked down the hall toward the door, catching her own eye in the mirror.

Her hair had been freshly straightened at the salon, yesterday. Which she'd started getting done as a teenager, because she'd been so *sick* of constantly trying to manage her curls and wrangle them into different styles.

But, it looked good. She brought her hands up to make some adjustments, but, she looked perfectly fine. A little tired, from a long day at work where Owen had been on her nerves as well after trying to make "edits" throughout the piece they'd been working on.

She rolled her eyes at herself, then, because since when did she ever check how she looked when she was just having a night in with her friends?

She made herself drop her hands to her sides; Gianna had seen her at her worst, including being hungover and when she'd had the flu. It wasn't like this was some new relationship where she was trying to keep putting her best, most attractive foot forward.

It wasn't like this was that kind of relationship, period.

She continued the few steps down, already finding herself grinning when she pulled the door open.

Only to find Ellie and Mia there, rather than Gianna.

Riley wouldn't say she was *disappointed* – all right, maybe a little – but she would definitely say she was confused, as she arched an eyebrow directly at Ellie. "You moved out less than six months ago, lived here for ten years, and still have a key... but you're knocking? We've talked about this."

Ellie shrugged, defensively. "It's your place, you have the right to privacy."

Exasperated and endeared – common twin feelings she had directed at her sister – she shook her head. "El, *please* just come in from here on out. It will save me the trip to open the door. I promise I will alert you to any orgies I'm having in advance."

"Listen, I would have just come in, but I have my hands full," Mia cut in, lifting both hands to show the paper bags she was carrying, presumably full of the Indian takeout they'd all agreed on.

"That's the spirit," she laughed, nodding approvingly, before moving back and making room for them to come in.

Ellie took one of the bags in Mia's hand and walked down the hall with it, turning into the kitchen, as Riley pulled Mia into a quick hug.

Mia was several inches shorter than she was and slight with it, but was deceptively muscular. She had to be, given that she was a firefighter and all, but the first time Riley had been introduced to her years ago, she'd been shocked by just how deceptively small she looked.

"Hey, I've missed you," she said as they pulled back from the hug. "It's been a while."

They – she and Gianna – hadn't spent any significant time with Mia in nearly a month. Mostly because of the holidays, plus all of their work schedules; they'd only sent messages in the group chat.

Mia smiled, dimples popping, as she said with a quiet sincerity, "Yeah,

I've missed you, too."

Mia often spoke like that, Riley had noticed when Ellie had brought her into the mix. She was great in an easy, nonconsequential social situation – Ellie's opposite in that way – but always seemed cautious when people started to express true care for her, as a person.

And Riley *did* care deeply for Mia as a person. She was kind, genuine, self-sacrificing, funny – all great traits that made it easy to care about her in her own right. But she also looked at Ellie like she hung the moon and at least half of the constellations, too. Riley would love anyone who cared about her sister like that. Who helped Ellie come out of her shell without pushing her out of it. Someone who saw Ellie for the amazing person Riley had always known her twin to be, and loved her for exactly who she was.

So even if Mia was slow to let people in, Riley included, even after several years, she didn't need her to be an open book. She just needed Mia's eyes to turn into hearts around Ellie. Which hadn't ever stopped happening, even before they'd gotten together almost a year ago.

"Sorry I'm late, but I picked up some cannolis for dessert," Gianna's voice came from just outside the doorway, which was still open.

Her hair was styled into a bun on the top of her head, which told Riley she'd been working on a makeup video, most likely. Her makeup was skilfully and flawlessly applied, as it nearly always was, her full lips alluringly and deliciously red – that same red Gianna had been testing out last week. She always tried the items she used before she was willing to feature them in a video as a recommendation. The red that had attracted Riley's attention that entire night, tortuously.

But that was before they'd had sex, before they'd acknowledged this attraction. It shouldn't be nearly as distracting again.

Admittedly, it kind of was, but only for a few seconds, before Riley snapped herself out of it and stopped staring at Gianna's mouth.

"Long time, no see," Gianna sing-songed lightly at Mia, "They got you locked up in that firehouse or what?"

Mia laughed as Gianna gave her a quick hug, before Gianna turned toward Riley, automatically coming in for a hug from her, too.

Riley felt the barest hesitation, before she gave in and leaned into Gianna's embrace. Not only because it would be incredibly weird and out-of-character to rebuff the hug, but also because – she wanted it.

She didn't want to go back to being weird; she couldn't handle that. The

couple of weeks over the holidays was her limit.

It was easy to relax against Gianna, as she took a deep breath in, inhaling her scent. Gianna's arms wrapped around her waist, squeezing, as she rubbed her free hand – not holding the cannolis – up and down Riley's back.

The contact made her stomach feel a little flutter, sure. But it also was so... comfortable. Just the way it had been for years.

"Hey, you," Gianna murmured, against Riley's ear, before they pulled back, though Riley kept her hand at Gianna's waist, where it automatically wanted to go. Her blue eyes were bright and playful as she teased, "Long time, no see for you, too."

Riley snorted out a laugh, even before she lightly pushed at Gianna's waist, dropping her hand. "Yeah, it's been *forever*."

Three whole days since they'd fucked in this very apartment. Since Gianna had *seen* a lot more of Riley than she ever had before.

She could feel her cheeks flush as she thought about it, and –

Ellie's voice broke through the moment, as she called from the kitchen, "Were we supposed to have three orders of the naan?"

She was grateful for the interruption, before she could really let herself relapse into desire for Gianna. Tonight was all about keeping things... respectable.

* * *

UNFORTUNATELY FOR RILEY, it became extremely apparent throughout the evening, that maybe things weren't as normal and respectable as she'd believed they would be.

Her thought process had really been that she had felt completely fine and normal, no freaking out or over-analyzing after they'd had sex. That honestly, the world had seemed to make sense, again. Therefore, everything should be able to *feel* normal again.

The first time it occurred to her that this electric, powerful *wanting* might not be entirely quenched from their encounter on Sunday, was as they were assembling food onto their dinner plates.

When Gianna, who had been standing in front of her, had accidentally dropped the spoon they were using to serve the rice and bent at the waist to pick it up. And, despite the voice in her head telling her to *not*, Riley dipped

her gaze down, staring at Gianna's ass, her throat running dry.

She wanted to *touch*, as she silently bemoaned that when they'd been together, she hadn't taken advantage of touching Gianna's butt. There had been so much other touching and pre-occupation at the time.

Ellie coughed from where she stood a few feet away, getting her attention as Gianna straightened up. "Riley, can you hand me a fork?"

Riley moved swiftly between nerves at getting caught checking Gianna out to dubiousness, as she stared at her sister. "Hand you a fork... from the draw behind you? From which cutlery hasn't been moved since we moved in?"

Ellie unsubtly gestured to Gianna, who was rinsing the spoon in the sink, not facing them, before giving Riley a *look*.

Okay, yes. She had definitely been caught ogling her best friend.

She cleared her throat, re-focusing herself. *Keep it respectable*. They'd had sex only a few days ago, the fact that it might still be very present in her mind was normal. She should have known it would happen once or twice.

It happened again, though, as they moved into the living room and Riley had sat in her space on the couch – movie nights like this usually saw herself and Gianna on one couch, Ellie and Mia on another – and Gianna had stood a foot away from her, clearly preparing to settle in, herself.

And then, she'd stretched. Totally fine and normal, arms over her head, twisting her back a bit. Her shirt slid up, revealing her stomach, settling just at her waist, leaving several inches of soft skin on display.

She'd stared, that same urge moving through her. The urge to reach out, even as she resolutely kept her hands in her lap. Riley had no idea what movie had been settled on at all, as Ellie, Mia, and Gianna debated different options while Riley had been living in her internal struggle.

Still, as Gianna had dropped to sit next to her on the couch, Riley breathed through it. Fine. Respectable. And she tried to focus on the new Avery Wilder romcom.

Halfway through the movie, lights dimmed, as Gianna had taken a sip of water, a few drops dripped from the lip of the bottle and landed on Gianna's chest. She was wearing a sweater with a deep V-neck, and Riley had watched those drops. Transfixed, really, as they'd slid down, disappearing at the neck of the sweater.

Gianna had tugged her sweater away from her chest, grabbing a napkin and dabbing at her skin. She'd slid the napkin down, right above her breasts,

which Riley could easily see perfectly encased in one of Gianna's silky bras.

The heated desire that she'd done her best to keep at bay so far... was no longer held at bay, in the least. Not at all. She felt it, present and wanting, even as she'd shifted around on the couch and pressed herself against the back cushion.

Movie night had never been so difficult.

Maybe she had simply never taken note of these things, these moments, throughout their friendship. That was the *wild* aspect to this. That for years, Gianna had been these small things, and Riley never thought anything of them.

And now, she was left wanting.

Was every normal interaction going to be like this? If she was so transfixed by all of these casual, normal actions then –

She found herself caught up again, then, as Gianna picked up the cannoli she'd gotten for dessert. She held it delicately, carefully, to not make a mess.

Then, Riley watched as her breath caught in her throat, as Gianna slowly licked at the filling. Curling her tongue around it, breathing out a happy little sigh, and Riley's breath left her in a rush as that heat sparked through her all over again.

Even as she tried to look at the movie – tried to force herself – she looked back at Gianna. At ruby red lips that wrapped around Gianna's finger, sucking off the powdered sugar there.

Riley heard herself whimper, before she promptly cut it off, disguising it with a cough.

But – this was *obscene*. It was –

She trailed her eyes up Gianna's face... only to find that Gianna was watching her in the dimmed room, rather than the movie.

They locked eyes, Riley's heart pounding in her chest, as Gianna's lips ticked into a smile. The most devious, mischievous smile, as she held Riley's gaze, an honest-to-god twinkle in her eyes, and slowly pulled her finger out of her mouth.

She was wracked with both disbelief and arousal, huffing out a soft laugh as she shook her head.

Gianna was doing this all on purpose. These *weren't* all everyday occurrences that Riley had never noticed. Something about that, though, made everything burn even hotter inside of her. That this was all so deliberate.

She couldn't say anything, though. Couldn't do anything about it. Not for the rest of the movie, as Gianna pressed herself against Riley in the guise of cuddling, or as she dropped a hand to Riley's thigh and rubbed very intently. Sliding up, close to Riley's core... then sliding back down.

If Mia and Ellie saw them, they'd look entirely normal. They always cuddled like this. They touched or gave little massages to one another often.

But Riley knew, very well, that it was not normal, and she was vibrating from it.

She basically jumped up from the couch when the movie ended, flipping on a lamp, as she did her best to usher Ellie and Mia out.

"I just have so much going on at work. Owen is being frustrating, and I have to get up pretty early tomorrow," she explained, which was great because none of that was a lie.

As the group herded toward the door, she hugged her goodbyes, keeping everything together as Ellie and Mia exited her apartment.

Before Gianna could follow suit, though, Riley grabbed her hand and pulled her back. She quickly peeked down the hall to make sure that Ellie and Mia had gone, before she shut the door.

She arched her eyebrows up at Gianna. "Teasing me? Really?"

Gianna's eyes went so wide, so innocent, as she dropped her mouth open in fabricated insult. "Teasing you? I was not."

Riley dropped her hands to her hips, staring Gianna down, as she stepped closer. Close enough that Gianna was pressed against her wall and Riley's chest pressed against her, and she could feel the fast staccato of Gianna's heart.

A vicious satisfaction worked through her at that; she wasn't the only one who'd been affected by the teasing, then.

"So, you weren't teasing?" She asked, dropping her voice, as she slid her hands up Gianna's hips, slipping easily under her sweater to the warm skin underneath.

It felt so natural and instinctive.

Especially when Gianna's arms came up, resting on Riley's shoulders, as her fingers toyed with her hair. "No," Gianna replied, evenly, "Because I think *teasing* implies that you won't be getting what you want, at the end."

Riley pushed her hips forward into Gianna's, heart pounding, and – yes. They were doing this again. It was that easy. "And what do I want?" she asked, angling her head up.

“Me,” Gianna breathed only a second before she dipped her head and captured Riley’s lips with her own.

It would never be said that Gianna didn’t know Riley exceptionally well.

* * *

RILEY COLLAPSED ONTO HER BED, trying to catch her breath after the most intense orgasm she’d ever had.

She’d fucked Gianna with her fingers, hard and fast – exactly the way she knew Gianna loved it even before they’d had sex the first time – as Gianna had laid on her stomach, stretched out under Riley. She’d gotten to fulfill her want from earlier, to touch Gianna’s legitimately *perfect* ass, and she’d been breathless from both the energy it had taken to thrust into Gianna and with the sheer *need* to come, when Gianna had weakly reached for Riley’s bedside table and handed Riley her vibrator.

“So... not just a one-time kind of thing,” Riley mused, as she turned and faced Gianna.

Who was still laying, supine and sated, in the middle of Riley’s bed. She looked up at Riley from where she had her head resting on the duvet, not quite reaching the pillow. “Why should it be? We both love sex and we very recently learned that we are pretty great at it, together. Neither of us has any other partners right now.”

Gianna’s explanation made perfect sense, and it settled inside of Riley. It was relieving, because sex with Gianna was that good. If she’d been in this situation with anyone else – having such good sex where they just *clicked* and they were so comfortable together – she would never assume they weren’t doing it again.

“Have I ever told you that you’re a genius?”

Gianna smiled, wide and relaxed, kicking her feet up into the air. “Once or twice, but I’m always open to more.”

Riley laughed before her phone vibrated on the nightstand and she turned to glimpse at it.

Ellie – 9:13PM

I think I left my wallet there? I’m going to stop over in the morning before work to get it.

Riley gave the message a thumbs up, tapping her fingers against the bed

as she contemplated this as an ongoing scenario. She was naked, in bed, with Gianna, who was stroking languidly up and down Riley's leg.

She was so comfortable, and everything made sense, and she wanted more of this. That was enough for her to keep going forward, to feel good about it.

But she could so easily picture Ellie's very strong and very negative reaction to even the *idea* of this exact situation.

It made her feel a kernel of guilt. "I don't think we should tell them," she found herself saying.

Gianna's hand on Riley's leg paused its stroking motion. "What?"

"Ellie, Mia, Joel," she elaborated, swallowing thickly. "We shouldn't tell them. About this."

Gianna was quiet for a long moment, before she propped herself up and stared at Riley, questioningly. "Are you ashamed of having sex with me, Riley Beckett?"

There was a teasing edge in her voice, but also something deeper that Riley picked up on. Something very real.

Riley turned to face Gianna, urgency pounding through her, as her stomach twisted in revolt. "I can't believe you would even *ask* me that." Her voice sounded exactly as wounded as she felt. "You think, on any level, that I could be ashamed of you?"

Because if that was the case, Riley would have to go back on the agreement they'd just made, about this happening more. She might even have to start questioning some parts of their friendship that she'd felt were rock solid.

Gianna shrugged, then brought her hand up to rub at her eyes. Finally, she shook her head. "No. I don't."

Riley could, thankfully, hear from the quiet, raw delivery that this was the truth, and she cautiously relaxed.

She was still confused, though, and she stared at Gianna, waiting for the explanation.

"I guess – I mean, *you're* the "honesty is the best policy" woman," Gianna finally said, exasperated, letting her hand fall back to the bed between them. "You've never had any issue discussing your love life with Ellie or Joel. I'm the new factor in the equation."

That was very fair feedback, and Riley accepted it with a nod. She tried to figure out how to explain through the way her stomach tied itself into nerves

at the idea of her and Gianna being anything other than *her and Gianna* in the eyes of their friends.

She knew Ellie wouldn't get it or approve, that was for damn sure. She didn't want to be the cause of the distress Ellie had displayed at the idea of Gianna and Riley changing their relationship. And she knew Joel would have a million questions that she wouldn't have an answer to, that he would want to discuss this to death whereas Riley just wanted to experience it.

"If we tell them," she slowly picked through the words to find the best ones to explain herself, "Then us having sex is going to become something under a microscope. They're going to all have opinions and every single time we're together, they're going to think about it, and they're probably going to worry that something could go wrong. And that could change the entire dynamic of all of us when we're together."

Riley stared at Gianna, less than a foot away from her, naked in her bed. The truth was, that if Riley and Gianna weren't *them*, anymore, the bedrock of their friend group might actually completely shift.

Riley wasn't sure everyone else would have the same confidence she and Gianna had regarding the strength of their friendship. About the certainty that they could do this and still be normal.

She knew for a fact that Ellie didn't share it.

"Things could get really weird, really fast," she finished. "And, honestly, it's none of their business."

"You think it would? Get weird?" Gianna asked, her voice contemplative.

Riley blinked incredulously at Gianna. "Do I think that *Joel* and *Ellie* might say or do something weird in response to something they perceive as a big relationship dynamic change?"

Gianna snapped her mouth shut and nodded, her expression contrite. "You are so right; I was obviously on my crazy pills." She nodded to herself, clearly thinking their entire situation over. "So, sex. Continuing. And keeping things between you and I."

Riley nodded. Yes. That all sounded good to her.

Gianna's smile slid back into place as she settled onto her stomach again. "I do enjoy some good just-us time."

"I think this might be the most *just us* time we'll have ever had." Her own smile crept over her face, meeting Gianna's, as her stomach flip-flopped with the thrill of it.

CHAPTER 18



Riley thought that by and large, she knew everything about Gianna.

She found over the first few weeks of embarking on this sexual relationship, that she'd been wrong about that.

She'd also found that being wrong had never been more fun.

She supposed that there were some things she could only understand by experiencing them. And the one aspect of Gianna's life that Riley had never experienced first-hand, was sex.

Riley found herself engaged in an intense learning curve.

She learned about how Gianna was very happy to either go down on Riley or give her a vibrator, often being the one to initiate using any toys. Which was very new for Riley, as she'd always been the one to bring it up to past partners.

There had always been moments with past partners, where she had to be very blunt – she could only come from a couple of methods – oral or vibrator – and she could only come in a few positions – on her back from oral or on her back/grinding down into a vibrator. She wasn't shy about asserting that, but it didn't always go over well.

When she'd gotten *so close* with Gianna eating her out while Riley had ridden her mouth, she'd nearly cried, thighs shaking from the intense *need* to release. She knew she had to be dripping all over Gianna's face, and yet she strained toward orgasm, tightly gripping the headboard. "I can't – I can't—"

Those were the only words she could form, so gone in the moment.

Gianna had licked up her core, making Riley shudder so hard, as she tugged at Riley's hips. "I know."

She'd pulled Riley down, then, flipping them easily, so Riley was where

she needed to be.

She learned that while she had always only been able to come once during any given sexual encounter before she became overly sensitive, Gianna could come frequently. And she *did*. That she could be in many positions. And they tried them.

She learned that there was a satisfaction and a thrill, unlike anything she'd ever experienced with anyone before, in being the one causing Gianna's pleasure. Gianna was always vocal – making sounds, encouraging. She wasn't shy in her body *at all*, loving to be touched and having the most visceral reactions to Riley, always. There was something so gratifying about making Gianna come, that it made Riley feel better than coming herself.

Added to that, it was *Gianna*. And Riley always enjoyed making Gianna happy; this was simply a new way for her to do so.

She learned what it felt like to have a partner who seemed to genuinely *worship* her body. Riley wasn't in the habit of feeling overly self-conscious; her body was her body and she accepted herself the way she was. She certainly didn't hate her body and she wasn't ashamed of it. But her weight did fluctuate, plus or minus about fifteen pounds, depending on how busy or stressed she was. She definitely didn't have *Gianna's* body. But she was comfortable with Gianna, because Gianna knew Riley's body. And she looked at and touched Riley like she was just as desperate as Riley was to touch her.

She learned, perhaps most enjoyably, that their tastes aligned so very, very well with each other's. Gianna liked to be more submissive, to tease, but typically didn't want to call the shots – especially when it came to her own pleasure. Riley had always known she liked to be in control, but she'd never explored it the way she was now, with Gianna.

Experimenting in giving orders – where Gianna could touch, how she should lay, what she could say. "I want you to ask me to come," she'd murmured in Gianna's ear one night after they'd finished watching the newest episode of *The One*.

She'd watched the way Gianna's eyes had lit up, and it looked like the same feeling that had rushed through Riley.

She even learned how perfect *kissing* Gianna was. Even though they had already kissed a few times, it was different when they took more time for it.

Riley loved kissing. She always had. But most of her previous partners didn't love kissing unless it was leading to sex.

Gianna clearly didn't share that belief.

They made out slowly, sensuously, sliding and pressing their lips together, during laundry nights. Riley straddling Gianna's lap as Gianna sat in her chair in the laundry room, waiting for their clothing to dry. Or Gianna sitting on the table amidst their warm, freshly folded clothing, her legs hitched around Riley's waist.

Laundry night make-outs were perfect, Riley found. They'd start their evenings discussing their life updates – work stories, a little gossip. And then they'd spend the next hour in the small room, luxuriating in the slide and press of each other's mouths.

"Best addition to laundry night since Tide Pods," Gianna had panted against Riley's lips one night, making Riley laugh so hard, she snorted.

And, really, none of this should have been surprising.

"I mean," Riley had panted out, as they collapsed onto Gianna's expensive, soft sheets, after the first time Riley used a strap-on on Gianna, three weeks into their sexual exploration. "We're good at doing everything else, together. So, it makes sense that we're good at this."

Gianna had stretched out next to her, cuddling in close, as she agreed, "Mostly true. But we're not great in paired sports."

Riley laughed, dropping her hand to Gianna's back and lazily stroking, as she recalled their mangled foray into playing tennis together, five or six years ago, after Gianna had asked her to try it. Even the ping-pong tournament they'd entered in college hadn't gone so well.

"I can admit that it is my athletic hand-eye coordination that leads us to failure."

"Taking personal responsibility is really important." Gianna nodded, seriously. She arched into the hand Riley had on her back. "The good news for you, is that now, I can vouch for your finer hand-eye coordination skills."

She learned how much she liked the way Gianna tasted. Somehow both familiar and totally new to her, all at once. She knew the way Gianna smelled, the softness of her, and she'd always loved it.

To know someone as deeply and intrinsically as she knew Gianna, but to completely rediscover her in brand new ways, was intoxicating. Addicting.

She and Gianna, in a standard week, already hung out at least two or three times. They did their laundry together and they watched *The One*, almost always. Usually, they would do something with Ellie, Mia, and/or Joel, in addition. Sometimes they went out to a bar or a club, though that had

happened with less frequency in the last couple of years.

If anything, that closeness only intensified. They still did those things together... and spent an extra night or two together, because when they were having sex like this – why wouldn’t they?

They didn’t *always* have sex during their laundry nights or TV nights. Frequently, yes. But sometimes they would just cuddle, sometimes they’d just kiss.

And Riley loved it. She loved that there was no world-shifting. Everything slotted easily into place between them. They were still *them*.

Just... with some more thrown in.

Like when Riley had twirled Gianna’s thong around on her finger when she took it out of the hamper, turning to face Gianna as she entered the laundry room with a fresh glass of wine. “This seems new?” She looked at the white satin, closer. “I don’t think I’ve seen this, before.”

“You saw the design,” Gianna assured her, as she’d put the wine down. “I showed you the sample of the material like... two months ago?”

Two months ago meant right before that fateful Christmas party. So, she could understand how a few things might have slipped through the cracks.

Riley usually did see the designs for Gianna’s new lingerie. She loved being a part of that process, even if she could typically only offer encouragement and very little by way of helpful critique.

“It’s nice,” she hummed consideringly. “I think it’ll look really good in the summer, with your tan.”

Gianna had fluttered her eyelashes. “Why, I thank you for your support.”

As Riley had continued to softly twirl the thong around her index finger, Gianna had stepped in closer, bracketing Riley against the table.

“Maybe this summer, you’ll be able to see it with my tan,” she’d whispered, turning their typical banter so easily into something that had Riley’s heart thumping.

She’d angled her chin up, mere inches from Gianna’s. “That’s kind of what I was angling for.”

Gianna had always flirted with her; she was a flirty person.

She still did. But, like with the thong, her comments became a lot more intent. Suggestive.

“You’ll get to see a lot more of my upcoming designs on display, at Worthy’s party,” Gianna murmured, reaching up to stroke Riley’s cheek, before she slid her hand down and gently took the thong out of Riley’s hands.

“In the meantime, you can enjoy my already curated collection of lingerie, live.”

* * *

THINGS ONLY TURNED stressful one single time.

When Gianna and Riley were at her apartment one night after work.

Riley had cooked for them – a vegetable soup, one of Gianna’s favorite dishes – and Gianna had listened to Riley rant about Owen.

And, as things tended to go, they wound up in Riley’s bedroom.

“I want you to tie me up,” Gianna moaned, as Riley had grabbed both of Gianna’s wrists in her hand, holding them up against her pillow, as she straddled Gianna’s stomach.

Her heart was thudding, heat already lacing through her veins, as she looked down. Gianna was already completely naked underneath her, and Riley had no clue where they’d strewn her clothing. Shockingly, Gianna was less particular about that than Riley would have predicted.

Riley had no idea where her own shirt or bra or leggings were either, but she was still wearing her boyshorts, soaked through as they were, as she rocked down into her.

And the request lit a fire inside of Riley. She’d never tied someone up, before, but... yes. She definitely wanted to.

“Conveniently, someone gave me some quality silk ties for that exact purpose,” she mused, her voice low, breathless. She slid her other hand up over Gianna’s chest, feeling her racing heart.

Gianna’s eyes squeezed closed as she arched her head back harder into Riley’s bed, her long neck entirely exposed. “That someone must have thought—”

They both froze, then, when the sound of the apartment door closed.

Gianna’s blue eyes snapped open, staring up at Riley, in alarm. The same alarm that bounded through Riley, pushing through the desire.

“Who is it?” Gianna whispered. “Ellie? Why is she here?”

Riley stared down at her, incredulously, her heart pounding with nerves at the intrusion. “How should I know? I’ve been a little pre-occupied, here.”

“Clearly,” Gianna shot back, teasing, as she flexed her hands, alerting Riley to the fact that she was still holding her down.

She released her, giving her a sheepish smile, before her head snapped up at the sound of Mia's voice.

"Um, Riley?" Riley's bedroom door was cracked open, but Mia – thankfully – wasn't right outside of it or anything. She sounded decently far off. Maybe in the kitchen?

Mia was here. In her apartment. Gianna was fully naked on her bed. Riley, herself, was almost naked and was still so, unbelievably wet from the visual of tying Gianna up.

"Are you... here?" Mia called out, sounding a little closer.

Riley quickly slid off of Gianna, scrambling as she tried to find her clothing.

"Maybe you should answer her?" Gianna suggested, amusement laced through her tone, as she propped herself up on her elbows and watched Riley with a clear mix between desire and entertainment.

"I'm here!" She shouted back, yanking up a pair of pants, before she gave up on trying to figure out where exactly her shirt had been discarded. She grabbed a sweater from a drawer, instead, huffing out a breath as she straightened up. She glanced at Gianna, as she called, "I'll be right out!"

Who was still naked – gloriously, gorgeously naked – on her bed.

Riley bit her lip, shoving away the desire still coursing through her veins, as she asked, "Aren't you going to get dressed?"

Gianna put on a considering frown, before dropping it into a mischievous smile. "I'd rather not. You go handle Mia; I'll wait here. Besides – it would look a *little* too strange if we both went out there, now."

Riley nodded. "Good point. Good point, good point," she repeated under her breath, as she shook herself out of staring at Gianna and walked toward her door. "I'll be right back," she whispered.

"I'll be here," Gianna whispered back.

As she stepped into her living room, pulling her door shut, she yelped in surprise when she saw Mia.

Granted, she wasn't like *right* outside of Riley's bedroom door – she was across the room, in the open entry to the kitchen, leaning against the wall as she scrolled her phone. Too far to have seen anything, but nerves still shot right through Riley.

"Hey," she breathed out, and – yeah, that didn't sound totally casual. She fixed on a smile, knowing that it likely looked as frazzled as she felt, still holding onto her bedroom doorknob.

Mia smiled at her, her deep dimples appearing in her cheeks as she looked up and tucked her phone in her back pocket. Mia had a very sweet, very warm smile. Riley often thought that it must be beneficial for Mia, to have that smile.

As a firefighter, she was there to help people when they were in some of their lowest, scariest moments. And there was an element to Mia's smile that was somehow simply... calming.

Mia's parents had died when she'd been a teenager, Riley had learned earlier this year, and she still remembered when Mia had quietly, emotionally, told her and Gianna a few months after she and Ellie had gotten together.

And while it made Riley's heart ache for her friend, for the woman her sister loved, she found that she wasn't surprised by the tragedy marring Mia's past. There was an element about Mia that read – *the worst can't faze me. I've been there. And I will help you through it.*

As she looked at that smile, she relaxed her shoulders, dropping her hand from the doorknob. She wasn't doing anything *wrong*, she reminded herself. Even though Gianna was statuesquely naked, ten feet away, it wasn't wrong. It was just private.

"Hey," she repeated. "Sorry I took so long, I was getting ready to... take a shower." And Riley would take *I'm a horrible liar* for five hundred.

Mia's eyebrows pitched up in question as she looked Riley over, making her stomach squirm.

She didn't question it, though. She nodded. "Sure." She cleared her throat, "Uh, yeah, I didn't mean to interrupt your... shower. Ellie's staying at the lab overnight because she doesn't trust anyone else there enough to manage this stage of synthesis properly, but she really wanted to re-read something she'd read from one of her PhD books, on cell tissue. Something by Sebastian Hall? It wasn't one that she brought to my place when she moved in, so she asked if I could come and get it from one of her old boxes, here."

Mia explained, before using her thumb to point to Ellie's old bedroom door. It was closed, as it often had been with Ellie still lived here; she'd often preferred quiet and privacy, whereas Riley had often kept her bedroom door cracked open.

Riley nodded, relieved that first, nothing was wrong, and second, this would be a quick procurement.

Mia's dark eyes reflected apology, as she grimaced. "I knocked, but you didn't answer."

Riley made a valiant effort to stop herself from blushing. "I probably didn't hear it over, um, my shower." Over the little moans Gianna often made in her ear that Riley was obsessed with, she silently corrected, walking over to where Mia was, closer to Ellie's bedroom on the other side of the living room from her own.

Mia rolled her lips, very clearly trying to hold in a smile, before she sharply nodded. "Right. So. Uh, I texted Ellie, and she said to use the key she gave me. That you said she should just come in even though she doesn't live here anymore, and that since I was acting on *her* behalf, it was essentially the same thing." The glow of amusement she wore faded back into one of contrition. "But, I know it's not the same thing. I'm *not* Ellie, I've never lived here. This is your home, and I don't want to disrespect your space. I only came in because Ellie... well, she *really* wants this book."

Riley swiftly shook her head, vehemently against the second half of what Mia had said. "Hey, no. Ellie might be my sister, but you're just as welcome here as she is." Even though it might be inconvenient at this specific moment, she refused to let Mia feel otherwise. She reached out, placing her hands gently on Mia's shoulders, wanting her to really hear her. "I've known you for years now, too. You're my friend, separate from your relationship with Ellie. And, taking into account your relationship with my sister, you're family."

And that was all there was to it.

Mia's smile returned, this time even brighter, her dark eyes reflecting gratitude and affection. "Oh, you should get a new lock, by the way. I had to really wiggle the key in there *just right* to get it to properly work."

Riley groaned, "I know. Believe me, I know."

She'd had it on her list for two weeks, since Gianna had pointed it out upon returning to Riley's after going out for drinks. She'd frowned critically at the lock as Riley fiddled with the key, cursing under her breath. "*Babe, I don't love that. I can call the company that did the security system for my house,*" Gianna suggested, already reaching for her phone.

But Riley had stopped her; she could and would do it herself. When work wasn't so hectic, and she took a look at her finances and picked out a reliable but cost effective security option.

Riley dropped her hands, squeezing Mia's on the way down, as she

nodded. "All right. Let me grab the book."

Finding the book was easy – Ellie was extraordinarily organized, and so were the couple of boxes she'd left in Riley's now-empty room. She didn't have the same home office storage space at her new home with Mia, and her work office was already overflowing with texts. Ellie had routinely returned and ferreted away with some of the books she'd claimed not to need... Riley suspected that by summer, Ellie would have found space somewhere for all of her precious science books.

She returned to the living room quickly, scanning her eyes over the cover. "Sebastian Hall, *Cell Tissue – Reparation, Regeneration, Respiration*. What a title."

Mia was standing only a few feet away from where she'd been a minute ago. But she was eyeing –

Riley's own eyes widened, her heart skipping a beat as she realized exactly where Gianna's royal blue, lacey Worthy bra had been shed. Here. In the living room. Thrown over the back of the couch on their way to Riley's bedroom.

Riley's face ran hot. "That's mine." She cringed at herself – *what was that?*

Mia's eyebrows furrowed together as she critically eyed the bra again, before drawing her dubious gaze up to Riley's. She didn't say anything, though. Not about that. "You found the book."

Riley looked down at the heavy textbook in her arms, surprised to find it there after how immediately her attention had been stolen by Gianna's bra. "Oh. Yeah."

"Awesome," Mia commented, reaching out for it. She shot the bra another quick, questioning look, before shaking her head.

Riley knew exactly what Mia, as an observant woman, was seeing. A new bra from Gianna's line, that obviously appeared to be Gianna's cup size and band width, not Riley's.

"By *that's mine*, I meant – it was in my laundry," Riley falsely explained, but felt like she *had* to. She couldn't stop. "I did my laundry at Gianna's the other day, and that was in with my clothing when I got home. So, I took it out and put it here, so I wouldn't forget it the next time I go to Gianna's, to return it."

For a bad liar, she felt that was a pretty decent explanation.

She did, anyway, before Mia's skeptically amused gaze returned to

Riley's. She studied Riley's expression, and Riley wondered if she could sense how quickly her pulse was skittering.

Seconds later, though, she nodded slowly. "Makes sense."

Cautiously relieved, Riley nodded back at her. "Right. Good."

Mia shifted the book in her arms, leaning in to give Riley a quick hug, before pulling back and heading in the direction of her front door. "Thanks, again. And – have a good... shower," she called as she left.

Riley inhaled a slow, calming breath. That hadn't gone amazingly, and she was half-sure that she was going to get a call from Ellie within the next twelve hours. A call Riley didn't want to get, because, frankly, she liked this bubble she was existing in.

She loved it.

She walked back to her bedroom, opening the door, and admittedly, Gianna lounging naked in her bed smoothed over any rough edges. A sight for the luckiest of eyes, Riley thought, offering Gianna a half-smile.

Gianna, in turn, burst out laughing. "Carina, you are too fucking funny. There's no way she bought that."

Riley laughed, half out of amusement, half agonizingly, as she walked to her bed, shedding her sweater and jeans as she went. "Yeah, well. It's all I had."

Gianna's gaze was pure affection, though, as Riley laid next to her. She lifted her hand and gently placed it on Riley's stomach, rubbing her fingers over her skin, comfortingly. Riley shivered.

The look on Gianna's face was far softer than the moment warranted, and Riley looked up at her, silently questioning. Gianna flattened the hand she had against Riley, as she murmured, "What you said to Mia, about her being family, was very sweet. That's my Riley. Collecting strays, giving them a home. Stray queers, I might add."

Riley scoffed. "What are you talking about?"

Gianna's eyebrows lifted dubiously as she listed, "Mia and her whole ridiculously sad life story of traumatic abandonment. Joel, who has barely had a relationship with anyone in his super Catholic family since he came out in college. *Me*, and let's not even delve into Giulia and Antero right now. Ellie, too, if you really think about it."

She shook her head, dismissive. "It's all... happenstance," she settled on.

"You think it's happenstance?" Incredulity dripped from Gianna's voice. "You go out of your way to be the one to organize every Thanksgiving meal,

every Christmas morning get together, every birthday celebration. Even when Mia wasn't with Ellie, you were the one who made it a point to invite her, personally, to everything. Even when we thought she had a girlfriend! Because you took her in, along with Joel and me. You've collected us, Riley. All of the people you've made traditions with – none of us would have them with anyone else." Gianna's voice was soft but insistent, as she slid her hand up and cupped Riley's jaw, not letting her look away. "And you think it's *happenstance*?"

There was a reverence in Gianna's gaze, something that made Riley's heart feel like it was beating faster and slower at the same time. She found herself swallowing thickly at the emotion in Gianna's expression, all directed at her.

"I don't know what else to call it," she whispered, shrugging. "I didn't, you know, deliberately seek anyone out. You're all people I meet and end up liking. Loving. And Ellie's my *sister*," she stressed, exasperated, pushing out a trivializing laugh, "I didn't find and collect her."

But Gianna didn't laugh. She stroked her thumb softly over Riley's cheek. "No. But you've spent your entire life going out of your way to make sure Ellie is comfortable and healthy. I think when you meet someone, you see the truth of them. And when that truth is similar to Ellie's – lonely or wounded – you stick with them. With us."

Riley wanted to roll her eyes, to scoff. Especially at the way Gianna's words made her feel. But she didn't. She couldn't, not when Gianna was staring at her intently, daring her to disagree.

"You're so special, Riley," Gianna breathed out, before she leaned down and slid her lips against Riley's.

She sighed into the kiss, melting into it. Into how quickly yet naturally it felt to get caught up in it. In Gianna. In her words, in the way she made Riley feel.

And she was so ridiculously glad that they could kiss, now. That they had another way to express their emotions for and with each other, especially as the kiss quickly turned deep, hot. Needy and wanting.

Reminding Riley as to what exactly Mia had interrupted, ten minutes ago, as the flames burst back into life inside of her.

Gianna tore her mouth from Riley's, licking a trail down her neck. "We can figure out the ties, later. I really, really need to taste you right now."

She wasn't going to argue with that.

CHAPTER 19



The unofficial launch party for Worthy was planned – fittingly – on Valentine's Day, in Manhattan.

It was at the Primrose Grand Hotel, in the, as the name implied, grand event space. Gianna had wanted, originally, for it to be in Boston, her home base. But with some pushback from Cora, who'd accurately insisted that it would be a bigger draw for more investors, she'd compromised on New York.

Gianna had booked a few rooms, paying for not only Riley, but Joel, Ellie, and Mia, for the weekend.

And it was the first time in the last month that they were spending truly significant time with their friends in a group, that wasn't a movie night or a quick dinner, which had given Riley a momentary bout of nerves.

Given how she'd reacted – as in, very obviously – in the face of Mia's suspicion at the start of the week, Riley wasn't exactly confident in her ability to act totally normally around Gianna and their friends as they were all together for an extended period of time.

She self-soothed with the fact that she believed she'd blown her own reactions out of proportion, that night. She'd received no texts or calls from Ellie, about anything Mia might have seen, which meant Mia definitely hadn't said anything to her. They'd all driven into the city together, and she'd received no suspicious looks or comments. No, they'd all had a very normal, very casual, fun little road trip.

And she was doing her best to lean into that feeling, tonight.

She wasn't going to answer the texts she was getting from Owen, who seemed to be digging in his heels, less on board with their digital launch the

closer it came. She wasn't going to do anything other than celebrate her favorite person's biggest accomplishment to date.

She whistled softly under her breath as she entered the opulent venue, a few minutes before the actual kick-off of the party. As people – those working at the event and some early arrival guests like herself – milled around, Riley inhaled deeply, holding it as she did so.

She'd wanted to arrive a little bit before Ellie, Mia, and Joel. Just to gather her bearings a little bit. To settle into being Gianna's *friend* and remind herself that they were in public, around their friends, and that they shouldn't slip up and kiss or – or anything that they'd started doing so naturally in the last few weeks.

It was very much not just the two of them this weekend. They would be at an event with a couple hundred people tonight, and would be hanging out with Joel, Ellie, and Mia for hours tomorrow as they went to a few museums and out to dinner before heading back to Boston.

But it was easy, being with the group during movie nights – she and Gianna were always cuddled under a blanket and no one was paying them any attention – or when they went out for dinner, which only lasted an hour or so, and everyone was jumping in on group conversations.

After friend group dinners and movie nights in the last month, she was always craving more of Gianna. They'd wait until they were alone, before Gianna would tug Riley up to her tiptoes and kiss her, deep and wanting.

Tonight, it would be *hours*. Hours of socializing and celebrating, hours of spending time surrounded by other people. Hours of sharing Gianna's attention and not being in their little bubble.

"Riley!" Gianna called out, drawing her attention.

She was already smiling, excited to see Gianna, when she turned.

And then nearly swallowed her tongue.

Gianna wore a hot pink matching bra and boyshorts, with a black Armani suit jacket over it, deliberately left gaping upon, with a pair of black stilettos.

That was it.

Riley couldn't keep her eyes off of her. Having sex with Gianna didn't dim her attraction at all. Didn't make it fade into the background. She still wanted, even though she knew just what Gianna looked like without any clothing, just what she felt like.

And she mentally congratulated herself – yes, her desirous staring was precisely why it had been smart to arrive early and ensure that her first

reaction to Gianna wouldn't give them away to their friends.

She felt the arousal curl through her, starting low in her stomach, as she raked her gaze up Gianna's body. "That is what you're wearing to your launch party."

She couldn't even say she couldn't believe it; she absolutely could believe it. It was bold and confident and fashionable and sexy. It was Gianna in a nutshell.

Gianna's smile was slow and sensual, and Riley knew Gianna knew exactly what Riley was thinking. "You like?"

"I think we both know I do," she murmured, making sure to keep her voice low.

Still, though, she drew her eyes down, then back up again, needing to take it – *her* – in all over again.

"In some states, it's likely illegal, how indecent you look in that." All right, Riley would allow herself that comment because it was just – so *true*.

Gianna positively beamed, her cheeks flushing with Riley's words. And even then, Gianna's gaze dropped down to take in Riley, too.

She was wearing a fitted suit – dark green, because she knew it made her eyes pop, and a pair of chunky heels Gianna herself had given her as a birthday gift last year, as she'd curled her hair into ringlets, sweeping up one side with a black comb. Though Riley wouldn't say she enjoyed dressing up as much as Gianna did – very few people could say that – she did enjoy putting in the effort, especially when an occasion called for it. Tonight most definitely qualified.

"Ralph Lauren," Gianna assessed, her voice dipping, as she reached out and traced her hand down Riley's lapel, before she slid down lower, dipping inside of Riley's blazer and touched the silky fabric of her gray button-down. "Nice. New?"

Gianna knew Riley's closet inside and out. "I don't know anyone else befitting of my purchasing a new designer outfit."

The hand Gianna now had resting on her waist squeezed warmly, appreciatively, as she caught Riley's eyes with her own. The heat in them was tempered with unadulterated softness.

"I am so, so proud of you," she whispered. This time, not because she felt there was anything to hide, but because of the weight of the words. Because of how much she meant them.

Seeing Gianna's success gave Riley pure joy, that was the simple truth.

Gianna *beamed*, and warmth settled right in Riley's chest at it.

"I can't believe it's happening," she admitted, as she looked around. There were a few displays of her current line and of future sketches here and there. Some large screens that played the commercials on a loop, along with some large posters of models, all different sizes, in Gianna's lingerie.

Gianna looked back at Riley, still smiling appealingly from ear to ear. "Worthy is really up and running and soon *you're* going to launch your platform and re-shape the news world as we know it." The hand Gianna had on Riley's waist squeezed again.

Her eyes were so bright, so exuberant. "Who would have thought when you called me a bitch in our dorm room all those years ago that we'd be here, achieving our dreams side-by-side?"

Riley lightly shoved Gianna back, an exasperated laugh working out of her throat at the memory. "I did *not* call you a bitch!"

Gianna's cheeky, teasing smile glinted back at her, as she reached out and caught Riley's hands in hers, keeping her from moving too far back. "Hey, I'm not holding it against you. No need to get tied down in the past."

She knew Gianna was joking, but the words sparked a very specific thought in Riley. A very specific thought from earlier this week, in fact.

She squeezed Gianna's hands with her own, before disentangling them and sliding her hands up Gianna's arms, resting her forearms over Gianna's shoulders in a loose hold. She lifted herself up to her tiptoes, bringing her mouth up to Gianna's ear, as she whispered, "If you aren't too bratty tonight, perhaps you might get a little tied down in the very near future."

Given the very open nature of Gianna's outfit, she could see how Gianna shivered – full-body goosebumps – and the way her full, glossy lips parted with her words. "Oh?"

God, she loved when she could steal the teasing right out of Gianna's mouth. In twelve years, she'd never had that power, not until they'd started this; it was addicting. Powerful.

"Mm-hmm," she affirmed, arching her eyebrows. "And I might have a little extra surprise for—"

"Wow. This place is crazy impressive," Joel's voice carried to them from a few feet away, cutting right into their shared fantasy.

Riley pulled away from the close embrace they'd been in – where she'd been about to spoil her own surprise for later, merely because she was greedy and impatient with want to see Gianna's responses – clearing her throat, as

she faced their friends.

But neither Ellie nor Joel gave them a look as if anything was amiss. Not even Mia, not even after the other night. Saved, by the very close and tactile relationship she and Gianna had always had.

Gianna snapped back to herself, straightening up and smiling brightly – maybe just a smidge *too* brightly. “Hi! Ellie Beckett, as I live and breathe.” She rested her hand over her chest, “Out at a *party*.”

Ellie’s eyebrows furrowed together. “I mean, it is *your* party. And I care about *you*.”

Gianna’s smile turned sweet and genuine as she leaned in to give Ellie a hug.

“Plus, I was in no way not coming. My friend is throwing a launch party in Manhattan, at the fanciest hotel I’ve ever seen,” Mia joked.

“Don’t try to rain on my parade and take away how special it is that Ellie showed up tonight,” Gianna shot back with a wink.

“*Everyone* showed up tonight,” Joel said, sounding very excited, as he fixed his bowtie.

Riley scanned the room, noting, indeed, that there was now a steady barrage of people entering the large room.

Gianna’s friends and non-business associates were here, of course, but tonight was the opposite of the Holiday Spectacular. It was less about them and more of a business party. The models and crew who had worked on the ad campaign, the team of seamstresses Gianna had built and hired over the years – she was committed to Worthy being made by-hand with high quality fabric, while everyone was paid well – other sponsors and influencers Gianna worked with…

There was going to be a *lot* of people in this room tonight.

“You’re right about that.” Gianna took a deep breath. “I suppose that’s my reminder that I should start to circulate. I’ll see you guys later?”

She said the words to the group, but she directed her gaze at Riley.

“Of course.”

Even if they didn’t mingle much in the next few hours at the party, Riley knew that she and Gianna had a sex-date tonight.

She expelled a deep breath, pushing through the mild disappointment of being out of their bubble and in the midst of people. Because she wanted Gianna’s now-customary – when they were just them – kiss when they were parting ways.

And the strangest feeling pinged in her stomach, that... she still wanted it. Even right now. Even with Ellie and Joel and Mia with her.

"I need champagne," she blurted out, alarmed by the clarity of that want.

She rolled her shoulders as she walked away. Maybe it was a good thing they weren't going to be in their comfortable yet thrilling, easy yet exciting sex bubble this weekend. Clearly, time with some other people and with some other social norms imposed on them would do them some good.

She approached a server with a tray, taking a flute just as Athena did.

"Hey! I didn't know if you'd be here?" She'd seen the list of RSVP's and Athena had been a maybe, depending on some scheduling arrangements.

Athena smiled, holding her flute to gently tap against Riley's. "Yes, well, Valentine's Day is a very busy day for my own website," she acknowledged with a coy smile.

Riley nearly choked on a surprised laugh as she sipped. "I can imagine."

She was certain that people who subscribed to Athena's high-end cam site very much indulged in something special today.

"I'm glad I was able to make time, though. It's quite the celebration," she nodded approvingly as she looked over the room.

Riley found herself smiling again, full of pride for Gianna. "Yeah, it is. It's really something special."

"The line is extremely promising, too. She has a good eye for fabrics," Athena murmured, looking across the room. "She truly is quite the success. She looks incredible tonight; I appreciate the bold choice."

Riley followed her gaze... and landed squarely on Gianna. Of course, who else could she be referring to? No one in this room – maybe in the world – looked as incredible as Gianna did right now.

"Yeah, she does," Riley agreed, unable to hold in the airy sigh that escaped her, as she watched Gianna toss her head back, laughing at something one of her models said.

Athena's sharp gaze turned back to Riley, and she eyed her closely over her glass. Riley held her gaze, even as she wanted to squirm a little. "You know," she began, drawing the words out slowly, "I'm not quite sure I've ever seen two *friends* behave as you and Gianna did, at her Christmas party."

Riley blinked, surprised by the comment. "I mean... I guess, we're just very close."

"Clearly," Athena agreed, easily. "It's just very interesting to me, the intimacy you two have. As someone who makes a living dealing in

intimacy.” She took a long sip, a thoughtful expression taking over her face. “But, Gianna was believably insistent when she informed me, after the whole gift box debacle, that you two are *just friends*, so... as I said: interesting.”

“Yeah, I know it’s not super common, but we are just friends,” Riley echoed, intending for it to be an affirmation.

But what it really did, was make her stomach twist in revolt, leaving a bad taste in her mouth.

Just friends... was so very not what she and Gianna were.

First and foremost, there was no *just* about their friendship; it meant the world to Riley. It was precious to her.

Secondly – and most alarmingly in this moment – she found herself unable to get over the word *friend*.

While it wasn’t a bad word at all – she loved Gianna’s friendship – it felt... minimizing, almost.

“While it’s uncommon to see such an intense platonic relationship, I appreciate it. I’m utterly intrigued, of course, but appreciative,” Athena mused.

Platonic.

The word sent a discomforting jolt through her.

Platonic, by definition, was at odds with everything she and Gianna had explored for weeks. It was incongruent with the earth-shattering sex they had, with the languid make-outs they indulged each other in, with the quiet intimacy they’d deepened.

She realized, as she had to swallow back the verbal disagreement, that she didn’t like it. She didn’t inherently agree with the fact that she and Gianna were strictly platonic or even that they were strictly *friends*.

The thought made her heart leap in her chest, distress chasing it.

No. No, she doubled-down on in her mind, swallowing hard, as she finished the rest of her champagne.

“Yeah, it’s uncommon, but that’s what it is. Intensely platonic.”

She told herself that the words didn’t taste like a lie.

* * *

HOURS LATER, Riley found herself in Gianna’s hotel room.

The rest of the night had gone very, very well. Especially as soon as Athena had started talking about her work, instead of Riley and Gianna. She'd been utterly relieved, and those thoughts hadn't made a return.

Riley had danced with her friends, she'd had several glasses of champagne, she hadn't let herself think about work.

She'd had fun celebrating Gianna, which was exactly what the night was designed for.

And she was most definitely having fun right now.

As Gianna had both wrists tied to the bedpost with the silk ties she'd given Riley in the gift box. Gianna was entirely naked, as she'd complied with Riley had ordered her to strip after stumbling into the room together, both a little tipsy on champagne.

After tying Gianna up, she'd slid her hands down, playing with her nipples. Rolling them between her fingers, even as she'd stood at the edge of the bed. Loving the way Gianna arched and strained toward her.

She'd slid a hand down, pausing as she'd murmured, "Open your legs."

Gianna immediately complied and Riley whimpered at the sight of her thighs falling open. She moved down, sliding two fingers between Gianna's folds, rubbing, holding back a groan at just how wet she was.

Because Riley's fingers were already soaked. *Already*, and they'd barely gotten started.

"Get undressed," Gianna had panted up at her, tone quietly begging.

The rush of that tone pulsed through Riley, making her even wetter.

Still, she bit back her own desire and reluctantly pulled her hand away from Gianna. "I have no idea why you think you are in a position to be telling me what to do right now."

Gianna pouted, and Riley couldn't resist bending down to kiss that sensuous mouth. Sucking her bottom lip between her own, biting down at it softly, before releasing it.

She walked to the end of the bed, already feeling so high on anticipation. That was even before she got to really take in the way Gianna was looking at her. Needy and desperate. Her wrists tied – loose enough to not be sore or painful, but firmly enough to keep her where they both wanted her – to the bedframe.

Riley tried to center herself, even as her heart was already racing, even as she could feel how wet she was.

"I've had this idea for a while," she said, impressed by the steadiness of

her own voice.

“Tying me up?” Gianna asked, not taking her eyes off Riley. Very clearly wondering where this was going.

“Yes...” Riley trailed off, as she shrugged, using that shrug to set in motion her sliding off her blazer. “But specifically, what I wanted you to see, while you were tied up.”

Gianna sat up higher at that, as at-attention as she could be given her position, but her interest was clearly sparked. “What you wanted me to see?”

She eyed Riley up and down from where she was on the bed, and Riley felt the dark thrill of it shoot through her.

Gianna would love this.

“There’s a reason I chose a suit tonight, instead of a dress,” she said, unbuttoning her shirt.

She didn’t slip it off right away. Instead, she moved her hands down to unbutton her pants.

Gianna groaned, impatiently. “Take it off.”

“I will,” she promised, keeping her fingers tucked into the waist of her pants, not yet pushing them down. “Do you remember the first time we went bra shopping together?”

Gianna nodded – quicker than Riley would have expected. “Mm, yeah. Sophomore year.”

“Right. And you told me that you had very specific designers you wore,” she paused, pushing down the tailored pants before stepping out of them. But she knew her shirt hung down just low enough. “And you were appalled that I bought whatever seemed to fit the best?”

Gianna’s chest was rapidly rising and falling already, eyes keenly focused on Riley’s body, and she nodded.

“I think I’ve officially found my brand loyalty.”

With that, she slid off her shirt and stood in front of Gianna.

In a black lace bustier that was genuinely very comfortable, as her breasts were perfectly encased, with the matching sheer bikini underwear. It really did fit her like a glove, snug and supportive, but with enough softness and give to feel good.

Gianna’s mouth opened on a whimper, her gaze roaming over Riley like she couldn’t decide where she wanted to settle.

As soon as she’d known about the Worthy launch, months ago, she’d ordered the set. At the time, it was a little show of support, and she thought it

would be fun to wear Worthy lingerie under her clothing.

She could *never* have anticipated back then just how fun this was. She could have never predicted the look in Gianna's eyes, the desperation, the way her breathing was labored. And she certainly couldn't have known that she'd react so strongly to it.

Having Gianna admire her like this, so strongly, made Riley feel unstoppable.

"I..." Gianna trailed off, seemingly unable to finish the sentence. Any sentence, as she appeared to search for something to say, but came up empty.

Riley reveled in it.

In the hot, hungry way Gianna looked at her. In how Gianna's thighs pressed firmly together and then relaxed, then clenched again. Like she was trying to do *anything* to feel pressure.

In the way Gianna had managed to twist her wrists, so she could grip the ties holding her to the bed, her knuckles white.

"Mine," Gianna's voice was wondrous and low and rough, as she stared at Riley, her pupils blown. There was desperation there, so heady, so wanton, as she pulled at the ties. "*Mine. You – I – that's mine.*"

And Riley knew that she meant the lingerie. She didn't need Gianna to have ever explicitly voiced how much it would turn her on to see someone she was fucking wearing the lingerie she herself designed. She knew Gianna well enough to know exactly what it would mean to her.

But the words settled somewhere inside of her – warm in a very different way than the heat burning through her.

"Yours," she agreed as she walked toward the bed.

* * *

SHE WOKE up the next morning, languidly stretching in Gianna's bed.

Gianna's bed, which Gianna's wasn't in, anymore. Riley realized this as she blinked open bleary eyes – they'd been up having sex until well after three in the morning – but the bed smelled like Gianna. Like *them*. And Riley dropped her head back down into the pillow, content with that.

Only a few seconds later, Gianna walked in from the bathroom, smiling brightly at Riley. "Hey, sleepyhead."

She wore, as far as Riley could see, only her Boston University

sweatshirt, which just barely skimmed the tops of her thighs. Gianna must have packed to take with them, because Riley hadn't seen it among her own clothes.

"Good morning, thief," she teased.

Gianna climbed back into bed. "As a matter of fact, it's almost noon. I was going to wake you up, soon, because we're supposed to meet everyone in the lobby to head out for the day."

Riley hummed under her breath, an unexpected reluctance sliding through her. She didn't want to leave this bed so soon. She didn't want Gianna to change out of their sweatshirt and put on real clothing.

And mostly, she realized, with that same alarm that she'd felt last night when talking to Athena, she didn't want to have to go out with Joel and Ellie and Mia, and pretend that she and Gianna were just friends.

Only, it wasn't pretending.

She and Gianna *were* just friends.

The utterly terrifying feeling that worked through her, well and truly waking her up, sprung from the thought that she didn't exactly feel like that, anymore.

CHAPTER 20



*J*uly, between freshman and sophomore year
Nowhere, Vermont was very beautiful, that much Gianna could admit. Nowhere was actually, technically, called Green Ridge, and she was putting some respect on its name, given that it was the hometown of her favorite person.

She didn't think she would ever be one to really love small town living, but Green Ridge had some charm.

"It's mostly a tourist destination," Riley explained, as they walked along the road, back toward Riley and Ellie's childhood home. "It's really only busy in the winter, for ski season."

"I love to ski; we should come back in the winter," she said.

Riley shot her a surprised, warm smile. "Really? I mean, sure. You can come here with me whenever you want. The Walker Resort is where most people go to ski or snowboard, but if you want to do some small runs, we can do it just from my house."

Gianna found herself smiling back, bumping her shoulder into Riley's. "Yes, *really*."

Gianna had arrived for her visit only a few hours before, but she'd already gotten her tour of the Beckett family home – which was very cute, full of books, and on a big plot of land, surrounded by nature. Riley's parents, she knew, were both scientists who did some sort of nature-related work, so... it checked out. She'd met Riley's mom, who'd given her a warm but distracted smile, and made a quip about tomorrow being "pancake Sunday." And they'd walked into town so Gianna could see the "downtown" area, which was only one main street.

Quaint.

Riley bumped her shoulder into Gianna's, as they turned onto the path that would lead them back to her house. "Well, Green Ridge isn't exactly the same thing as going to Lake Como for winter break or the south of France for a month in the summer, so, I wouldn't be offended if you wanted to keep going to see your parents."

Gianna's stomach clenched so tightly at the words, she nearly tripped over her feet.

Riley looked up at her as they walked, her hazel eyes curious. "How was Saint-Tropez? Whenever we texted in the last month, you've just texted me like normal. No pictures, no special stories. Nothing!"

Gianna swallowed thickly, biting at the inside of her cheek.

She was going to go to the south of France, to visit her father and stay at the house he'd rented to work out of and design his fall line from. That had been the plan, which she'd reluctantly shared with Riley before Riley had left for the summer.

It had continued to be the plan... only her father never actually send her the plane ticket he'd "planned" on doing. And when she'd finally questioned him about it, he confessed that he "actually didn't think having her there was a good idea" and that he "needed space for his creative process."

Gianna, instead, had texted Riley, asking if she could come and see her, *now that she was back in the states*.

Riley was still looking at her, though, her curiosity clearly growing with every second Gianna didn't answer.

"It was good," she lied through her teeth, smiling with it. "It just wasn't, like, a big deal or anything. Been there, done that, before." Which was true. Never with her parents, but still. "The sun was shining, it was warm. I went to some incredible beaches. The people were hot, the wine was amazing."

Riley watched her closely. *Too* closely for Gianna's comfort.

And, she didn't want Riley to know, she thought desperately. Riley had slotted into her life, in a spot that felt precious, in a spot no one had ever filled before. She knew she could tell Riley anything without judgment.

But... she didn't want Riley to know *this*. She didn't want to talk about this. She didn't want to open the door about her parents, or have Riley ever see whatever it was about her that her parents saw. That her old "friends" saw.

The curiosity all over Riley's face, though, inevitably turned to

skepticism. “You’re not telling the truth,” she stated, knowingly, scrunching up her face in confusion. “Why—”

“Just, drop it! God, Riley, I all but have a giant neon sign flashing that I don’t want to talk about it, okay?” She pushed, feeling her heart race, and her stomach twist in on itself.

And her words sent Riley stumbling back in surprise. “I was just asking about your summer, I didn’t think that was such a state secret!”

“Well, it is! Because I didn’t go to Saint-Tropez! Okay? Does that make you happy to know the truth? I didn’t go to Lake Como over winter break, either, and I didn’t go to France last month; I’ve been living in the summer dorms.” She confessed, and her face felt hot. Not just because of the summer sun beating down on her, and much more due to the emotion whipping through her. the rejection and embarrassment and guilt from taking it out on Riley, all combining, forcing even more words out. “Some of us don’t have mom and dad wanting to see us for every holiday and calling us to check in. Not everyone has this big, happy family with genius twin sisters who have bright futures and brilliant parents who make pancakes on Sunday mornings—”

“Have you *seen* my father?” Riley broke in, and she didn’t shout. Somehow, her quiet, insistent tone cut through Gianna’s admittedly loud words even better.

Gianna broke off, her heart beating rapidly in her chest, as she stared at Riley. “What?”

“Have you seen him around? Met him?” Riley challenged, her voice harsh.

The wind really left her sails at that, and she shook her head. “Not... yet?”

“And you won’t,” Riley sharply said. “My dad died, nearly two years ago to the day. So, actually, I don’t have some big, happy family, not anymore. Because my mom checks in, but she doesn’t really care about anything personal. She cares about our achievements – actually! Mostly, she cares about Ellie’s. Because Ellie is a brilliant scientist, just like her and my dad. And the funny thing, is that Ellie doesn’t even get *along* with my mom. So I’m the go-between for them trying to keep them, us, all together.”

Gianna’s mouth hung open, surprise pushing through her, helpless, as Riley tightly crossed her arms over her chest.

“My dad’s dead, and he took the soft part of my mom with him. Oh, but

don't worry; he also took Ellie's semblance of security and pancake Sundays, too." Riley's words – the raw emotion in them, the sadness that cracked through her voice – cut Gianna to the very core.

It cut through the emptiness left inside of her from her own parents, through the heated defensive barrier she'd never been able to shed.

The tears in Riley's eyes cut through *everything*.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't... I didn't know."

How did she not know? She wondered, nearly frantic with the thought.

Had Riley told her? Had Riley ever confessed this part of her life to her, and she'd – she'd missed it? Overlooked it? Especially if she'd done it before the holidays, it was very possible that Gianna might not have given this the gravity it clearly deserved. God, she *really* hoped that wasn't the case.

Riley hastily reached up and swiped at her eyes, shaking her head. "I never... it never felt like the right time to mention it. Him."

Her hazel eyes looked shockingly green as they were filled with tears, Gianna dimly registered, as she stepped closer. She felt uncertain right now, on shaky footing, and yet, she wrapped her arms around Riley, anyway. Needing it. Needing closeness with her.

Everything settled again, just enough, as Riley wrapped her own arms around Gianna's waist. She held, firmly, pulling Gianna into her impossibly closer. And everything settled inside of her even *more* as Riley rested her head against Gianna's shoulder.

"And... sometimes it felt good. That you didn't know. Everyone in Green Ridge knows everything about everyone," she laughed, humorlessly. "Senior year in high school... sucked. Everyone knew," she repeated, her voice a whisper against Gianna's shoulder, her warm breath washing over her skin. "Everyone knew and Ellie wasn't here and my mom was different. You, not knowing, was kind of nice."

She shivered at it, holding Riley tighter.

Riley sniffled, before yanking her head up from where it had been resting. "Shit. I got tears on your new Hélène Pierce. I'm sorry."

Gianna frowned, looking down and – yes, there indeed were tearstains, if they were only tearstains, on the frilled sleeve of her new summer dress. But, none of the typical irritation she expected to feel came, and she shook her head, looking back at Riley.

The apology on Riley's face felt far, far worse than a ruined dress, twisting her stomach in knots.

"I honestly don't give a damn about Hélène; I care more about you." It was... strange, she thought, to say that to someone. To say it and mean it with her whole heart. But she *did*. "I've never, you know, comforted someone before, though. So, be patient with me, if I'm not amazing at it yet. I'm still on my humanity learning curve."

She offered Riley a tentative smile, even as she took in the truth of her own words.

No, she'd never comforted someone. Not over something real, something like this. Her old friends... they didn't have real, emotional conversations like this. They didn't turn to one another when things got difficult. And if they did, no one had ever turned to her.

Riley returned her smile, tremulously. And, god, she really was *so* beautiful, Gianna thought, unbidden. Her eyes glittered with tears, still, and her hair was a little tousled, and she wasn't wearing makeup, and her smile was a little raw.

But something about Riley Beckett was simply breathtaking.

It made sense, she supposed. Because she cared about and liked Riley *so much*, and Gianna also loved beautiful things.

"I'd say you're a pretty fast learner," Riley affirmed, as she reached up and wiped at her eyes. She drew in a deep, shuddering breath, then, as she nailed Gianna with a serious look.

A look that took her from the high of how much she really did care about Riley and that Riley thought she was a fast learner, and made her remember what had gotten them onto this topic in the first place.

"And I'm sorry for pushing, about your parents. I realize I can be a little like a dog with a bone when I want to know something, and you're allowed to have boundaries, I just..." She trailed off, studying Gianna. So closely, Gianna was sure Riley had to see right to the heart of her. "I don't understand why you won't talk about them, at all. Nothing real, anyway. You'll say they gave you gifts, like your new Louboutin's, but I saw you order them yourself. You'll say they're flying you to glamorous places, but you never talk about the trips. I just don't—"

"Because, I didn't *go* on the trips," the words clawed out of her, embarrassment and hurt wrapping together sharply, pushing against her.

She wrapped her arms around herself, needing to comfort herself, now.

Especially as the words kept bubbling up, raw and painful and unstoppable, in the face of Riley's accepting, empathetic gaze. "I haven't

seen either of them in over two years. And it only happened, then, because I booked the entire trip to Italy myself.”

“I’ve never had pancake Sundays. Because, I don’t remember when my parents ever wanted me around them,” the confession escaped her very soul. Words she tried to never think about, herself, because they *hurt* so badly, but she could never really outrun them. “When I was really little, I guess, they had a nanny, and I spent time with them. But by the time I started school, they sent me to live with my Mummo – my grandmother,” she corrected, swallowing thickly. “In Finland. Savonlinna. And I spent most of the year with her, there.”

She had those memories, locked away somewhere. In a place she rarely visited, somewhere sacred in her mind.

Her chest ached as she admitted, “And, I don’t know why they sent me away from her, but they did. Maybe I was getting to be too much for her to handle? I don’t know; they hardly talked to either one of us.” She shrugged, the weight of the words heavy on her shoulders. “So, I’ve been going to school here ever since. And they don’t visit. They don’t call to talk about personal things or academics. They don’t *call*.”

The words tore themselves out of her throat, which felt so tight, so painful, just to breathe. She squeezed her eyes closed, both trying to hold in these stupid tears that burned at her and trying to not see the big, wide eyes Riley was giving her, that made her want to cry even more.

“They don’t care,” she finally whispered. “They – I – they don’t care, about me.”

She didn’t even know if Riley could hear her, because she could hardly speak. She felt choked by the words. Choked by the truth, a truth she’d often tried to run away from or make excuses for.

But there was no way around it. No hiding from it, not right here, not from Riley.

Her entire body was shaking, she realized, as she wrapped her arms tighter around herself. It didn’t work to stop the trembling, though, not when the trembling was emanating from somewhere deep and cavernous inside of her. From the very core of her being.

Riley enveloped her in an embrace. She didn’t want to call it a hug; it felt stronger than that. Even though Riley was shorter than she was, Gianna felt completely secure and surrounded, as Riley tightened her hold.

She half-expected Riley to offer a platitude – *no, they do love you, they’re*

just busy! Something like that, that Mummo used to softly tell her when she was upset.

Riley didn't, though. "You deserve better than that," her voice was so steady, so certain.

Even if Gianna didn't believe it, she could tell that Riley did. And right now, it felt like enough. Trusting Riley, so fully, felt like enough – more than enough.

And it was so nice, she dimly registered, to not have to hold herself up.

CHAPTER 21



“I can’t believe how many people are supposed to be here, tonight. How many people are already here,” Owen said, his voice hushed yet clearly excited as they reviewed one of his segments that was going to be uploaded to the website. “Important people. People who can actually make a difference in my career.”

Riley wasn’t even sure she was being spoken to, even though she was the only person within earshot of him. Still, she spared him a look out of the corner of her eye, watching him strain up on his tiptoes, as if it would help him see more of the people starting to mill around on the floor, brushing down his tie.

She cleared her throat. “Owen.”

“Hmm?” He barely acknowledged as he looked across the floor. “Oh, damn. There’s Fred Davidson.”

“Owen,” she gritted out, grabbing his attention. She knew she must have looked as frustrated as she felt when Owen made that *oops, sorry* expression she was increasingly familiar with. Ignoring it, she pointed down to the tablet in front of her. “Technically, we are still on the clock for another minute.” And she intended to utilize every second on-the-clock at her disposal. “Look. This part, here? In these moments, you slip back into *nighttime news anchor* stance, still.”

She honestly felt like the closer they drew to the launch of BostonNow Digital, the more Owen was fumbling. Sometimes on little things, but they were things that Riley had been working on with Owen since he’d been hired.

She didn’t want their digital stream to come off like news videos posted on the internet; she wanted them curated and recorded *for* a streaming

audience. And there was a small part of her brain that she was trying to ignore, where she was convinced that Owen was fumbling on purpose.

“Because I *am* an anchor,” he said back with clear exasperation, gesturing down at her tablet. “I can’t just not be an anchor because of this; I need to be taken seriously for the rest of my career.”

A part of her wanted to throw her tablet at the wall. As it was, she bit back her frustration even though this was becoming a regular part of their back-and-forth. “Right now? This *is* your career,” she reminded him for at least the sixth time.

“And, we’re officially off for the night.” He looked up from his watch, sounding far too glad about the fact. “Try to enjoy yourself,” Owen advised with a nod before he ran his hand through his hair and started off with a determined stride across the room, already talking to himself under his breath.

Undoubtedly trying to figure out what to say to Fred Davidson, meanwhile losing focus on the job he was supposed to be doing by the day.

“*Try to enjoy yourself,*” Riley mocked under her breath, exhaustedly rubbing her hand over her face, before she all but collapsed into the chair at her desk. She was really going to need to rally for the occasion, but she had to take a minute, first.

Owen was right – there were so many people here tonight. Every who’s who at the entire network was currently making their way here to the main newsroom floor for the BostonNow anniversary celebration.

BostonNow had become a primetime news network only ten years ago, skyrocketing from a very underfunded and extremely small local station when they’d been the only people covering a story about ongoing construction around the city. A project that was deemed very minor in the eyes of actual news.

There were permits and budgets and sign-offs from city officials – not really newsworthy.

But BostonNow had delved into the background of the company behind the build because one of the producers had parents who had been forced out of their family business so that the construction company could buy them out. Strong-armed out, was more accurate.

In the end, it turned out that the company behind the build was actually part of a mafia-owned conglomerate, and there *were* shady business ties, ones that went all the way down to D.C.

Since then, the network had become a heavy-hitter.

Ever since, every year at the end of February – on the day their team had been the first to report on the political corruption – the network celebrated. Everyone, from assistants to the execs, would be in attendance, and from what she'd *heard*, it was supposed to be straight-up fun. It wasn't meant for networking; it was meant for celebration. They shut down the main floor of the building, set up a bar, and had at it.

Riley started working at BostonNow last April, so she hadn't yet been to one of these parties. But she wasn't so sure she felt like she was in much of a partying mood at the moment.

"Ah, Ms. Beckett. Still hard at work?" A voice asked coming from the side of her desk, sounding far too amused at the sight of Riley with her face in her hands.

She whipped her head up to find Marika Hendrick herself standing next to her desk. In her power suit and holding a whiskey, her slate gray hair twisted up into a perfect chignon, Marika was utterly commanding.

"Ms. Hendrick!" She sat up straight, trying to make it look like she hadn't just been on the brink. Still, she felt entirely too flushed, as she fixed on a smile. "It's really nice to see you."

Marika raised her eyebrows as she took an unhurried swig of her drink. "And you as well." She looked around at the other workspaces, currently abandoned as the celebration had truly started. "Are you not planning on joining?"

"Yes, of course I am. I was just..." She trailed off, gesturing to her tablet. "Getting a few things wrapped up here."

Marika's gaze was laser sharp as it took in the organized clutter of Riley's desk. "You'll never catch me saying that I made it to where I am by being the first to jump away from work."

The approving tone made Riley nearly melt with relief.

Marika was the head of the network, whom she'd only met twice before. First at the meeting in which Riley had pitched her year-long plan to throw BostonNow into a digital age, faster and better than the competitors.

She'd given Riley a considering nod, saying that she saw "great potential" in her. It had been the seal of approval that had gotten Riley this job and one of the best moments of her entire career to date.

Which mattered to Riley *a lot* as a woman in the media news industry, given that Marika Hendrick was one of the trailblazers.

They'd met again over the summer, at an exec meeting Riley had been invited to. Personally invited by Marika, it had turned out, as she'd wanted a firsthand report on how Riley's plans for the digital launch were going. No pressure.

"I've been really looking into the possibilities of moving more into a digital world." Marika nodded at Riley, settling her hip against the side of her desk. "If this platform you're setting up goes well, there are plenty of avenues we could explore. Avenues I think you could do a very good job of taking point on."

The hint of promise in her voice both lit Riley up and made her tense all at once.

Typically, she enjoyed talking about work with anyone who was as passionate about this job as she was. But not with her boss's boss's boss, who could cleaver Riley's future, when she wasn't as confident in it all as she wished she could be.

"That's what I'm working on," she assured, and at the very least, no matter her fears, it was the truth; she was *working on it* every single day.

As her phone buzzed, face-up on her desk, Riley gamely ignored it even as it made her heart skip a beat.

Dealing with Owen and the looming precipice of her career was daunting, but it was admittedly a great distraction from her personal life in the last week. Since they'd returned from New York, Riley had found that a distraction was very useful.

Riley had never needed or wanted a distraction from her feelings, and if she was being super honest with herself, she didn't need or want the distraction now, either. Riley believed in letting herself feel her feelings.

But she hadn't felt the same intensity of emotions she was experiencing for Gianna since her young and naïve relationship with Ashton. Maybe not even then.

She hadn't felt this same swoony sensation at every smile, the way her stomach erupted in butterflies with every sweet word, the way her heart raced with anticipation at a simple text.

By all accounts, that should be a good thing. It was a good thing, to know that she could feel that way again, because even a few months ago she'd been seriously doubting it. That night, the truly fateful laundry night she'd had with Gianna a couple of months ago after her date with Dull Dan, she'd been concerned that this feeling was gone from her emotional vocabulary.

Given that it was Gianna causing these feelings, though...

She felt that visceral twist of excited anticipation as her phone buzzed for a second time and Gianna's picture popped up on the screen. Yeah, that was the complicated part.

"You can check your phone, if you'd like. We're not in a meeting," Marika commented, pulling Riley's attention back to her. "It's a *party*."

A welcome distraction, she thought again, as she tried to shake herself out of that rabbit hole.

"No, it's fine." What *wasn't* fine was that she was chomping at the bit at every text Gianna was sending her for the past week. "I can—" she cut a quick look to her phone as it buzzed again. "—just check it later."

Marika nodded, watching Riley intently. Riley had no idea what she was looking for, but she stared back, unwavering.

"You know, I was the main director on the floor here, when the station took off," she commented.

Riley nodded, deliberately keeping her gaze on Marika rather than her phone. "I do know," she confirmed, though she suspected the comment was rhetorical. Who working in this building tonight *wouldn't* know that?

"It's why I wanted to take the chance when you came in with your pitch. There were other networks that offered me a job at the time, but I had a vision here. And look where we are." She gestured around them, their surroundings literal evidence of her success.

Admiration and appreciation combined inside of her as she *did* take the chance to look around. "It's very remarkable."

"Nothing in our business is *easy*, but it's very unique to have a vision. I appreciate yours," she continued.

And if there was one thing Riley needed to hear at this point – as her career was careening toward the precipice where she would either make it to the other side in an impressive feat or fall right off the edge – it was that. "Thank you, Ms. Hendrick. That means a lot coming from you."

Marika tipped her glass toward Riley slightly in acknowledgement before she hummed lightly under her breath. "I am a bit surprised it took you this long to dive into a digital launch; I might like to pick your brain about that."

Confusion edged in, dimming the glow she'd felt at Marika's last comment. She stared up at Marika, eyebrows furrowing. "Um, well. As I said at the pitch meeting with the network last year, it's been something I've really been trying to start up for a couple of years."

“Yes...” Marika arched her eyebrow at Riley as if Riley was the one being dense.

And the longer they held eye contact, both staring at the other one like total idiots, the longer Riley wondered if she was being dense. So dense, she wouldn’t be able to make sense of where this woman was going.

It really and truly did diminish the thrill she’d gotten from Marika Hendrick saying that she appreciated her vision.

Marika seemed to give up waiting on Riley to fill in the blanks, as she gestured with her tumbler and spoke with the same tone, like Riley was indeed being dense. “Given that your girlfriend is such a successful influencer and has been for quite some time, I would have thought this would be an avenue you’d have thought of traveling down long before.”

The comment was so far out of left field, Riley felt like she and Marika weren’t even reading the same book. “My girlfriend?” She echoed, knowing she sounded as shell-shocked as she felt.

“Gianna Mä...kin-en?” Marika clarified, completely butchering the pronunciation.

“Mäkinen,” Riley corrected her pronunciation without a second thought, still unable to process this conversation with *Marika Hendrick*. Or what the woman was even talking about?

“Your girlfriend,” Marika confirmed, shooting Riley a look like she almost felt badly for her. “Several members of the board identify as queer; while I understand privacy, there’s no need for secrecy. I’d like to vocalize that I’m not inquiring about your romantic life,” she clarified.

Riley was still blinking widely, slowly, up at her, trying to wrap her mind around the turn this had taken. “You’re... not?”

“No. I could care less about your personal details; I would like to discuss details pertaining to the success of her digital career, though, and how I assume that influenced your decision to push for a digital path.”

What dimension had she stepped into?

“How do you even know...?” She couldn’t finish, because the only word that made sense was *anything*.

How did Marika Hendrick know she and Gianna even knew one another? While Riley had taken Gianna as her plus-one to many work functions in the past, she’d yet to do so at BostonNow. How did she –

“My daughter, actually, follows your girlfriend,” Marika explained, sipping slowly at her whiskey.

Riley sat back in her chair, trying to regain her balance as so many thoughts and feelings whipped through her. As she'd done her research on all of the execs before her first meeting at the network, she'd known Marika had been married three times and had a daughter from her second marriage, who just graduated from college. Which meant she was very comfortably in the typical demographic of Gianna's audience.

That made sense.

"We had a conversation recently about you," she elaborated, "Given that you are featured heavily in your girlfriend's videos." She arched a doubtful look at Riley, undoubtedly reading her body language. "That's why I assumed your relationship wasn't a private matter."

That was what didn't make sense.

"I suppose I'm just a little confused," putting it very mildly, "Because I'm *not* in her videos."

Marika waved her hand not holding her tumbler. "Ah, right. It was her comments *about* you that prompted Denisse to ask me if I knew who you were, given that she'd mentioned you worked here."

Yet again in this conversation, Riley was tripped up.

It wasn't shocking, she supposed, that Gianna talked about her in her videos; Riley was a very big part of Gianna's life.

It was just... she'd never really thought much about it, before. She'd never had reason to pore over Gianna's every word, before, or even had reason to try to soak up every word Gianna had to say about *her*.

She'd never felt the way she felt right now, where she wanted to hear every single thing Gianna talked about, all of the time. Especially if it pertained to her.

"Hey! Sorry to interrupt." Joel's voice jolted Riley right out of the place she'd zoned to, and she had to physically shake herself as he appeared. Jaunty and grinning, she could tell he was barely holding back excitement.

She wasn't sure she'd ever been more grateful for his interruption, if only for her to be able to have a minute to gather her bearings.

Riley wasn't typically one to be thrown for a loop in a social setting, but there were so many moving pieces in the last few minutes.

Marika Hendrick sought her out. Marika Hendrick was personally contemplating Riley's venture at the network and the future of her career. Marika Hendrick knew she was in a personal relationship with Gianna. Marika Hendrick *believed* them to be romantic, based on whatever Gianna

said about her?

What did she say about her? What did she say that Riley was missing?

And that was before she even started to touch on the frustratingly persistent elation at being referred to as Gianna's girlfriend.

"Hello...?" Marika extended her hand to Joel.

Who excitedly grasped it, giving it a firm shake.

"Joel Masterson." He grinned widely, continuing to shake her hand.

All right, that was enough for Riley to regain some of her faculties, and she stood from her chair, reaching down to grip Joel's other wrist, squeezing it lightly. He registered what she was doing, and toned down his handshake.

"He's one of the cameramen on the floor," she elaborated for him before he got *too* excited and ended up scaring her. One of the last things she needed was an exec being sketched out by Joel, for both personal and professional reasons. "He's actually working with me on the setup of the streaming sites and making sure the tech side of things is where we need it to be."

The frown that had formed over Marika's face transformed at Riley's explanation, and she gave Joel a reciprocal handshake – once, visibly firmly – before dropping it. "Ah, nice to meet you. We were just discussing that endeavor, actually." She paused briefly, aiming a look at Riley again. "Speaking of, will your girlfriend be here, tonight? I might like to pick her brain, now that I've seen a handful of her videos."

"*Girlfriend?*?" Joel broke in, looking between them ludicrously, bafflement written all over his face.

Riley's heart tripped in her chest, and her mouth opened, but nothing came out. What could she say, when she had been too caught up to correct Marika when she'd first said it? When she *wanted* it to be true?

"Mm, right," Marika nodded shortly. "My apologies; I've already gleaned from Denisse and some of those videos that she doesn't practice monogamy?" She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "It's really very interesting, the different norms accepted in society these days compared to twenty or even ten, years ago."

"Oh, Gianna's willing to talk about society's views on romance and sex, all of the time. Right?" Joel jumped in, bumping his shoulder against Riley's. "I think she's supposed to be coming here tonight. Right?"

For several beats, Riley could only nod as they both looked at her. "Yes," she managed to find her words. A little, anyway. "She... uh, she'll be here."

"Wonderful. Best thing in this business, truthfully, is getting to meet all

of the different people,” Marika said, before she cleared her throat and shifted off of Riley’s desk. “Find me, later, when your... partner? Arrives. We’ll have another chat.” She directed that specifically at Riley, then glanced between the two of them. “Before the evening turns too debauched, I should say again: I’ve been keeping up on the stories you two have been working on with Mr. Grady. If this upcoming launch does well, I see a lot of doors opening for you.” She seemed to double-down in the intensity of her gaze as she landed on Riley at the end of her sentence.

She gave Riley the barest hint of a smile, which Riley returned, even as it made a nervous shiver slide down her spine. There were two too many “*if it goes well*” comments in their short conversation for her liking.

“So intense,” Joel murmured, seemingly in awe as he watched her go. If there was one thing she could really appreciate about Joel, it was his genuine appreciation of an impressive woman. And maybe she could care a little bit more about it, later, when she wasn’t still reeling. “Such a legend. Who came to talk to *you!*”

He worked himself back around into the excitement as he wheeled around and gave her a giant smile.

In only seconds, that smile dropped into a confused frown as he reached up and scratched at the back of his head. “Weird, though, how she assumed Gianna was your girlfriend or partner or whatever.”

Riley, once more and entirely uncharacteristically for herself, had nothing she could say. No idea *what* to say. Not when she and Gianna had agreed to keep this between them. Not when whatever *this* was, was now growing exponentially complicated.

And yet, denying it or laughing it off felt so wrong. Intrinsically, deeply *wrong*.

He shrugged, easily. “Maybe it’s the picture. Lotta people were commenting on it this week. Man, she kills it with engagement. I was talking to her a few days ago, and—”

For at least the third time in the last ten minutes, Riley felt like she could hear a record-scratch, halting her racing thoughts.

“What picture?” She demanded, gripping at his wrist again as the urgency swept through her.

Joel cut himself off, clearly surprised. “Wow! You love talking about engagement.”

She bit the inside of her cheek at her own impatience; it wasn’t Joel’s

fault he had no idea what the hell was going on. No, it was entirely her own doing. And *that* made her feel wrong, in a different way. “Yes. I do. And you know we’ve both talked to Gianna about her advice for our platform, and we can circle back to it, later.” She was proud of her very even delivery. “But right now, Joel, the picture. Please.”

Joel shook his head at her as he dug his phone out of his pocket. “I swear, it’s so weird that you don’t keep up with Gianna on her TikTok and website. And how you *only* follow her personal insta,” he murmured as he tapped at the screen.

He turned the phone so she could see it, speaking as he moved, “There were a ton of pictures taken at the Worthy party, last weekend. This was one of them.”

It was a picture of herself and Gianna, taken from a distance. And even though they weren’t posing in any way, hadn’t even known their picture was being taken, they definitely appeared to be together. Truly *together*.

She remembered the moment, vividly. Gianna had sought her out after having schmoozed and socialized, and she’d grabbed Riley’s hand, turning her so naturally into her arms for a dance. Riley had moved with her, even as she’d pointed out, “The 90’s pop/hip-hop playlist tonight isn’t quite matching with this.”

This being their slow sway.

Gianna had shrugged, wrapping her other arm around Riley’s back and pulling her closer, fitting their hips against one another. “I’m wearing a suit jacket over underwear; I make the rules here.”

She’d laughed then, entirely charmed, as she’d slid her hand under Gianna’s jacket and stroked her fingers over her soft, bare back, as if confirming with her own touch that Gianna was dressed exactly like that.

Still, she didn’t move her hand, as Gianna shivered against her touch, and Riley felt the echo of that shiver throughout her entire body.

“Plus, I’ve been working the room for hours; I know everyone is here for me and my product, which is great. But I need to look busy to just be able to take a few minutes by myself,” Gianna murmured, much more seriously.

“By yourself?” Riley echoed, incredulous, holding Gianna’s gaze only inches away from her own as she tilted her head up. She’d traced her nails teasingly up Gianna’s back. “So, what am I?”

“The only person here who knows just... *me*,” Gianna had whispered in explanation, as she’d lifted her other hand and swiped some of Riley’s hair

back behind her ear, before she paused and stroked her thumb over the hinge of Riley's jaw. "I thought that was obvious."

And that was the photo.

Her hand under Gianna's jacket, clearly touching her skin. Gianna's bare thigh was slid between Riley's, and there was not an inch between their bodies from chest to knee. They weren't kissing but their faces were only scant inches away from one another as they'd moved together.

For anyone who didn't know them saw this photo, if they knew the truth of what they'd done in Gianna's hotel room afterwards... well, they wouldn't be surprised.

Riley's hand tightened on Joel's phone, her heart pounding in her chest at the sight of them together. They made a very nice picture, she had to admit, and what was harder to admit was how much she loved it.

"Great pic of you two. I guess I can see that someone might *assume* something's going on," Joel said so simply as he reached for his phone and gently tugged it out of her grasp.

"Joel..." She had to swallow, around the dryness in her throat to be able to ask, "How often does Gianna mention me in her videos?"

Joel – sweet, unassuming Joel – scrunched up his face in thought. "I guess she mentions you a lot? Obviously. Since you two do so much together. She talks about all of us, sometimes. You the most."

God, she felt insane. She felt insane for asking *Joel* questions about *Gianna*, when Riley was the person people came to for questions about Gianna.

And yet, she couldn't help it. She wanted to know. She wanted every piece of information she could have, which wasn't unusual for Riley. It was just unusual that it wasn't about work or someone she'd just met.

"What does she say? About me?" She couldn't help but ask, even as it felt so *wrong* for her to do. Asking about Gianna's videos, pieces of Gianna's life she'd always very staunchly not watched in order to preserve an unspoken integrity in their relationship.

Joel shrugged, though. "From what I can remember off the top of my head, it's never, like, serious personal information. Probably because she knows you're more private than she is," he seemed to reason with himself. "Usually she mentions you in stories or something." His eyes lit up, "Oh! She *did* make a video kinda personal about you, when you changed networks. It was really about the news and why you were so passionate about what you

were doing and her being proud of you for following your dreams and stuff like that.”

Gianna had said those things to Riley in person. Many times. How proud she was that Riley was leaping to do something she really cared about, and it had always made Riley feel good about herself. Confident she was doing the right thing.

Even so, knowing that Gianna had made a video about it, despite Riley’s enjoyment of her own privacy, made everything inside of Riley want to melt.

Joel frowned. “She didn’t make one about *me* changing networks.” His consternation seemed to drain away, though, as he started to chuckle. “She definitely has never said anything about the two of you *dating*.” He snorted in his laughter. “It’s kind of *insane* that Ms. Hendrick thought that. Right?”

Riley tried to tick her lips up into a receptive smile. She really did.

She tried to make herself join in on the joke. But treating the intimacy she had with Gianna like a joke, laughing about it with Joel, felt so disingenuous. It made her stomach twist and turn like she was going to be sick, and she couldn’t do it.

Joel continued to chuckle, lightly bumping his arm into hers. “You and Gianna! And our boss’s boss’s... boss? Is that the right chain? Regardless, *she* took some sort of notice there. That’s crazy! Oh my god, Gianna is going to eat that up.”

Yeah, the idea of *that* made her straighten up in alarm, even as she crossed her arms over her churning stomach.

“Please don’t mention that when Gianna gets here,” she said, hardly hearing her own words over the music that had been turned up as the crowd clearly started to get into the spirit of the evening.

“Don’t mention it? This is the kind of thing she’d find hilarious,” he pointed out, huffing out another laugh. “It’s like, *of course*, of all the people to see Gianna’s profile and that picture.”

Just Joel’s laughter, even without joining in herself, was really starting to get to her. She knew she was frowning, she *knew* the mirror of her feelings was written all over her face, but she couldn’t smooth out her expression when she tried.

It was all too much, she realized, as she stared up at Joel, her hands starting to shake.

“And you didn’t correct her!” Joel guffawed, before his own words seemed to reach him, and his amusement he’d found in the situation

obviously started to fade. He looked at her, actually focused on her, then questioned, “Why *didn’t* you correct her?”

Riley’s heart hammered against her ribs, as her mouth hung open and no words could come out.

Not explicitly disclosing the sexual nature their relationship had taken to their friends felt very, very different than outright *lying* to them. Right now, in this moment, anything other than the truth felt like it would be maybe the biggest lie she’d ever told.

This was the very root of why she’d always pursued the truth, she thought, desperately trying to find the way out of the very strange but intense pickle she was in. Because things always piled up and came out, eventually.

It was the sharply-edged *truth* that was all she could think of to say. Yes, she and Gianna did have an agreement to keep this between them, but it was one Riley herself had come up with. And their agreement had been made under the pretense that they were merely having sex.

The situation wasn’t the same, now. And keeping it in, especially as she faced Joel’s earnest, searching expression, it was so hard.

It was too hard.

“Riley?”

“We’re having sex,” she found herself confessing.

Joel’s eyebrows rose high on his forehead, his mouth audibly snapping shut.

She had no idea how quiet or loud she’d actually spoken, she only knew that saying the words aloud felt both terrifying and freeing.

“Gianna and I.” Even though Joel definitely didn’t need the clarification, Riley found that *she* needed to taste it on her lips. “Gianna and I are having sex. That’s why I couldn’t correct Ms. Hendrick. I mean,” she blew out a breath, dragging a hand through her hair. Her hand shaking, she realized as she did so. “I didn’t expect her to even know Gianna and I knew each other! Let alone think... anything else. And I didn’t know what to even say, you know? I barely know what to say to *you* about it, so—”

She broke off, feeling like a weight had been lifted from her even as she felt anticipation clawing at her stomach, searching Joel’s expression as she waited for him to respond.

She expected surprise. Shock. Exclamations. A typical Joel reaction to big, unexpected news.

Instead, when Joel registered what she was telling him, he narrowed his

eyes and huffed out a little breath. Indignant, he pointed at her. “You’ve made me such a *liar!*”

The great news about his reaction was that Riley was so confused by it, it took away from every other feeling that had been putting her through the ringer. “Excuse me?”

Joel shook his head, tossing his hands in the air. “Do you know how many times people have asked me about you two? How many people have mentioned you guys to me, and I’ve just said – nope. You two were *just friends*. Sure, you’re strangely close. Sure, you go on almost all of your vacations together. Sure, you have this whole insulated world together that makes everyone else feel like they’re missing the secret code. Sure, you greet each other like a couple that’s been happily married for a decade but hasn’t seen each other in days.”

“You don’t have to be married to be close to someone,” she cut in, automatically defensive over the aspects of her and Gianna’s relationship. Things that had been commented on many times over the years, by many people, and Riley had always been simultaneously grateful for her closeness with Gianna at the same time that she was concerned that no one could conceive of a relationship like theirs unless they were fucking.

No matter what their relationship involved currently, that had never been a factor, before.

“I’ve always said that to people! Always! I’ve always defended you two being really, intensely, kind of weirdly close friends!” Joel’s voice grew in volume as he gesticulated wildly.

“I get that!” In spite of having one of the biggest conversations of her life, though, she still had enough presence of mind to remember that they were surrounded by their coworkers. “But can you stop *shouting* about it in a room full of nosy journalists?”

Especially as his yelling gave her intense flashbacks to when she’d told Ellie about this on Christmas. And immediately, she thought of Ellie’s warning against this.

The warning she really, maybe, should have listened to. But she *didn’t* and now she was *here*.

“Sorry,” he hissed, leaning in closer, “But it’s taking me a minute to get over the fact that I’ve lied that lie to dozens of people over the years! At least fifty. *At least,*” he stressed.

And though Joel was prone to being a little dramatic, she couldn’t help

but feel like he was likely telling the truth with that figure.

Some of the wind left his sails, as he leaned heavily against her desk, putting them on eye level with one another. “I just don’t get it, though. Why all the secrecy for so long?”

Joel nodded as if she’d answered. “Because she’s so famous? I mean, it is good for branding, I guess, to have people think you’re available, even if you aren’t.” He frowned, deeply, then. “But... you both sleep with other people? You’ve both always talked about your relationships with other people, so—”

He tilted his head the other way, eyes lighting up as he literally snapped his fingers. “An open relationship! Okay, that makes sense. Are you two, like, primary partners, then? I mean,” he slapped his thigh, “Duh. Of course you are. You’re the person the other one always comes back to.”

Riley stared at him, both dubious and entertained. “Do I even need to be here for this conversation anymore?”

Joel stared back at her, mouth falling open in offense. “You’re the one who dropped a bomb on me, here!”

There was no defense to that. She found herself settling next to him on her desk, which was a relief as her knees felt shaky. “That’s fair.”

She turned her head to look at him, though, as she picked through everything he’d said. “First things first – we *haven’t* been doing this for our entire friendship. Joel, come on. You know I’ve dated,” she reminded him in disbelief that he jumped to that conclusion, because, “How many stories have you heard over the years about my unsuccessful journey to fall in love?”

He inclined his head. “You got me on that one.”

Riley rolled her lips, unsure of where exactly to even start. “It’s only been going on for the last... six weeks?” Though that was when they’d first had sex, the night they’d very nearly hooked up – the night that altered the course of her life – popped up in her head, a demanding reminder. “Maybe ten weeks. But definitely not ten years.”

“How—”

She felt the heat race through her at the sex toys they’d started to put to use. Then immediately shook her head. “*That* is not a part of this conversation at the moment. Definitely not here.”

They sat quietly for a few moments, but Riley was grateful for the companionable quiet and the steady warmth of Joel’s arm pressing into hers.

“I didn’t even know you were *queer*.” He looked at her with a mix of question and hurt. “You’ve known I was gay since the day we met!”

"I didn't know I was queer, either," she lamented back, a mirthless chuckle leaving her. "Believe me, it was unexpected."

"So, you and Gianna have been sleeping together. For a few months. And it's a secret, because...?"

"Because..." She sifted through any explanation, all of them somehow making perfect sense and not seeming good enough. She lifted her hands up and then dropped them to her thighs. "We didn't want it to become this big deal," she settled on.

"Why would it have to be a big deal?" He asked, genuinely baffled.

Riley's mouth fell open, real laughter flooding through her for the first time in what felt like forever, as she turned to look at him. His typically perfectly styled hair was sticking up from the multiple times he'd run his hands through it, as he was slouching against her desk. "Sorry, was I the only one who was here a few minutes ago, when you single-handedly worked yourself up into believing we'd been together in an open relationship for a decade and accused me of making you a liar?"

Joel's expression turned sheepish. "... okay. I can see your point."

Riley's stomach took a nosedive, right back into that guilty feeling, as she thought about the fact that telling Joel violated the agreement she had with Gianna to keep this to themselves. That for the first time in her entire relationship with Gianna, she was going against her word.

She pushed through the feeling, turning to look at Joel intently. Needing him to see just how serious she was, as she said, "And you *can't* mention this to Gianna."

"Riley!" His tone in the single word was aghast. "Gossiping together is literally the foundation of my relationship with Gianna!"

And she couldn't blame him, because she *knew* Joel was reactionary, she knew he was bad at keeping secrets, she knew he loved gossip. She knew he and Gianna enjoyed gossiping, together.

Still, she insisted, "Please. Just – for now. While I..." She trailed off, helplessly.

While she sorted through her feelings? While she tried to process how much *more* this meant to her than merely sex? While she was still dealing with the fact that she'd thought realizing she was attracted to Gianna was going to be the wildest thing she'd dealt with thus far in her personal life?

When, in fact, the wildest, most unpredictable, most altering experience was realizing that her feelings went so much deeper?

“Oh my god,” Joel whispered.

And, there it was. Riley squeezed her eyes closed at the full truth. “I know. Trust me, I know it’s crazy, and I know it’s ridiculous to have developed *feelings* like this for the only person I know who hasn’t ever even wanted to date someone.”

Joel’s hand landed on hers, urgently. “*What?! You... Riley.*”

She snapped her eyes open and looked at him. But she couldn’t even be upset with his shocked, pleading look. “I’m one of the world’s biggest fools. I’m aware,” she acknowledged, dryly.

His eyes were still wide as saucers. “No! I mean... yeah,” he admitted with a sympathetic wince. “But, what I was trying to say was *oh my god, she’s here.*”

Riley sat at attention immediately, an instant awareness flooding her. The feeling that even though this might be the worst timed entrance Gianna ever made in Riley’s life, she still had this trill of excitement to see her. To be with her.

“Ten o’clock. She spotted us. She’s coming over, and I have to act like I don’t know anything!” Joel thankfully kept his voice down, even though it was as frantic as Riley had ever heard it.

Unable to help herself, Riley started to turn. It had only been a few days – seventy-two hours *max* – since she’d seen Gianna, yet she felt like it had been forever.

Joel winced. “Damn. Sorry, I meant my ten. Your... four?”

Riley didn’t even really have to turn. Because as soon as she did, she could smell Gianna’s perfume, which immediately set off a round of butterflies in her stomach.

“I walk into a party, and see my two newsies sitting alone and all serious in the corner. Should I be worried?” Gianna asked, lightly and teasingly, but with just enough of an undertone that Riley knew she was really asking what was up.

She’d rounded the desk as she spoke, landing a casual hand at the small of Riley’s back as she did so. Riley jumped at the touch, unable to contain herself.

Trying to roll with it, she pushed herself completely off of the perch she’d had on her desk, before she really *looked* at Gianna.

There were raindrops clinging to her hair and on her eyelashes, her cheeks still a little flushed with the winter chill outside. She was still wearing

her Tom Ford jacket, barely unzipped, and she was staring at Riley, obviously both amused and concerned.

Riley, alarmingly, felt like she could have melted right into her.

"Well?" Gianna prompted, bringing her hand back up to rest on Riley's hip. "Should I be worried?"

Right. Riley could only offer a small, guilty smile. "No, no. I'm... we were just—"

"Talking about Owen!" Joel shot the words out of nowhere, nearly shouting them. So loudly, Riley startled, whirling around to face him as she felt Gianna's hand tighten against her from her own shocked response.

As they both faced Joel, he gave them a nervous smile, tapping his fingers against Riley's desk. "Yep. We were talking about Owen. Good old Owen."

Jesus Christ.

She wanted to bury her face in her hands, but instead, she could only shoot Joel a *look*.

Gianna nodded slowly, looking between the both of them. "Ah. Sure." Her perfect, full lips twisted into a pout before she let out a considering laugh. "I can see how that might put a damper on any party vibes this close to the launch."

She turned away from them to scan her eyes over the crowd that had amassed, letting out a low whistle. "You know? Honestly, I didn't expect this when you invited me."

While Gianna was facing away from them, Joel's eyes locked onto Riley's, looking apologetic.

"I thought it was going to be more of the subdued affairs that I've been to with you before. Where everyone is still wearing their suits and sipping on a single glass of wine, talking about current events." She continued, softly, subconsciously, rubbing her hand over Riley's waist.

Riley arched her eyebrows at Joel, and he motioned a zip over his mouth with a very solemn nod.

Which Gianna saw, as she turned back into their little group. And Riley tried very hard not to let out any reaction as she watched Gianna stare questioningly at Joel even as she finished saying, "I see with the arm-wrestling contest starting already over there that I was wrong."

Finally managing to gather herself, she smiled up at Gianna. The smile was easy – it was exactly how she wanted to look at Gianna – the attempting to not look like she was elated by her very presence in any not-typical way

was... not so simple.

"You made it." The words fell out of her mouth, warm and soft, and exactly how she felt in her chest when Gianna's smile turned easy and sweet at her.

"Obviously." Gianna lightly bumped her hip into Riley's, but didn't move away after. Instead, she slid her arm more firmly around Riley's waist. "No thanks to you not answering my texts confirming when I should arrive or if I needed to bring anything."

Even though Gianna was obviously teasing her, Riley felt the words sharply. She'd deliberately not looked at Gianna's texts when talking to Marika, when in reality *that* was not something she'd ever do before she was aware of these feelings. "I'm sorry."

Gianna's jibing grin disappeared, though, at how obviously stricken Riley was at her internal revelation. "I'm just kidding, carina," she murmured, her eyebrows furrowing in obvious concern.

Yeah, Riley really, really needed to get this under control. She quickly nodded. "No, I know."

Gianna frowned, before she squeezed at Riley's hip and nodded decisively. "Hey, if Owen is still causing problems for you two, then I'll take some time tonight and actually work with him on some of his issues."

"What? No," Riley immediately rejected, for so many reasons. Principle among them being a strange combination of wanting to soak up every moment with Gianna that she could, *not* wanting to watch Owen make his giant googly eyes at Gianna, and not wanting Gianna to have to waste any of her time.

But Gianna shook her head. "No; either he's being deliberately obstinate with you two and I doubt he'll want to act inept in front of me, therefore we can call him out on it, or he actually needs to get a lesson and I feel very qualified to be the person who does so."

Gianna's haughty, decisive tone, especially as she was coming to Riley's aid, made her want to swoon. Literally. She caught herself swaying into Gianna, before she remembered, "It's seriously not worth your time, and he's insufferable around you."

A devious smile moved over Gianna's face. "Yes. He is. But, don't you worry; I can use that to my advantage."

Oh, Riley was very sure she could. "Yeah, I'm not concerned," she murmured, holding Gianna's gaze, before dipping her eyes down to where

Gianna's mouth pulled into a slow, enchanting, knowing smile.

Acutely aware of Joel standing next to them still – keeping his mouth shut as per wordless promise – Riley straightened up. “But. Clearly, this is a party-party, not a work-party.”

“Ah, yes. But I don’t work here.” Gianna slid her hand from Riley’s back, before she slid off her jacket. “Don’t worry, though, I dressed for a party-party.”

She wore one of her slinky black cocktail dresses, strapless and cutting off mid-thigh, and Riley breathed out a strange laugh, something embarrassingly akin to a *titter*, as she slowly slid her gaze up from Gianna’s thighs. “Yeah. You sure did.”

The smile that slid over Gianna’s face was remarkably satisfied.

Riley didn’t quite understand it or know how to put it into words. She just knew that while she’d tripped over herself and stumbled when adjusting to her attraction for Gianna, it didn’t feel close to *this*.

Because she’d always known Gianna was attractive; it was just a fact, a known variable. Even if she’d never felt the magnetism herself, she very much understood it. Experiencing it herself had been a new and scary and thrilling experience, but she was able to put it in a place in her world that made sense.

This felt so much bigger. And much, much more terrifying.

“Gianna! Hey! I didn’t know you’d be coming.”

The fact that Owen made his way back over to them – in spite of ditching Riley the literal second he was off the clock to attempt to find a bigger fish in their pond – wasn’t surprising in the least.

He was smiling that stupidly handsome, bright, engaging smile. The smile that had to count for at least a third of the reason the execs picked him. *Had* to.

“Owen,” Gianna greeted, her lips pursed as she nodded coolly at him.

... admittedly, Riley loved that. Seeing Gianna dress someone down, especially a man – and right now, especially *Owen* – was always a sight. She was so subtly amazing at it.

Riley wondered what it meant that right now, even that was making her feel more enamored.

“It’s often said where a party goes, I go. And here I am.” She held her hand up, as if to say *voila*.

Owen stared at her, nodding quickly. “Sure, yeah!” If he had a tail, it

would have been wagging.

“And where Riley goes,” Joel added, sounding like he was unable to keep it in. When all three of them looked at him, he explained, “Where the party goes, Gianna goes, but where Riley goes, Gianna... also... goes?”

He spoke slowly as his eyes fell on Riley’s, and she gave him a murderous look. His features immediately turned sheepish.

Thankfully, though, Gianna didn’t seem to notice.

She stroked her hand up then down Riley’s back in a quick, affectionate touch. “Also true,” she agreed.

“Also true,” Gianna granted, rubbing lightly at Riley’s back. “I’m going to get a drink, if anyone wants something?”

“I can help,” Owen immediately offered, shuffling forward in the already limited space he’d not allowed between them. “I’d be totally happy to.”

Where Riley used to find Owen’s crush on Gianna part amusing and part exasperating, she’d never felt this... this heated irritation that bubbled through her, unbidden.

“*I’ll go,*” she snapped, and everyone turned to look at her. Her heart pounded in embarrassment when she’d realized just how intense she’d sounded. Subdued, she cleared her throat. “I can help.”

Normal voice, normal volume. Perfect.

“Actually,” Gianna said slowly, “Why *doesn’t* Owen assist me?” She arched an eyebrow at him, still not mirroring his moony-eyed expression in the least. “I hear there are a lot of failures in your camera technique.”

She had a modicum of satisfaction at the surprised, then uncomfortable look on Owen’s face. “What? No. No, it’s not...” he glanced between Riley and Gianna, before simply not finishing his sentence.

“Come on, then,” Gianna directed him, before she ducked down to whisper into Riley’s ear, “Back soon. Going to eviscerate him.”

Riley didn’t manage a word out, before Gianna slid her hand down and lightly swatted at Riley’s butt.

She exhaled sharply, the butterflies turning into leap frogs in her stomach. And then Gianna was off.

Gliding through the crowd, that either parted for her like they were the red sea or Riley’s love-vision was so tainted, it appeared that way.

Either way, it spoke volumes over the Gianna-effect.

It took her several seconds to remember that she wasn’t alone in this moment, and she slowly turned to look at Joel.

Whose expression was sheer mysticism as he gaped at her. “Wow... that was even weirder than I *thought* it was going to be.”

She saw the last few minutes playback instantly in her mind. The nervous, awkward, schoolgirl-like giggle, the jumping from her desk, the snapping at Owen. Her stomach fluttered in that insane, romantic-possibilities way, which was then chased off by static nerves, and she definitely did *not* need it pointed out to her to know what was happening.

“I know,” she groaned, finally able to acknowledge the truth aloud at the very least, as she dropped her face into her hands. “I know.”

CHAPTER 22



Riley opened the pounding knock on her apartment door, unsurprised to see Joel there the following afternoon.

“You and Gianna,” was all Joel said as soon as he saw her, brushing past her and right inside. The assertiveness of the action was very not like Joel.

But Riley could accept it, given the circumstances.

She closed the door and followed him into her living room, where he was pacing, still in his jacket.

“You and *Gianna*. You and *Gianna*. *You and Gianna*.”

Riley crossed her arms and leaned against the wall as she watched him. Even with his frantic energy, though, it felt comforting. It felt good to have someone else in on the updates of her life. Someone who wasn’t Gianna, someone who wasn’t at the very heart of it all.

He paused, scrunching up his eyebrows at her, before shaking his head again and spinning on his heel.

“You and *Gianna*!”

“I really would have thought you got that out of your system, given that you had the whole night to process and all.”

She couldn’t really blame him, though. She was living it, had been living it for two months, and she was sometimes amazed when she thought about everything.

He really did stop in his pacing, now, turning to look at her in utter disbelief. “If anything, the entire night just gave me questions! Once I really had some time to think about it!”

Riley nodded slowly. “That explains why so many of your texts that I saw this morning came scattered throughout the night.”

Joel opened his mouth... then snapped it shut, and the alarm that had clearly filled him dissipated into a sly smirk. "And where exactly were you when you got my texts this morning?" He sounded like a disconcerting mix between a stern parent and an excited child.

She'd woken up to a barrage of messages, including but not limited to:

WOW. Still can't believe it. DYING to talk

*Don't worry, though, I'm not talking to anyone
except for you.*

YOU AND GIANNA

An exasperated laugh tripped out of her throat. "You know where I was, Joel."

Exasperated and accepting and... Riley didn't even know what else she felt, as she rubbed her temples. Falling for her best friend was much more emotionally taxing than Riley could have ever anticipated.

But she knew Joel had watched her and Gianna through barely blinking eyes as they left the party together, barely two hours after Gianna had arrived. After Gianna had returned from talking to Owen, which Riley had watched a little too closely. Gianna had been very serious, very professional, as she'd brought out her phone and clicked through videos, pointing out things Riley couldn't hear.

She made her way over to the couch, collapsing onto it. Joel immediately followed suit, turning to face her.

"And...? What did you two do after the party?" He asked, his voice taking on that gossipy tone.

Riley stared him down. "Joel."

He held up his hands. "Hey, apparently, I've been very wrong about the nature of your relationship!"

At that, Riley could only deflate in an accepting laugh. True. Very... very true.

"If you hadn't dropped that bombshell on me last night, you two could have left the way you did and I wouldn't have thought twice about it!" His own words seemed to blow his mind, his hands falling heavily into his lap. "I would have thought you were going to do laundry together! Or watch one of your shows! Or check out a better bar! Or whatever else you two do."

Riley had to let him have this moment, she really did. Because as much as Joel was reeling, so was she. It was insane.

After the briefest of pauses, Joel's dazed look turned sharply focused as

he stared at her. It almost made her nervous, wondering what was going to come out of his mouth, before he asked, “Okay, but... come on.”

His tone was hushed but utterly delighted.

And Riley was utterly baffled.

“Come on... what?”

His mouth dropped open, seemingly offended. “Come on, and dish! Are you kidding? We’ve seen *how many* people fall for Gianna over the years? We’ve seen *how many* people stumble over themselves? It’s like she’s a freaking witch, casting seduction spells.”

She and Joel *had* remarked on that many times over the years. Had joked about it. It would have been impossible not to, having been on the sidelines, witnessing it for so long.

Riley stared at Joel, her stomach twisting, feeling unsure if this was something good or something bad.

On one hand, she was in the ultimate conundrum. The single biggest emotional dilemma she’d ever experienced. Added onto that, merely telling Joel about them had violated that agreement she’d made with Gianna, and the guilt over doing that had very much *not* dissipated. Expounding on this seemed like it was even more wrong.

On the other hand, she’d been going through this alone, for months at this point. Yes, it was her own idea to do so. And yes, she had Gianna by her side so she wasn’t totally alone. And when she was *with* Gianna, she felt like she didn’t need the rest of the world. She didn’t need to confide in anyone else, because Gianna was right there with her, which meant everything was okay.

But she’d already broken her word to Gianna. And while she had Gianna physically on this ride with her, they were not on the same exact journey.

The guilt was already here, though. Joel already knew.

Even if it was crazy, even if it was messy, sometimes it also felt amazing.

The words were already bubbling up, as if she couldn’t swallow them down any longer. As if they’d been kept down for far too long.

“She’s fucking amazing.” Her heart pounded with that admittance, aloud.

Joel’s eyes lit up, though, and he leaned in closer, nodding.

She found she didn’t need even that small encouragement. “It’s like... Joel, it’s one thing to *see* it, to *see* Gianna being charming and beautiful, but it’s like you’re being let into this entire other world when you get to feel it.”

Riley laughed, this wild, bubbly sound that pushed out of her mouth as she shrugged. “I don’t even know if I can put it all in words. Because it feels

– it feels inescapable. *She* feels inevitable.”

There, yes. That made sense, but it wasn’t nearly everything.

“Like, if you’re interested in her, and she wants you back? That’s it. All it takes is a moment, and you’re suddenly in her orbit. We can be doing something so inane, something we’ve done a thousand times before. Like, getting a coffee together at The Bean Dream. We’re sitting there and caffeinating and it’s all normal. We’re talking, we’re laughing. And then...” the words rolled slowly over her lips, as she could see this exact moment play out in her head. The same way it had countless times in the last several weeks, in so many permutations.

“She gives me a look,” she settled on, shrugging helplessly. “Just a look. But it’s a look, where I know she’s thinking about me. Thinking about being with me. About something she isn’t going to say aloud, but she doesn’t need to. Because I’m already hooked.”

Riley breathed out deeply, experiencing that rush from just the memory of those moments.

“Wow,” Joel murmured. It seemed to be his go-to word for this, but who was Riley to disagree?

“And that’s not even discussing how thoughtful she is. Like so thoughtful,” she frowned, blinking up at the ceiling as she fell back against the couch again, tipping her head up. “Maybe that is because of our friendship, but... I don’t think so.”

She was sure their love and respect for each other amped up Gianna’s thoughtfulness, but she knew the core of Gianna. She knew that was just who she was. Who she’d spent her adult life striving to be.

Riley turned to look at Joel, who was staring at her from only inches away, now.

“You want to know where I was this morning, when I read through your texts?” She asked softly, even though she knew it was rhetorical.

She knew even before Joel eagerly nodded that he would desperately want to know.

A gentle warmth floated through her, tinged with a hint of self-conscious nerves, a sweet and startling softness settling in her stomach, as she thought of what she’d done this morning.

“Cuddled on Gianna’s couch, under my favorite blanket,” she knew Joel knew the one – it was the one Riley always claimed at Gianna’s, a soft gray luxurious throw that Gianna always kept out for her. “With my coffee, made

the way I like it, by Gianna, with CNN on tv – on mute.”

Once again, just the way she liked it.

That wasn’t even counting the fire going in the fireplace, and Gianna’s thick curtains pulled back so they could see the blanket of snow falling.

It was how they typically spent their mornings at Gianna’s, now.

They woke up, usually still naked from the night before, but occasionally having thrown something on, depending on when they’d actually gone to sleep. And waking up was so... simple. So incredibly *pleasant*.

Easy, soft morning exchanges. Sometimes they had sex in the morning, sometimes not. And then they moved into the living room for coffee and their own morning routines.

Their legs intertwined while Riley scrolled through all of her news outlets – local, national, and international – while Gianna scrolled through updates to her socials and emails.

It was a quiet solitary *togetherness*, something she’d never had with previous partners. Either her last partners left early or they wanted one-on-one time. Riley liked company in the morning, but she also enjoyed peace and quiet while she truly woke up and read through all of the news updates that had happened while she’d slept.

Gianna knew all of this about her. Accepted and anticipated it. By her own admission, she enjoyed it, too. They’d had many mornings similar to this when they’d been roommates in college.

It was so easy, with Gianna. Terrifyingly easy.

Joel sighed, dreamily, drawing her out of her thoughts as she looked at him again. “This is the kind of thing right from some sort of fairytale.”

The lovely, sweet feeling she fell back into at the memory got swept away as she snapped back into reality at Joel’s words.

“Only, it’s not,” she corrected, her stomach churning with something far less pleasant, now.

It didn’t settle, even as she rubbed her hand over it, trying to quell the nausea.

“It’s *not* a fairytale, because like you said – how many people have we seen fall for Gianna over the years?” She parroted his own words back at him. Hating it. “How many people have felt like this, because Gianna is so ridiculously *Gianna*, and they wind up as the idiot who should have known better? The idiot who was warned from the start how it’s going to end?”

Because, as Riley had so confidently told Gianna all those weeks ago in

this very apartment, she knew the rules. She knew how Gianna *did* relationships – that was to say, she didn’t.

Riley slapped a hand over her eyes, groaning as all of these awful feelings mixed with the good ones. “And now I’m just one of those idiots.”

She didn’t know how it made her feel. On one hand, she was a huge idiot who should have known better. A huge idiot who just *had* to chase that feeling, just *had* to explore every possibility instead of leaving well enough alone.

On the other hand, she wasn’t alone in that. It wasn’t only her, who had made this mistake. So many people had done this over the years – thought they could be casual with Gianna, or made themselves believe they could be, just to have the chance to be with her at all.

She snapped her eyes open, sitting up straight as the dread of that realization washed over her like a damn tsunami, and she gasped.

“Oh, god. Shit. I’m *Owen*.”

The name fell from her lips with sheer distaste, her face twisting with it. She couldn’t have possibly drawn a *worse* direct correlation in her mind, yet, here she was.

“No!” Joel immediately rejected, emphatically. He vehemently shook his head when Riley stared at him in horror. “No way.”

Bless his heart.

Riley had to swallow down the violent feeling like she was going to be sick, as she tried to reconcile with the truth.

She reached out and dropped her hand on Joel’s, patting it, feeling a little numb. “Yes. I am. Mooning over Gianna, knowing she’s clearly stated that she is not the mooning kind. Hoping, somewhere deep down, that this is different.”

It was the first time she’d said the words, maybe even the first time she’d clearly even *thought* them.

But, they were true.

She blinked blankly across the room, feeling so stupid and silly and annoyed at herself. For getting into this mess in the first place, for letting it get to this point.

For joining the legion of people who fell at Gianna’s feet.

A strangled sound of distress escaped her throat as she wrapped an arm over her waist and bent over it. “God, I’m *awful*.”

“No, you’re not,” Joel was quick to say, leaning forward with her. She

was dimly aware that he had a hand pressed against her back. Dimly aware of him rubbing soothing circles against her.

She had to take a few moments, to try to gather herself. To stop her stomach from churning at the onslaught of guilt, mostly, as she turned just enough to look at Joel. “Aren’t I?” She challenged, swallowing through her dry, tight throat. “I’m the person Gianna has come to *over and over*, talking about the people who have developed feelings for her. I know better than anyone that the romantic aspect isn’t what she does, that she wants to cut ties with someone before something reaches that level.”

Her stomach rolled so violently, she hunched forward more, almost completely in half, in an attempt to repress it. Uselessly, it turned out.

“I’m the person who knows that Gianna usually doesn’t even stay *friends* with someone if they catch feelings for her after they have sex!”

The thought of *that* could truly make her feel sick. Dizzy with it, she leaned into Joel as he moved closer to her.

“Listen! You aren’t those people,” he reassured.

The scoff that left her was unstoppable. “How is everything I said not exactly like all of those people?”

“... all right,” he conceded weakly. “So, yeah. The feelings you have are... similar.”

Those words were so discomforting, Riley could only groan again, dropping her head into her hands.

“But,” he rushed to say, “You aren’t Owen! You aren’t!”

Without moving, her voice muffled against her palms, she asked, “So, the way I looked at Gianna last night wasn’t the way Owen looked at her?”

It was a trick question and they both knew it.

Thankfully, Joel at least didn’t try to lie about that. “Fine, yes.” He tightened his arm around her, her voice growing much more certain as he insisted, “But, Gianna doesn’t look at *you* the way she looks at *him*.”

Even though she wanted to dismiss him... she couldn’t. Not totally. Whether she was being stupid or hopeful or stupidly hopeful, she took in a deep breath and tried to calm the feelings ravaging through her, as she looked at him.

It was apparently all he needed, as he rushed to explain, “Gianna looks at Owen like he’s an invasive insect that she’s ready to kill. She sees him on the sidewalk and she’s ready to squash him. She looks at *you* like you could go on a killing spree and she’d be like, *good job, babe, they deserved it! I’ll call*

my lawyer!"

She couldn't help but laugh at both his analogy and impressively dead-on voice intonation.

His eyes were so big and bright and sincere, though.

And though she hated herself for it, she felt comforted about the analogy.

"Gianna could *never*... I was going to say hate, but honestly, she couldn't even really dislike you. She would never cut you out of her life over something like this." There was a ludicrousness that took over his voice that should have been comical, but only added to the window of relief she felt.

Joel scrunched up his face in thought, adding on, "I mean, Gianna's said before that she goes into every sexual relationship, prepared for someone to develop feelings. Even the ones where it doesn't happen, she's prepared for it. So... she *had* to know this was a possibility?"

He clearly was voicing his thoughts as he was figuring them out in his head, entirely off the cuff.

Still, there was a reassurance she took from him. Something that dulled the edge of the guilt and the anxiety. Because if nothing else, she believed Joel was right about the fact that Gianna would never hate her or cut Riley out of her life.

She believed that with everything she had, with a conviction that settled in her very bones, even if she had no clue what the best or easiest resolution to this whole predicament was.

After letting that sink in enough to steady her – just enough to get her hands to stop shaking – she fell into Joel with a deep breath.

"Even if you're right, that still leaves me with no clear path forward," she muttered the truth that had plagued her since the morning she'd realized her feelings.

She had no idea where to go from here.

Joel was uncharacteristically quiet for several moments, his arm strong and steady around her. "Yeah. That's kinda tough."

"Kinda," she echoed, entirely too amused at the lack of embellishment.

She didn't know how long they stayed there, before Joel let out a soft chuckle, full of disbelief, "*You and Gianna!*"

For all that she had no fucking clue what to do about *her and Gianna*, she couldn't help but laugh.

CHAPTER 23



O ctober, sophomore year
Dating girls was fun.

If Gianna was being entirely forthright, she found *dating* fun. She didn't exactly understand people talking about feelings being difficult or getting bogged down in details.

The dating pool was large and it was so easy. Talking to people, flirting, gauging interest... it was just, exciting.

Granted, Gianna hadn't really dated anyone longer than a few months, and she was trying to make a more concentrated effort on picking better dates than she previously did. Before, she dated for pure style over substance.

Now, she was approaching her romantic prospects with a more fully-formed scope. Which included women.

Mostly because, as she and Riley had been organizing their room during move-in day last month, Riley had asked, "Why don't you ever date women? I know you've hooked up with them, now. But, have you done anything more... serious?"

And there was no judgment in her tone, only a searching curiosity.

Gianna, at first, brushed it off as a joke. "Riley," she gasped, scandalized, "How do you know I've been hooking up with women?! Voyeur."

Riley scoffed, nailing her with a blistering look as she'd folded her clothes. "Does it count as voyeurism in *any* way, if I only know the gritty details because you apparently love to share them?"

Gianna laughed, then, giving in with a shrug. It was so – so different and so *nice*, to have someone to tell about her life. Someone who cared about the details, who urged Gianna to share stories about her day, even when they

weren't particularly thrilling. So, yeah, she *did* love to share details with Riley.

"If you aren't interested in actually dating girls, that's fine; I'm not trying to push or pry or anything," Riley followed up her previous comment. "I was just wondering, since you broke things off with... Brent? A few weeks ago and announced you were going back on the market."

Ah, yes. Brent the Tufts grad student. Gianna liked him well enough – enough to exclusively sleep with him and see him a few times a week throughout the summer. And he really had liked her – not just physically, either, which was a new avenue for her to explore.

But her classes would be starting soon, and Riley was going to be moving back, and Gianna had decided that she simply didn't like him *enough* to keep making time when her schedule was looking fuller.

Gianna had sat with Riley's comment, then, because she'd never really thought about it, before.

"I don't know," she admitted, after coming to that conclusion. "I guess, before last year – before I came out to you – I never thought about really dating a woman. And now..." she shrugged, considering, "I guess, men are the people who usually approach me or ask me out. And they're easy." She arched an eyebrow at Riley, "I *know* when a man is interested. And I know how I make them interested. Women don't feel so simple."

Riley accepted her words with a nod, before she aimed a look at Gianna. "I'm pretty sure you, of all people, would be able to tell if a woman is interested in more than a casual party hookup." A smile that was both sweet and... sexy, almost? Tugged at her lips. "Let's be honest – if a woman has an interest in women, she'll probably be interested."

Still momentarily thrown by that sexy little note in Riley's expression, it took her a second to register what Riley was saying. She found herself mirroring the exact same smile back. "You know what? I think you're right."

And, it turned out, that Riley *was* right.

Gianna knew how to read people like a book, and adding women to the romantic aspect of the equation was an exciting new facet to her library.

It was how she'd ended up in the Boston University mail center, to swing by and talk and flirt with Carrie during her shifts. Carrie was cute, with dark hair and hazel eyes and delicate features. She wasn't someone Gianna would ever meet at a party given that she rarely went out and didn't drink, but she thought that was a nice change of pace.

They'd met in their macro marketing class, and had worked on a project together the first week of school. Gianna, in a change of pace, was actually the student in the class who raised her hand the most. It was a pretty powerful, prideful feeling, to understand and actually be *good* at what she was working on in her courses.

They were somewhere just past the talking stage, right in the beginning of the dating stage, and Gianna was enjoying it.

She enjoyed Carrie's smile, too, as she gently informed Gianna, "You don't have to come here every time I'm working."

Gianna shrugged, "I know. But I like it."

And going out of her way to see someone for that reason – because she liked it. Liked them – was new for her. Exciting.

Riley had given her that sweet, proud smile when Gianna had told her about it, too, which made it all the better.

Carrie blushed, before her eyes widened as she remembered, "Oh! You actually got some mail. I, um, I kept it up front for you instead of sorting it into your mailbox, in case you stopped by."

Endeared, Gianna grinned at her and reached out to touch Carrie's hand in appreciation. What she enjoyed about women more than men, really, were their hands. So much softer and more comfortable for her to hold. Gianna was well aware her hands were bigger than most women's, and it was nice to *be* the bigger hand when their fingers laced together. She hadn't ever noticed it until she'd started holding Riley's hand so frequently, but she liked it. A lot.

Carrie's blush deepened as she flexed her fingers around Gianna's and handed her an envelope with her other hand. "I don't usually see mail for you, here."

"Yeah," Gianna murmured, trying to not get her hopes up. But anticipation still buzzed through her, nerves tangling as she bit her lip and looked down at the envelope.

The return address read *Marjatta Mäkinen*, and Gianna sharply inhaled.

"She wrote back," she whispered, surprise and elation rushing through her, as she felt herself smiling so widely, it hurt her cheeks. Still, the emotion made her throat feel raw. "She wrote me back."

"Who did?" Carrie asked, peering at the envelope. She was tentatively smiling, herself, mirroring Gianna's emotion.

"My grandmother," she said, around the well of emotion in her throat.

She cleared it, shaking her head, as she stated more firmly, “My grandmother.”

“That’s nice,” Carrie smiled wider, softer, as she nodded at Gianna, “Go ahead, open it.”

Even though her fingers Itched to do so, she couldn’t.

Not with Carrie’s hazel eyes watching her.

Frozen in place, Gianna slowly shook her head. Carrie didn’t know. She didn’t know how nerve-wracking this was for her, she didn’t know what it had taken for her to send Mummo a letter a couple of weeks ago, reaching out to her for the first time in almost ten years.

“Sorry, I – I actually have to go,” she apologized, squeezing Carrie’s hand once, before gently disentangling herself. “I’ll text you, later.”

Carrie’s confusion was palpable, but Gianna would have to remedy that, later. Right now, she had to get to Riley.

* * *

“I KNEW SHE WOULD WRITE BACK,” Riley’s words were so certain, so strong, and landed so softly inside of Gianna, as they sat pressed against one another in Gianna’s bed, the still-unopened envelope between them.

Riley was the reason she’d written Mummo in the first place.

After opening up to Riley about her parents and mentioning the years she’d spent in Savonlinna with her grandmother, she’d been unable to tuck all of those memories away. They were the happiest ones she had, up until her friendship with Riley.

The memories of learning to use a sewing machine and how to hand stitch, because Mummo was a seamstress. Gianna took to it, and she remembered that she would spend whole weekends in Mummo’s shop with her. The memories of Mummo making her Karelian pastries, of Mummo brushing her hair before bed.

That was what had started this whole thing. Riley had been brushing out Gianna’s hair for her, the touch tender and sweet and Gianna hadn’t asked her to do it, but she wouldn’t deny that it made her feel good. Loved.

“My grandmother used to do this,” she’d said, the memory taking her aback. “When I lived with her.”

Riley didn’t say anything for a few seconds, pausing her motions. “Why

don't you talk to her anymore?"

Her question was probing but quiet. Coaxing.

And it worked, because Gianna wanted to talk about it, for the first time.

"It hurt. A lot," she admitted, "Going to Elliston."

She'd missed Mummo, terribly. So terribly, it had made her cry during her first nights there.

"And I was mad," she admitted, ashamed by it. But... this was Riley. And she didn't want to not tell Riley how she felt, even if she knew she'd been in the wrong. "I was mad that Mummo let them take me from her. I was mad that she never came for me. She didn't have a cell phone back then, so she could only talk on the phone. And I... stopped calling. Eventually, she stopped calling me, too."

Gianna's frown was so deep, it felt carved into her face, as she dipped her head and stared down at her hands. "I think it was easier, to be mad at her and blame her, rather than blame my parents," she whispered, letting out a mirthless laugh. "Which makes no sense, but, there it is."

Riley put the brush down and Gianna found Riley's arms wrapped around her chest, pulling Gianna back into her. She reached up, grasping Riley's arms, needing the anchor.

"It does make sense. And I think maybe you should reach out to her," Riley whispered. "I think it might be a good thing for you."

Gianna extinguished the hope before it could even ignite, "I don't think she'd want to hear from me."

"I think she would," Riley gently countered.

She didn't have Mummo's phone number. She'd texted her father and asked if he did, but he apparently didn't either – which was unsurprising, but it made her inexplicably sad.

She'd remembered her address, though. Mummo had made her memorize it, when Gianna had started to live with her when she'd been five. She used to quiz Gianna on it, on their address, on her name, on what to do in case of emergencies.

So, she'd written her a letter –

Mummo –

I'm not exactly sure how to start this, because I've thought about contacting you a few times over the years and never knew what to say. It all sounds silly, like too much and not enough.

Last year, I made a friend –Riley, she's also my roommate – who told me

I should just tell you, about me. The me that I am, now.

So – I graduated from Elliston, obviously. I'm attending Boston University, now. I'm a marketing major, but I'm not quite sure where I'll go from there.

I'm not really sure you would have been proud of the person I became after I left you. Riley says that she thinks I have a good heart, and I'm not entirely sure about that, yet, but I'd like to believe she's right. I'm trying to live my life like she's right. And I know that if she is right, it's because of what you did for me.

I guess that I mostly wanted to tell you that I'm sorry. For never returning your calls and for blaming you for Giulia and Antero's decisions. It wasn't your fault. And I hope you can forgive me.

Love,

Gianna

She'd included her return address, obviously, but... she'd tried not to think about whether or not Mummo would write her back.

Riley nudged her shoulder against Gianna's, bringing her back to the moment, as she tapped on the envelope. "Are you okay? Do you want to open it?"

Gianna blew out the breath she hadn't known she was holding. She paused, clenching the hand that wasn't holding onto Riley's as she felt herself trembling. "Can you? Can you open it?"

Riley wordlessly nodded, squeezing Gianna's hand, before slipping hers out of it and opening the envelope, pulling out the letter.

"What does it say?" she immediately asked, closing her eyes.

"Well, I can't read Finnish, so I'm not exactly sure," Riley answered, gentle amusement coloring her tone. "But she said a lot, so I think it's safe to say that she was happy to hear from you."

Gianna opened her eyes quickly, looking at the papers in Riley's hand. There were at least four full pages there, and she quickly grabbed at them, her heart beating quickly, leaping into her throat.

She scanned her eyes over every page, not yet taking everything in linearly, just catching bits and pieces.

Gianna –

... You still know Suomi! I've wondered over the years of you living in America if you would remember how to speak it, how to write it. I know you came to live with me having already spoken Italian from your mother, but

I've always hoped you considered my language – our language – just as close to your heart.

... I have thought of you many, many times. Wondered about you. Hoped you are doing well.

... I'm not in contact with your father, anymore. I haven't been since you went to Boston.

... do you still sew? I have officially retired and sold my shop to the Heikkinen girls. Do you remember them? They used to work for me part-time. But I always kept the sewing kit you made; you were always so creative with it.

... I have nothing to forgive, dear. You were just a child, with no control over your own life, taken from the only stability you'd been given. I knew you were scared and hurting. I hated so deeply that you were taken from me, but I never was mad at you.

I appreciate your Riley. Keep her around; she seems like a good one.

Love,

Mummo

A laugh broke from her lips, full of disbelief and awe and she clutched the letters tightly, before smoothing them down in her lap.

She turned, then, pressing her lips against Riley's cheek, as she reached up and cupped her jaw, keeping her from moving. "My grandmother thinks I should keep you around," she whispered against Riley. Her lips tingled as they slid over Riley's soft skin, but she didn't pull back at all.

She continued to plant kisses over Riley's face and Riley allowed her to. She didn't stop, even when Riley started laughing, even when she started laughing as well. It felt so right – the perfect outlet of all of her feelings.

CHAPTER 24



Gianna – 8:12PM

*Got us a seat at the bar, in the corner
opposite the entrance*

Riley double-checked Gianna's message just before she pushed through the mass of people crowding around the door.

Gianna had messaged her this afternoon while she'd been at work, telling her –

Gianna – 4:02PM

*Tonight. You. Me. Zest. We drink. We dine.
We take dessert home to watch The One*

Gianna – 4:02PM

*(cannot believe the season is ending soon,
it feels like we were watching Sierra meet
her potential matches just yesterday)*

Gianna – 4:03PM

*I know you're stressed at work and have a
lot on your plate. But I also know that all
work and no play make Riley a sour patch
kid*

Even though she was at work and her launch was looming closer and closer – only eight days out, now – she'd only been able to ignore Gianna's messages for all of two minutes.

Riley – 4:05PM

Correction: all work means Riley might just

keep her job, which makes Riley a very happy camper

Gianna – 4:05PM

*Fine, Riley being all work and no play makes
GIANNA a sour patch kid*

Riley – 4:06PM

*Well, god knows that's the last thing I want. I'm
here to make you happy*

Riley had typed out the words and sent them before she kicked herself for it, in light of... everything. Was it too flirty? Was it too *much*? Was it –

Gianna – 4:06PM

*Perfect, then that settles it. I'll see you at Zest.
And later, I'll see much, much more of you*

As simple as that, Riley had a not-date at the hottest new bar in the city.

After her weekend confessional to Joel five days ago, they'd walked through what Riley's options with Gianna were, and it boiled down to the fact that there really weren't very many. There was really only a single choice. Or, there should be, anyway.

She had to tell Gianna that she had feelings for her. It was a part of their agreement from the day they'd crossed the line into something *more*, it was an agreement Gianna set forth with every sexual partner, one expected them to abide by. It was something that meant a lot to Gianna.

Which Riley respected, deeply. She'd *always* respected that Gianna was so clear with her boundaries and what she was expecting from a relationship. And she'd always bemoaned with Gianna when people broke that agreement.

Not respecting that rule was eating her up inside.

Whenever she wasn't with Gianna and thinking about them – about their sex life, about all of the fun they were having, about all of the fun they *always* had – it was tainted, now, by this awful, crushing guilt. Because she was disrespecting herself, by lying about having these feelings, given that a lie by omission was still a lie.

But more than that and most importantly, she was disrespecting *Gianna*. It was wrong. And Riley never, ever wanted to wrong Gianna.

According to Joel, however, there was the other option of –

“You could just... keep going?” He’d said, holding up his hands when she’d looked at him incredulously. “Hear me out! You know it’s not going to last. It’s not like you’re one of all of the others, who are going to try to convince Gianna to, like, *change her ways* or something. Right?”

For all it did *ache* to know that Gianna didn’t engage in relationships, that she didn’t or couldn’t experience the romantic fall that Riley was currently head over heels in, Riley didn’t expect anything else. And no matter what she wished could be different, she would never try to change Gianna.

“*That’s* the big problem, right?” Joel had reasoned. “Gianna doesn’t want people to get too attached or to make things more difficult or to get too entangled. But – you two are already entangled. How much worse could it be? Either you admit to your feelings and you two break things off now, and you’re crushed.” He held one hand up as one side of a proverbial scale. “Or, eventually, everything will run its course like it always does for Gianna, and then it’ll end.” He winced, apologetically, lifting his other hand as the other side of the scale, balancing them out evenly. “You’ll probably still be crushed, but that part feels inevitable at this point.”

“Very inspiring,” she’d dryly shot back.

Despite the fact that Joel was, admittedly, factually correct, it still didn’t sit well with her.

Doing the right thing wasn’t always the easy thing. In fact, doing the right thing was rarely ever the easy thing.

But Riley had tried to live her life doing the right thing. She’d turned her back on supposed friends and turned down invitations from the popular girls in her youth who’d teased her sister. She’d gotten her official promotion to producer by pressing forward with a story about her own station director, who’d assaulted then bribed several young interns throughout the years. She’d known there was a good chance she’d get fired from it, but she’d done it, anyway.

Somehow, telling Gianna about this giant shift in their emotional tether – rather, *her* emotional tether to Gianna – felt even scarier than that.

She’d tried earlier this week, already. She’d walked into Gianna’s, dragging her laundry behind her with one hand and holding flowers in the other.

Which, she’d realized upon entering Gianna’s house, was *insane* and made no fucking sense! But the florist next to her apartment building seemed

to beckon her when she'd been loading up her car – feelings, confession, flowers... it all seemed to make sense in the moment.

Plus, Gianna loved flowers. She couldn't keep them alive for a damn, but she loved them.

"I'm thinking Italian tonight?"

She'd panicked when Gianna's voice came closer, clearly coming to meet Riley. She'd whipped the flowers behind her back as her pulse had raced, but – what the hell was *that* going to do?! It wasn't like she could physically hide the flowers forever!

Some part of her illogical brain had been activated, then, as she'd dropped the lily-of-the-valley – Gianna's favorite, because her Mummo used to have it in her garden – bouquet on the floor, like a fucking *moron*, just as Gianna had come into view in the entryway.

"But if you—" Gianna cut herself off, staring at Riley like she had two or more heads as she'd walked closer.

Riley's heart pounded in her chest and she'd wanted to drop her face into her hands.

"Did you just... drop those flowers on the floor?" Gianna had asked, her voice clearly baffled but sounding like she was on the verge of laughter.

Not that Riley could blame her.

"I..." She had nothing.

Gianna brushed by Riley, pressing against her as she bent down to pick up the flowers. "What I mean by that is, I know you did because I saw you, but *why*?"

Gianna straightened up but didn't back away. She stood right in front of Riley, just barely pressing against her in her at-home jeans and sweater – the clothing Gianna would wear for casual company or by herself – and she smelled perfect and her eyes were so bright as she smiled inquisitively down at Riley.

And the words to confess her feelings didn't materialize.

She felt the guilt, she felt so *wrong*, she felt – for the first time in their lives – like she might be acting like a truly bad friend to Gianna. Even as her stomach folded in on itself, though, no words came.

"I... couldn't carry them with my laundry," the weakest, dumbest words escaped her. A *lie*, and her stomach twisted even harder with it.

Gianna stared at her in disbelief even as she breathed out a chuckle and used her free hand to cup Riley's jaw, so naturally, seamlessly tilting Riley

up to face her as she pressed a fleeting, casual kiss to her lips.

“Thank you for the flowers,” she whispered against Riley.

The everything in that moment simply... ensnared her, as brief and simple as it was, as Gianna released her. She knew in that moment that she wouldn’t be telling Gianna the truth that night. No matter how wrong it was or how terrible she felt. She couldn’t.

All she could do in that moment was wonder desperately if there was a word for this... this longing for something she currently *technically* had.

“It’s been a while since I’ve made a pit stop at the florist; I was just thinking about that,” she said as she bent down again and grabbed a handle of Riley’s hamper with the hand not holding the flowers. “And if the situation ever arises again, I’m more than happy to come to your aide.”

That had been two days ago.

Tonight was a new opportunity.

An opportunity she’d practiced for, this time. She’d prepared several different speeches, ranging from simple – *I promised I would tell you if or when I developed feelings for you, and that time has come. It’s been a really fun time and I know we will navigate through this* – to much more involved – *I’m so sorry I haven’t told you how I felt, but I realized a couple of weeks ago that this is more for me than just sex. I never want to disrespect you or treat you badly, so I should have told you sooner, but the truth is that when I’m close to you, you make everything feel the way the world should be. You make everything make sense. I’m not sure how to go back from this or how that feeling is ever going to go away, but at least now you know.*

Nothing ever felt quite *right*. But she was just going to have to do it in the moment, when that moment presented itself.

She pushed through the throngs of people, gritting her teeth as she had to elbow past some particularly annoying men, before she finally could get some breathing room.

Huffing out a breath, she turned to where Gianna said she would be, and

Sitting at the end of the bar, in a sleeveless red satin dress, gold bangles on her wrists, diamond earrings glinting in the aesthetically dimmed lighting, was Gianna. She was talking with one of the female bartenders, words that Riley couldn’t hear but seemed entirely inconsequential.

She wanted Gianna.

In the way that she wanted to take her home, tonight, and be able to touch

her all over, in the ways Riley had learned Gianna liked.

In the way that she wanted to then wake up with her the next day, softly.

She wanted Gianna in all of the ways Gianna wanted her back, and, unfortunately, in all of the ways Gianna didn't.

Breathing through that, she nodded and pushed herself forward.

"Is this seat taken?" She asked, as jokingly as she could, as she slid her hand over the back of the expensive leather seat.

Gianna paused in her conversation with the bartender as she slowly spun to face Riley. She braced her elbow on the bar, her chin against her fist, and slowly looked Riley up and down.

And the exacting look in those blue eyes, perusing her body, made her shiver. She shifted in her heels, brushing a hand down the side of the green dress she wore. Not slinky, like Gianna's, but form-fitting, with long-sleeves and a wide, low neckline.

It was a dress she'd had for a few years, and Riley vacillated between her feelings on it at times. But Gianna had always effusively encouraged her to wear it when they were going out together or if she was going out on a date where it would be appropriate. She'd always insisted that the green worked well with Riley's eyes and the cut was show-stopping.

Tonight seemed appropriate to wear it for a little spin. A little bit of limelight before they were *done*.

As Gianna slid her gaze slowly all the way up Riley's body again, the bartender cleared her throat, "She's actually been saving this seat for a while. You're at least the sixth person to ask in the last fifteen minutes."

Riley looked at the woman, preparing to tell her that she was actually who Gianna had been waiting for, when the woman spoke again, leaning over the bar in Riley's direction, "But, I'd be more than happy to... take care of you."

Riley's eyes widened when she held the bartender's gaze, because – *huh*. She had big, wide brown eyes and a smattering of freckles, making her appear very cute in the face, even though she wore a skin tight tank top and jeans that demanded to be thought of as sexy. And it worked, Riley thought.

Gianna – not taking her eyes off of Riley – responded, "The thing is that my new friend, Alanna, here is correct; I am waiting on someone," she paused, licking her lips slowly, pulling Riley's attention right back to her. "And this person means the world to me, so I'm really torn about giving up this seat."

"I'll try very hard to make it worth your while," she offered, the words leaving her mouth before she could stop herself.

And the world was such a confusing place because it was *wrong* to flirt. It was so wrong to make innuendos with Gianna, knowing that Riley was breaking the biggest code Gianna lived by when it came to her personal life.

But it also felt so *good*.

"Yes, you are most definitely welcome to take the seat," the woman – Alanna – said, and Riley turned to look at her again, tearing her eyes off of Gianna. "I'm the owner, so, I supersede everyone here."

Yep, Riley hadn't been imagining anything a minute ago. There was definitely a suggestive tone, there. She lifted her eyebrows at the realization, before sliding into the seat, "Who am I to argue with that?"

"What'll you have?" Alanna asked.

"Gin martini. Dry. Lemon. Stirred," Gianna answered with Riley's order, though she clearly had her own drink in front of her, still, only half empty.

Alanna lifted her eyebrows at Riley, though, and she nodded to confirm.

When she turned to see Gianna again, she saw that Gianna hadn't moved at all from where she'd turned when Riley had approached. She sat, entirely turned to face Riley, gaze firmly on her.

Riley *felt* it. She felt the attentiveness, the attraction, the pull. It slid through her, wearing down all of the bad feelings. Soothing them.

She only dragged her gaze away as Alanna slid her drink across the bar. She sent Riley a small half-smile, before turning to serve other customers, and when Riley looked down, a surprised laugh broke from her lips.

"I think she left me her number." Because there were, indeed, ten digits written there. Riley hadn't even noticed when she could have written it down, but – then again, she'd been preoccupied.

"Riley, in that dress you can get the number to any single person who is attracted to women," Gianna said, her tone somewhat playful, somewhat self-satisfied, as she added, "As I've always said."

She looked at Gianna, this time swiveling her seat so she turned completely, making their legs – bare, from the cut of their dresses – slide against one another's.

"I've never been hit on by a woman before, like that." She tapped her finger against the number on the napkin.

"You give off a different vibe, now," Gianna murmured, holding Riley's gaze while she sipped her vodka tonic.

“What vibe is that?”

Gianna slowly placed her drink on the bar and licked her lips, and Riley’s throat went dry with it. “That you would be open to leaving here tonight with a woman,” she said it so simply, so matter-of-fact, that if it wasn’t for a barely perceptible dip in her tone, Riley would have thought Gianna was unaffected by that fact.

She recognized the look in Gianna’s eyes, though. She recognized the sultry tone.

And, as her heart thumped in her chest, she recognized that this was the moment. This was the time to rip off the band-aid and tell the truth. Before they got into any real, heavy flirting, before anything could possibly happen or be taken too far.

It didn’t matter that she’d rehearsed any speech, though, she realized, her heart pounding. Because she... wasn’t going to say it. She didn’t know when she would ever have the strength to say it – maybe when this gnawing guilt got to be too much?

All she knew was that it felt so incredible to have Gianna look at her this way. To be the person Gianna wanted to take home tonight.

She knew this was all they’d ever have, and she knew it was all only temporary.

But she also knew that she’d spent years wanting to feel this way. Wanting to feel excited and wanting and exhilarated and swoony. And she didn’t know when she would ever feel it again.

It might be selfish and wrong, but maybe Joel was right. She was going to be crushed at the end of this no matter what. And she would never, ever try to drag Gianna into the messy feelings she was now harboring.

Maybe... in some twisted way, it was excusable to wring every ounce of enjoyment and pleasure from this that she could.

It was so convoluted, but right now, as Gianna’s hand dropped to her bare thigh, Riley couldn’t bring herself to care.

“Maybe I am open to leaving here with a woman tonight,” she murmured, shivering as Gianna slid her hand just a little higher, her fingertips slipping under the hem of Riley’s dress.

“Alanna?” Gianna asked, stopping her hand as she held Riley’s gaze with her own.

Riley knew Gianna was the literal opposite of a jealous person. Considering she never *wanted* romantic ties, there was nothing to ever be

jealous of. So she didn't let herself read into the grip Gianna had on her leg, and she *knew* Gianna was teasing her.

"Unfortunately, I think she is going to be a little busy tonight; I'm not going to have the time to get to know her." She gestured to the insane amount of customers vying to push forward to get their order in.

"That's a shame," Gianna commented, her voice light, a spark in her eyes as she slid her hand up another few inches. Riley's mouth fell open with a heavy exhale, the heat sliding through her as Gianna's fingertips were so close to touching her... "I think I can offer an alternative, though."

Riley was positive that no one had ever thought of Gianna as *an alternative option*.

She was increasingly becoming alarmingly convinced that Gianna was *the* option, and that everyone else would only ever be an alternative.

CHAPTER 25



Riley settled in at her desk, rolling her head back on her neck trying to work out some – any, really – of the tension there.

They'd – she, Joel, and Owen – spent five hours, so far, creating content from this past weekend to have lined up and ready to post on their channel for when they launched. Given that it was only just past noon on a Monday, Riley would say her week was off with a bang.

The launch was officially happening on Thursday. The biggest day of her career to-date was happening in *three days*.

She was prepared to eat-sleep-breathe BostonNow until then, and so was Joel. Owen... was questionable, but he'd buckled down – for the most part – so far, today.

And speaking of.

Riley hadn't even had the chance to dip into her cup of soup yet, as Owen came to stand next to her desk, perching next to her.

He didn't immediately speak, as he fiddled with his phone, clearly reading something on his screen. She tried to not let herself get agitated; even if they'd just been together nonstop for five whole hours and he was silently towering over her while she wanted to have a quick lunch break. She *had* told him that after she ate her soup, she was going to read updates and see if there were any fresh stories from today for them to work onto their roster for this weeks' news.

There was a very good chance he was trying to find some stories he wanted to post as well. Despite the fact that Riley rarely agreed with the pieces he wanted to focus on, she tried to appreciate that he was really focusing on work.

After a few seconds, he looked down at her, and asked, “Are Gianna’s parents Giulia Gallo and An…tero Mäkinen?”

All right, Riley could admit – that was very much not what she’d expected. She set her spoon down next to her soup, interest piqued. “Yes. Why?”

She already was developing a bad feeling about whatever this could lead to – as very few things involving Gianna’s parents ever led to something *good*. In fact, in the last twelve years, Riley couldn’t think of anything that had started with or involved Gianna’s parents, that led to a truly positive outcome for Gianna.

They were the same parents who’d both decided that they would bring a child into this world, but also didn’t want that child to disrupt any part of their burgeoning careers in the fashion world. The same parents who’d left Gianna at her grandmother’s house in Finland throughout almost all of her childhood, flying her out to see them four or five times every year. The same parents who, when Gianna had turned eleven, had unilaterally decided to send her to a boarding school in Boston, where they still rarely ever saw her.

The same parents who liked to use Gianna when it was convenient for them – when Gianna’s fame level rose or when she was successful or when they were going through another one of their many breakups and wanted her to badmouth the other. The same parents who broke so many promises to Gianna over the years, that Riley... well, Riley couldn’t say she hated many people, but – they were pretty high on the list.

They were the parents who had biologically *created* Gianna, which was the most credit Riley could give them.

“Is Gianna in Italy?” He asked, ignoring the *why* part of her answer.

Given that Riley had spent the better part of the weekend entirely wrapped up with Gianna, only extricating herself completely when Gianna had to make a product review video, she could say with the utmost authority, “No, she’s not. *Why?*”

“I never knew her parents were, like, super famous in Europe,” he commented, tapping on his phone.

Heated irritation skittered through her, along with increasing concern and with it, she gave up on responding to him. Instead, she grabbed her own phone, pulling up a quick google search.

Her stomach sank instantly.

Giulia Gallo Marries Long-Time Partner Antero Mäkinen.

“What the fuck?” She muttered, soup entirely forgotten as she hastily clicked on the first article, one of many written from Italian entertainment sites, time-stamped almost three hours ago.

She quickly skimmed the article, easily understanding the gist even without translating it from Italian to English.

Married in a small, beautiful ceremony on Amalfi coast.

“It was finally the right time,” Gallo told reporters from Attuale.

Some snippets about both of their careers, through their successful modeling years, into Antero’s successful menswear designing career and into Giulia’s mediocre – Riley’s word, not the article’s – Italian film career.

“What the fuck?” She muttered again, anger at Giulia and Antero surging through her.

Because if Gianna had known they were getting married, Riley, too, would have known about it.

Gianna’s fucking selfish asshole parents, in the loosest definition of the word.

Her hands shook lightly, both from the rage that burned through her and at the growing concern for Gianna. Who Riley had no missed texts from. Not a single one.

That alone sent alarm bells sounding off loudly, blaring through her nervous system. She was already calling Gianna before she’d really thought about it.

Which only rang a couple of times before going right to voicemail.

“Shit,” she whispered, immediately opening her text thread.

Riley – 12:11PM

*Hey, you. Tried to call, just wanted to check
in and say hi*

She drummed her fingers against her desk, impatient and worried and – she snapped her head up at Owen, having forgotten he was there for a few minutes.

“Have Gianna’s socials been active today?” She demanded to know.

She could look, herself, but she also knew that Owen would likely already know, like the devoted Gianna follower he was.

Unsurprisingly, she was right, and he scoffed, nodding at her. “Uh, yeah. She posted, like, these shots of her Worthy models on insta this morning, and

she's posted, like, four tiktoks. She went live, like, an hour ago—”

That ring of alarm only sounded louder, her stomach twisting into knots, and that was even before her phone vibrated with a text.

Snatching it up, she opened the message.

Gianna – 12:12PM

Sorry. Just super busy. But I'm good, Riley.

Seriously.

“Oh, hey! She just posted a review about those new foaming body scrubs that I’ve seen ads for,” Owen said, tapping his knuckles on her desk and taking her gaze away from her phone. He looked genuinely excited. “I’ve been hearing about those, but waiting to see if they actually worked, you know?”

Riley did know. She knew, in fact, because over the weekend, Gianna had gone over her lineup of product reviews she had to film this week as well as what other projects she was tackling for work. It was part of their regular programming, filling each other in on their upcoming work weeks and schedules. She also knew, because Gianna had used one of those foaming body scrubs on her – she’d give it a positive review for certain.

But she knew that Gianna was intending to film that and a few others today, and edit them, then release them throughout the week. She also knew that she’d been planning on putting up the Worthy spread later this week, as well.

It was enough to spur her into action, standing up as she grabbed her coat from the back of her chair.

Owen jumped up off his perch on her desk, clearly alarmed, “What, are we getting back into filming already? I haven’t even started my lunch, yet.”

Only then did she pause in throwing her items in her bag, the reality of her own day and her own work plans pushing through the thoughts of Gianna.

Riley’s launch was in three days.

When their digital accounts went live, she wanted to have a backlog of info pieces – a whole slew of current events, different lengths, different topics, but all less than a week old. Those were mostly done, but then she wanted to have other videos, ones that linked to the recent videos, that explained the background of these events and why they were important. Videos on current wars and updates on what was going on, but also videos that explained the cultural, political, and religious backgrounds and

significance. Videos on current politics, but then videos on the people and positions that had gotten them to this point. Videos on current celebrity news, but also on how these people became famous and relevant actions and behaviors.

There was still plenty of work that needed to be done, and work she *did* want to be in the room for, as she'd been the one to create and curate those stories.

Only three days until they went live, three days to make sure they were as prepared as they could possibly be.

Her eyes fell to her phone as another text buzzed –

Gianna – 12:14PM

Hey, I'm probably just going to put my phone on total do not disturb though, so don't worry if I don't answer for a while, though, if you call me again. Good luck with Owen today xo

Gianna didn't ever screen Riley's calls or put her, specifically, on Do Not Disturb. It was a mutually agreed upon decision, to be each other's emergency bypass option, and that if they needed to ensure total media blackout, they would simply tell the other person they needed radio silence for a couple of hours.

She stuffed her arms into the sleeves of her coat, then, the anxiety and concern overpowering anything else.

"Actually, I have to go; there's a family emergency." She'd barely taken two steps, before she caught herself, and skidded to a stop to turn around. Owen was already about to speak, but she knew what he was thinking, and she cut him off, "You can spend the afternoon making the videos we've already discussed with the content we already reviewed with Joel."

Did she trust Owen to not try to put his own spin on these videos? Of course not. Did she trust that he would prioritize any of the videos that needed to be made regarding celebrity news or anything he didn't deem "serious," despite knowing that the general interest and demographic of the audience they were trying to draw in and capture the attention of? Not a chance.

Still, Riley blew out the door, already ordering an Uber before she hit the lobby.

Gianna's door was locked when she arrived, and she didn't answer when Riley knocked, rapid and hard. But she *knew* Gianna was home, because

she'd reluctantly, driven by her concern, pulled up Gianna's TikTok on her way over.

The videos Gianna had posted – more than she usually ever posted in a single day, given that she always carefully planned and timed her posts to hit maximum engagement – were ones that Riley knew had to have been filmed either last night or this morning, and then edited. And she knew that when Gianna was editing her own content, the ones that weren't professionally contracted, she preferred to do so in her own home.

Giving up quickly, she used her key and hastily shed her jacket as she walked in and locked the door behind her.

She could hear Gianna speaking, though, and she followed her voice right to the kitchen.

Where Gianna stood at one end of her island, in front of what seemed to be a random arrangement of fruits and vegetables and... a plastic bottle? All cut up into various pieces on a cutting board, as well as a whole host of items gathered – mostly food but some not – still whole.

Riley came to a halting stop as she stared at Gianna, careful and cautious.

This, right here, Gianna-at-work, reflected exactly what Riley had seen in her videos on the way over. And it was exactly why Riley never watched them. Gianna was perfectly made-up and well-dressed, which wasn't an issue, given that Gianna didn't ever really leave the house without looking what she deemed as her best.

Her issue came from the fact that in her pictures and videos, it was always *more* than real life Gianna. She supposed it reminded her of the Gianna she'd first met, all those years ago, on the first day of college. The Gianna that didn't wear makeup and nice clothing just because it made her feel good, but because it helped her hide. It helped her disappear, just enough, into a façade.

And the façade of her influencer accounts was legitimate; she never endorsed something she didn't like or wouldn't use, she never said something she didn't believe. Riley knew that.

But the Gianna given to the public, no matter how honest, would never be the same Gianna who laughed with Riley – loud, guffawing barking laughter, until she cried. It would never be the same Gianna who nervously asked Riley to bring her to the doctor when she was worried that she found a lump in her breast. It would never be the same Gianna who showed up at Riley's doorstep on the anniversary of her father's death, with Riley's snacks in hand.

And the Gianna who stood in her kitchen today, right in this moment, was very much not Riley's Gianna.

The differences were there, in the heaviness of her makeup – which was skillfully done, but *Riley* could see that it was even different from Gianna's usual videos – and in the fact that she was wearing a brand-new designer sweater. One she'd just purchased, which Gianna would typically never, ever wear near food that had even a chance to splatter.

Gianna cut herself off from speaking, blinking at Riley, as she held a black knife in her hand. "I told you that you didn't have to come over."

She didn't sound annoyed or even exasperated at Riley's presence, though. Mostly, she sounded... blank.

Which was even more concerning to Riley, making the knots in her stomach twist even harder.

"Actually, you told me that you were super busy, but that you were *good*," she corrected.

Now, Gianna's sigh had a hint of exasperation to it. "Same thing, and you know it. And, clearly, I am." She used the knife in her hand to gesture to the chopped items. "See? The Amaze-Knife really *is* amazing. Cuts through everything like butter so far. We haven't yet gotten to the laptop charger, though, but that's the one my money's on as the most difficult."

Slowly, Riley walked closer. "Gianna."

Gianna arched her eyebrows at Riley. "Hey, this knife isn't even something I'm going to keep. It's a gift to you, soon, because we both know I'm not going to be cooking with it. Should be good to know what it's capable of."

Even though her words were teasing, her voice just couldn't quite measure up to it. It edged just a bit too far on the flat side, and the twisting in Riley's stomach started to expand into her chest.

"Gianna," she repeated, softer. "You were the person who told me you weren't going to have time to get to filming this until at least tomorrow, probably the day after."

"Sometimes when I really buckle down and focus, I can impress even myself." Gianna laughed, light and twinkling and entirely... wrong. Forced.

It didn't float through Riley's veins, a magical sound, but instead felt almost like nails on a chalkboard.

"Maybe you're a little bit *too* focused," she suggested, as she walked down the long side of the counter.

“And maybe you’re a little too worried about me being focused.” Gianna shot back, glib but *almost* sharp. Not quite cutting – not near as cutting as Gianna could be – but as much as she ever would be with Riley. “You can’t live your life in fear of something that happened once, over a decade ago.”

The surprise and the sting of pain at the comment stopped Riley in her tracks.

She knew that because of Ellie’s breakdown, this kind of single-minded focused response to stress worried her more than it likely worried other people.

But Riley had experienced the worst of this kind of response, and it had been a formative moment in her life. Something Gianna knew, more than anyone else.

She held Gianna’s gaze with her own, speaking quietly and evenly, “I think the fact that you even said that to me means it was a good thing I’m here.”

Gianna’s big, blue eyes cast down from Riley in that moment and she released her hold on the knife, letting it clatter to the cutting board. She shook her head, the artfully teased strands of hair hanging from her otherwise immaculate ballerina bun moving with it, as she squeezed her eyes closed.

“Seriously, though. I’m fine. There’s no reason for you to be here, in the middle of the work day, when we’re both busy.” There was a steeliness to her voice, but it was all veneer.

It was enough to make her keep walking forward, until she hit the end of the counter, drawing up right in front of Gianna. She didn’t touch her, but stood close enough. Waiting.

Gianna looked down at her through thick lashes. “I mean, it’s not a big deal.” She scoffed, throwing her head back, and rubbing her palms at her thighs. “It’s *not* a big deal,” she repeated, pushing herself away from leaning on the counter and standing up straight.

“Gianna,” she whispered, and in that moment, it was all she could say. Because she *hurt* for Gianna, her chest was aching with it.

Gianna breathed out a laugh that was more derision than anything else. “I mean, why would my parents getting married and not even telling me about it, let alone invite me to it, be a big deal? At the very least, they’re consistent. Some people would love to have consistency from their parents.”

There it was. There was the underlying and undeniable pain, leaching through into her voice, etching into her face.

“When people show you who they are, you should listen, right? Well, Giulia and Antero have shown me who they are time after time, so who’s actually the asshole?” Gianna challenged, arching her eyebrows down at Riley, as if seriously demanding an answer.

And even though she knew Gianna didn’t actually *want* an answer, she gave it. “They are,” she insisted, strongly and wishing that Gianna would really hear her. “*They are.*”

Gianna shrugged again, jerky and unconvincing, before she crossed her arms tightly over her body, and started to pace. “Yeah, they are the assholes. And I know it. So, it shouldn’t matter to me. I barely talk to them. A handful of texts a year. Maybe a phone call. *Maybe.* I got a text on Christmas. Oh, and Giulia liked my Instagram story, when Worthy launched.”

Riley could only watch her, her heart so, so heavy, and feeling so useless. “I know.”

Gianna wheeled around, facing Riley again, the expression on her face drawn tight. “I live my life without them. I don’t celebrate holidays with them. I don’t chat about my business plans with them. Why *would* they think I – their only child – might want to be informed that they were getting married, before anything hit the news. They’re basically inconsequential to me, so why wouldn’t I be inconsequential to them?”

Something about that, stopped Gianna where she stood. No more frantic motion, just her hands falling to her sides as if holding them up was simply too much work, now.

The raw hurt that filled Gianna’s face, making her chin wobble and her eyes start to water, as she stared defenselessly at Riley, made a sympathetic hurt flow right through Riley’s very core.

“Why am I just so inconsequential to them?” Gianna asked, her voice breaking under the weight of the words.

The well of tears that had filled her eyes started to drip down her cheeks as she all-but fell back on the stool behind her, unable or unwilling to hold herself up anymore.

“I don’t get it,” Gianna murmured the words, shaking her head, reaching up to wipe haphazardly at her cheeks as even more tears fell. “I just don’t understand. I’ll *never* understand. It doesn’t matter what I do or how successful I am – I just *don’t understand.*”

The strength of her words, about how utterly defeated she sounded, knocked the breath right out of Riley. In three strides, she closed the space

between them and wrapped her arms around Gianna tightly.

So tightly, she could feel Gianna's heart hammering against her own. She could feel the way her back shook as she cried even harder. Gianna's hands twisted into Riley's shirt, fisting the material, as she burrowed her head against Riley's chest.

"You'll never understand, because you are so much better than they are," the words forced themselves out, because she *had* to say it. It felt urgent to her, that Gianna know that. She slid her hand up and combed her fingers into the hair at the base of Gianna's neck, ruining her bun, but knowing that Gianna loved to have her head scratched and massaged.

And Riley knew with every fiber of her being that she needed to do everything in her power to give Gianna anything she needed right now. There was nothing she could really do, to alleviate the hurt Gianna was feeling, but there was a desperation inside of Riley to do *something*. Anything and everything that she knew Gianna liked or gave her enjoyment or comfort.

"I mean, they made me," Gianna pointed out, muffled against Riley's shirt and still not pulling back even a centimeter. If anything, her hands clung even harder. "They created me. We both know that... potential... lives inside of me."

Riley slid her hand down Gianna's back, rubbing firmly and soothingly, holding her as close as humanly possible. "You are who you choose to be," she refuted, firmly. "And you've chosen to be someone funny and driven and compassionate. Someone who shows up for the people you care about. Someone who strives to be better. *That* is the potential you have. I see it every day."

She saw it in the way Gianna treated her, the way she treated around their other friends, people she worked with, the people who worked for her.

Gianna's tone broke off into a sob, which wracked through her body, and Riley, desperate, could only hold her. She didn't know how long they stayed that way, but she would have done it forever if need be.

It wasn't the first time they'd done something like this. Not the second or even the fifth, in the tenure of their relationship. It happened every year or two, whenever Giulia and Antero did something to harm Gianna.

And it always hurt Riley when Gianna was hurting. When she broke down in tears and leaned into Riley, like the strength she was made of needed to take a break and she was trusting Riley to be the one to hold her up.

But right now, it felt even worse than it ever had. Which was insane,

because whenever it had happened in the past, it was terrible. But having Gianna leaning against her, experiencing so much pain, was agonizing, now.

“Why don’t they care?” Gianna asked, eventually, when her tears subsided and her breathing was coming back to normal. Her voice was low and throaty and raw, “Why did they even *have* me, if they just don’t care?”

Riley’s hand had slipped under Gianna’s shirt at some point – in the *least* sexual way possible. It just felt comforting and close to be able to stroke her bare back, which Gianna had arched into in a positive reception. She continued to stroke up her spine and then smooth her hand back down.

She hated Gianna’s parents, in that moment. Detested them. And that simmered low inside of her at the same time as she felt so helpless, and all she could offer was, “I don’t know.”

“I would never do that,” Gianna swore, the passion and intensity swinging back into her tone with a vengeance, the hands that were still loosely holding Riley’s shirt, squeezed tightly again. “What the hell is the point? What’s the point of having one if you don’t love them? Abortion was already way legal when they got pregnant with me, so *why*? Why would they have me, if they didn’t want me around, *ever*? I would want my child to feel so... loved,” her voice turned soft. Contemplative. “I would want them to feel – vital. Important.”

Gianna never referenced having children, in any way. Not even when they had spoken about it, hypothetically, in terms of Riley’s potential future and what she might want.

So, that threw Riley for a loop. But, this was most definitely not the time or place to delve into that.

Mostly, Riley wanted to assure Gianna that her parents *did* love her. She wanted to tell Gianna that they had to, on some instinctive, inescapable human level, care about her. But it felt, disgustingly, too much like a lie, and she knew Gianna wouldn’t believe her even if she could say it.

“I don’t know what the point is, in that case,” she said, instead. “I don’t know.” She used the hand she still had wrapped in Gianna’s hair to pull her head back and tilt Gianna’s face up to hers. She *needed* Gianna to hear this, to feel this. “But whatever the reason was, *I* am so fucking glad you’re here.”

Gianna’s eyes, watery and just, sad, stared into Riley’s own.

But she needed to know Gianna heard her. It felt as vital to her as her next breath, and she leaned in, pressing her forehead against Gianna’s, closing her eyes in relief at the close contact. “Your parents are not nice people. And I

will never understand why they do anything they do. But having you was the best decision they ever made, even if they don't realize it."

Gianna's eyes searched Riley's own, and she didn't waver.

The soft sigh Gianna let out as she leaned in and pressed her cheek against Riley's chest wove itself through Riley, comfortingly. Gianna didn't cry again, though, just breathed, deeply and shakily, while her ear rested above Riley's heart.

Riley slowly disentangled her hand from Gianna's hair and slid her other hand out from under her shirt, stroking up and down her back at the same time that Gianna slowly released her hold on Riley's shirt.

Gianna eventually took in a breath and Riley could literally *feel* Gianna compose herself. The way she rolled her shoulders and straightened her spine into her typically perfect posture, before Gianna leaned back and looked up at Riley from her perch on the stool.

"So... how does the Vybrant Cosmetic line hold up against tears of that magnitude?" Gianna asked, and even though her nose was a little stuffy and her voice was a little reedy, she sounded so much more like her normal self.

Riley had never been more relieved to hear it.

She smiled softly, cupping Gianna's jaw in her hands. "Very well, actually."

Gianna snorted. "Babe, come on. No matter what quality makeup, nothing is going to hold up *very well* against a half hour of sobbing tears." Her gaze drifted to Riley's pale blue shirt, and her eyes widened, utterly aghast. "Oh my god. It's a murder scene."

She looked down at herself, noting that her shirt was soaked through in large patches from the tears and likely snot and whatever else had worked itself out. There were some smudges of eyeliner and mascara, as well. Riley couldn't care less.

"If that's what your shirt looks like, I look like a train accident. Maybe there are a couple of survivors thrown out onto the tracks, but there were definitely casualties," Gianna commented, a genuinely playful edge teasing into her voice, as she reached up and started to lightly swipe under her eyes.

Gianna's cheeks were puffy and her eyes were a little red. There were a few streaks of her mascara and some other smudging, much like on Riley's shirt, so, yes, she didn't look technically flawless.

Still, though, Riley's heart flip-flopped at the sight of her. "You look beautiful." There was a promise in her voice that she could feel settle in her

veins.

The hands attempting to wipe up any makeup flaws paused, as Gianna shot Riley a look of abject disbelief. “You’re crazy. Step further away from the Amaze-Knife.”

Riley rolled her eyes as she reached out and gently pulled Gianna’s hands down from her face. She wanted a clear view, right at Gianna, as she swore, “You are more beautiful to me right now than you were when I came in.”

Gianna scoffed, but it was half-hearted, as she stayed still, gaze searching Riley’s.

“*This is my Gianna,*” she whispered, stroking her thumb over Gianna’s soft cheek. “And I would pick the real you, complete with all of your feelings no matter what they are, every day of the week.”

Gianna blinked up at her, breath shivering out, with her eyes so wide and so utterly *loving*, that Riley had to be the one to break the moment. Before she let herself get too wrapped up in that look. A look that Gianna, who *did* love her so deeply, was giving her while having one of her worst moments.

She cleared her throat and gently dropped her hands to reach for Gianna’s. “Come on. Let’s clean you up.”

Riley had put herself back into the right headspace – the headspace that loved Gianna appropriately, that would support her no matter what, that was here as the friend Gianna needed – by the time they re-settled upstairs in front of Gianna’s vanity.

Gianna sat in front of her, face tilted up at Riley, willing and waiting for Riley to start removing her makeup.

It wasn’t something they did nearly often enough to be ritualistic, but Riley knew that it meant a lot to both of them. It was a willingness of Gianna to be her most vulnerable self, and a promise from Riley that she wanted to see every side of her.

She gently stroked the insanely expensive cloth over Gianna’s face, starting at her forehead, then moving to her cheeks, then her chin, before moving to her mouth and eyes.

They *definitely* hadn’t done this since their relationship had shifted, and something about the intimacy made Riley feel warm from head to toe. She softly stroked the back of her hand down Gianna’s cheek, murmuring, “Almost done.”

Gianna hummed, leaning into Riley’s touch. Only for a moment, before she blinked her eyes open, looking up at Riley earnestly. Her baby blues

resembled that of a scolded puppy, as she said, “I’m really sorry, about what I said earlier. About you, being worried about how focused I was.”

Pearly white teeth dug into her bottom lip, as she gazed intently up at Riley. Remorse colored her voice, filled her eyes, and Riley let her hand, holding the now-used makeup removal wipe, fall to her side.

“It’s all right.”

Gianna shook her head, though, reaching out to grab Riley’s wrist. “No, it’s not all right. It’s never all right for me to throw something like that in your face.”

“... it’s not,” Riley grudgingly agreed. Yet, she didn’t summon even an ounce of the sting the comment had originally caused. “But, it made me see how much you were hurting. Because you *never* hurt me.”

She could see how hard Gianna swallowed at that, how soft her eyes went before she averted them, and squeezed at Riley’s wrist again. “I would never,” Gianna swore, her voice low and solemn.

Riley twisted her hand up, so she could mirror Gianna’s hold on her wrist. “I know.”

Gianna smiled then, soft and sweet and a little self-conscious, before she looked into the mirror and nodded. “As natural as the way I was born.”

“If only anyone else could be so lucky,” she joked. Kind of.

“With great power comes great responsibility,” Gianna loftily responded, before she stood up, facing Riley.

Gianna certainly looked and sounded so much more like her normal self, if – understandably – a little rough around the edges. But it was so relieving and such a welcome sight, Riley felt it like a balm.

“I’m really sorry you had to come here in the middle of the workday,” Gianna whispered, then, shaking her head at herself. “It’s literally one of the biggest weeks of your entire career; my personal stuff is not that important.”

Everything inside of Riley swiftly and adamantly rejected that, and she forcefully shook her head. “That is the furthest thing from the truth,” she said, the strength of her conviction almost shocking herself. “Gianna, you’re the most important part of my life.”

She’d never meant anything more than she meant those words.

She would have said the same thing six months ago and meant it just as much as she did now. And yet, it was *different*.

Riley didn’t know if she would ever be able to pinpoint exactly how it was different. It felt too complicated for her to truly understand with any sort

of logic. Six months ago, Gianna had meant the world to her and Riley would have left work in the middle of the day to be here for her in a heartbeat, without a thought of possible consequence. Just like she had today.

But saying those words and feeling exactly how ardently she meant them – with her whole heart, with everything she possibly had inside of her – felt impossibly, inexplicably bigger now.

Maybe it wasn't different, she thought, unbidden, as her heart skipped a beat. Maybe... maybe she just understood it better, now.

Gianna looked at her with eyes so soft and so warm, Riley's breath caught in her throat.

Gianna's other hand, the one not still gently circling Riley's wrist, came up and softly ran over the curve of Riley's neck, to cup the back of her head.

She tingled with it, everywhere Gianna's warm fingers touched, the anticipation of the moment forcing her to exhale as Gianna bent down and slid her lips against Riley's.

Riley melted into it, giving herself over completely.

They'd kissed so many times, at this point. All of the time. Before they'd realized and acted on their attraction for one another, they kissed on the cheek almost every time they saw each other. Well, Gianna kissed her cheek – Riley had always accepted it as something very European of her. Still, it came as no surprise to her once they'd started *this*, that those cheek kisses would often turn into real kisses.

But it never got old.

It never failed to make all of Riley's senses key into high gear. As if tasting and touching and smelling and seeing and hearing were more important when she was tasting and touching and smelling and seeing and hearing Gianna.

She fell into every sensation, now, slowly parting her lips against Gianna's and relishing in the feeling of her soft lips moving with Riley's. The way the feeling echoed from the senses in her lips and moved through her body.

But nothing about this kiss was like their usual kisses.

Not even as Gianna deliberately, sensually dragged her top lip down over Riley's bottom one.

Yes, Riley's body responded, but this felt like it was landing right around her heart. It wasn't frantic and wanting. It wasn't full of unstoppable lust. It wasn't playful and teasing, with nipping teeth and wandering hands.

This kiss was intentional and heady and *full*.

So, so full.

Riley's free hand reached out and fell on Gianna's waist, not wanting to change the tempo or the tone or anything about the kiss, just needing to feel more of Gianna.

She sighed into Gianna's mouth at the contact, and –

And found herself wanting, searching, confused when the contact of Gianna's mouth abruptly broke from her own.

In the next moment, when a choked exhale escaped Gianna on a broken whimper, Riley quickly pulled back, confusion growing exponentially, while alarm streaked through her right on its heels.

Especially as she saw Gianna's face.

Still tilted down, angled toward Riley's, with her eyes still closed, but with a fresh set of tears streaming out of them.

Worry gnawed at her stomach as she quickly reached up and rubbed her thumbs softly over Gianna's cheeks, doing her best to smooth away the tears. "Hey, what—"

"I don't think we should do this, anymore," Gianna whispered, sounding utterly wrecked as the words left her mouth.

Riley kicked herself, immediately both guilty and irritated with herself. Still, she kept her voice low and soothing, as she promised, "I'm so sorry. I know today has been absolutely terrible, to put it mildly," she attempted to inject a little bit of humor.

Neither of them smiled, though, and her worry only increased. She sobered completely, swearing, "I wasn't expecting *anything*, Gianna." She rubbed her thumbs over Gianna's cheeks again, hoping she was providing some comfort. "I never expect anything, between us. But definitely not for anything physical to happen right now."

She could tell with the way Gianna inhaled sharply that her words didn't alleviate any of the anguish that Gianna was clearly experiencing.

Her heart pounded, and she felt more desperate by the second to say or do anything that could make it better. Maybe Gianna had to cry today out some more, she thought frantically, just like she'd had to cry downstairs.

"Why don't you sit or lay do—"

"I don't mean right now," Gianna cut her off in a voice that was barely even a whisper.

But Riley heard her, as clearly and loudly as if Gianna had shouted the

words. And she felt like everything in the world narrowed to this moment. Like everything in the world existed in the way her heart *pounded* in her chest, so painful, and the blood started to rush in her ears.

Gianna took in a deep breath, slowly and deliberately, before she opened her eyes.

They were still so full of emotion, still watery. But her tears weren't falling, anymore, as she looked Riley right in the eye.

"I don't think we should do this, anymore," she repeated, in a voice that sounded still a little wrecked, a little quiet, but not uncertain. In fact, she sounded very certain, and she looked the same way.

As if saying the words gave her back a confidence she'd been lacking amidst the emotional afternoon.

Which seemed laughable and nonsensical and utterly insane, to Riley, because those words were shaking her foundation to the core.

Seconds beat by between them, and she could only stare up at Gianna, trying to process. Trying to figure out if she was still misunderstanding something. Desperately hoping she was, even though she knew deep down that she wasn't.

She *knew* that this was going to happen, at some point.

But she couldn't for the life of her wrap her mind around why in the world it was happening right now. She could only stare up at Gianna as her heart felt so constricted, she could hardly breathe with it.

Gianna's expression went from sad and solemn and certain to concerned, though, as Riley didn't – couldn't – speak.

Her throat was so tight, she couldn't even swallow around it. She managed to ask, "Why? I... why now?"

Which was ludicrous, because Gianna didn't owe her an explanation. She *knew* that. But, still, she felt like she was only inches away from shattering – again, her own fault – and she couldn't help but ask.

"Because I love you too much," Gianna's words were promise, confession, and apology all in one simple, devastating, beautiful blow. A blow that made Riley have to blink back tears as her eyes burned with them. Gianna closed her eyes, those beautiful blue eyes, as she shook her head and admitted, "If today has shown me anything, Riley, it's that *you* are too important to *me* to potentially let anything ever screw it up."

Riley felt like she was holding herself together so tightly she might snap in half and her heart hurt so badly, but the second to worst part was that it

made so much sense.

The worst and most baffling part was that it maybe, somehow made her love Gianna even more.

CHAPTER 26



Riley had only ever been romantically heartbroken once.

She'd only ever *let it happen* once. She'd been young and naïve and had agreed to get married – like a fucking idiot – right after college, and Ashton had shattered that young and complete trust, as the first person she'd ever really fallen in love with.

She didn't know if what she was feeling right now even was heartbreak.

All she knew – what she'd been coping with since early this afternoon – was that she was so emotionally entangled with Gianna no-middle-name Mäkinen and she had no idea how she could ever *not* be.

How could she go back, after this?

Because she'd loved Gianna, wholly and completely, for her entire adult life. She loved the very person that Gianna was at her core, before romantic feelings got wrapped up in the mix in any way.

Funny and teasing and kind and gossipy and loyal and fierce and loving. Someone who was willing to own up to her faults and wasn't afraid to call out someone else for not doing so.

The question was, what was she supposed to do when the person she loved so much also became the person she just might be *in love* with? When both of those things were so intertwined? When Riley had been shown a new color, and now she couldn't un-see it?

After Ashton, there had been heartbreak, but Riley had lived with it. She'd cut him and his ridiculous, hurtful, stupid apologies out of her life. She'd focused on building up her career and her friendships into something strong and reliable. She'd ended up in a better place, without him.

There was no "better place" in her life, without Gianna. Riley's life

wasn't even complete without Gianna.

Gianna hadn't gone anywhere. She was still here, right at Riley's metaphorical side.

Riley sent her phone – face down and completely silenced, even from the short vibration setting she normally had it on – a sidelong glance.

She'd left Gianna's not long after their conversation.

She'd stayed long enough to ensure that Gianna really did seem like she was close enough to herself. She'd kept an iron-clad hold on forcing herself to keep it together for just long enough to determine that Gianna most likely wouldn't fall apart again.

That was the conundrum, wasn't it?

That Gianna, at the root of everything, was still her best friend. That Riley still cared about and prioritized her feelings, even when her own felt pulverized.

That, at the end of the day, she couldn't even tell Gianna and lean on her for support, because Riley shouldn't have *had* these feelings in the first place. Riley should have been the one to end that part of their relationship weeks ago, when she became aware of it.

This was what lying got her. Because she'd lied – and worst of all, lied to Gianna – this was the consequence. If Riley had ever needed to be taught a lesson in why doing the right thing was ultimately better than doing the easy thing, here it was.

And there Gianna was.

Sending her a few texts after Riley had left her place.

Thanking her for coming over. Encouraging her to kickass at work. Even sending a funny TikTok of two college girls both drunk after a party, mumbling words that didn't make any sense, but they were nodding at and agreeing with each other like they were solving cancer. She'd made the joking comment that those girls were a reincarnation of Riley and Gianna after they'd gotten trashed at the end of senior year, and – though neither of them had any memory of doing it – had filled over half a notebook with absurd ramblings, that they'd clearly thought were important but couldn't make heads or tails of.

Riley still had the notebook.

Gianna was there, being totally and completely normal. Because, of course she was. Everything was still normal for Gianna. Sex or no sex. It didn't complicate things for her.

Riley had enjoyed that, at the start of this. That their friendship was essentially the same as it had always been.

And she both loved it and hated it, now. It made her both feel relieved and made her heart hurt.

She laid on her couch with her arm slung over her eyes, feeling just that. Her heart truthfully and scarily felt physically sore inside of her chest.

She hadn't had it inside of her to keep answering Gianna's messages tonight; she was allowing herself that grace period. She'd sent Gianna a little message saying that she was going to buckle down and work, and had then resolutely not touched her phone again.

Riley had completely bypassed going back to the station tonight, though. Yes, she could have gone and worked. Honestly, she probably *should* have. She definitely had enough to do, and it wasn't even late enough by the time she'd left Gianna's that it would be strange to go back.

It hadn't even been four o'clock. How that was true, Riley had no clue. She'd somehow only gone into Gianna's for three hours, but emotionally, it had been much longer.

Instead, she'd come home and attempted to get some work done on her laptop. To read through her emails, to organize the videos they already had, prepare everything for tomorrow.

Coming home, she'd realized when she'd tried to start working, had been a mistake.

Because she'd come home to her apartment that held traces of Gianna in every corner.

From the slightly lopsided vase in her kitchen that she'd laughingly and proudly given to Riley four years ago when she'd taken a series of pottery classes to the spot on the living room wall where a guy had drunkenly tripped over his feet and sent his elbow through the plaster when they were in their final year of college. It was barely visible now, but she and Gianna had teamed up to figure out how to patch and paint it, giggling and leaning into each other as they'd made jokes about this being their new career.

From the bedroom doorframe Gianna had pressed Riley against when they'd kissed before the first time they'd had sex, to the chair Riley had bent Gianna over just last week and fucked her so hard, they'd both been crazed with it.

She was everywhere in here, in every way. Just like she was in Riley's life.

And she had no fucking clue what to do with that right now.

She wasn't really sure that there was an answer. An answer other than, she supposed, accepting how much she loved Gianna and trying to convince herself that they could stay as close as they were without going completely insane.

So, yeah, she thought she deserved tonight as a grace period to try to deal with that. Which left her exactly where she was: crying on-and-off with the loss of something she'd never even really had.

Riley froze as she heard the scrape of a key in the apartment door, her heart sinking even as it also leapt in anticipation. There was certainly an irony in the feelings Gianna brought out in her.

She sniffled, an edge of panic creeping up, as she used her sleeve to wipe the tears from her face; she couldn't have Gianna see her like this right now.

"Riley? I sent you a text but you didn't answer," Ellie's voice rang out, before the door shut behind her and Riley could hear her taking off her jacket.

Not Gianna. Ellie.

It was a relief, and yet, a piece of her illogical and treacherous heart was disappointed that it *wasn't* Gianna.

"Oh. Sorry I didn't answer," she called out, clearing her throat when she heard how raw her own voice was, pushing herself to sit up completely.

"It's fine. Um, I really just had some questions about this gift you want to send mom for her birthday – that really detailed bioactive terrarium? It seems like a good idea, but there are different fungi and protozoa in each one, and I don't know which one you wanted to pick. But we have to send it by tomorrow morning if we want it to reach her in time," Ellie explained as she walked into the living room.

Riley quickly and futilely rubbed at her eyes, as if she could erase the puffiness and redness. Her best hope was that Ellie wouldn't notice.

"Why is it so dark in here?" Ellie asked, before she turned on the lamp and light flooded through the room.

Riley blanched at it, feeling like a vampire. It hadn't really occurred to her but, no, she hadn't turned on the light at all, even when the sun had started to go down an hour ago.

She reached up and finger-combed her hair as she pulled herself as together as she could.

"I think you should just pick whichever one you think mom will like most," she said, settling back on the couch. She was as good as she was going

to get.

Ellie turned on another lamp, the closest to the couch. “I don’t know, I—” She cut herself off as she came face-to-face with Riley, her mouth abruptly snapping closed. A frown tugged at her lips, obvious concern moving over her face as she seemed to study Riley to check for any physical ailments. “Uh... are you okay?” She asked when she didn’t see anything.

Riley huffed out a breath, reaching up to pinch at the bridge of her nose – uncomfortably stuffy – before she closed her eyes.

She was both a bad liar and she didn’t *want* to lie. She simply didn’t have it in her, emotionally.

So, she told the truth... to a point. “I’m not sure I want to talk about it.”

She didn’t open her eyes yet, but she felt the couch dip after a few seconds, Ellie settling next to her. Another few seconds went by before she felt Ellie’s arm wrap around her waist, and Riley quickly leaned in, not having it in her to fight against the comfort.

Ellie freely admitted that being the comforting party in an emotional situation was stressful for her, because it made her feel anxious and uneasy and tongue-tied.

There was something really comforting in Riley’s soul merely from Ellie being with her, though. Maybe it was because they’d literally shared a womb. Maybe it was because Ellie was as familiar to Riley as a human being could possibly be; she’d only ever existed in this world for twenty-two minutes without Ellie by her side.

And maybe she felt guilty and stupid in equal measure in taking that comfort, given that she was so torn up over a situation Ellie had strongly warned her against.

“I get not wanting to talk about it. I mean, I’m me,” Ellie spoke softly but deliberately, with just the right edge of self-deprecation.

“But...” Ellie leaned back a little, looking at Riley. The hazel eyes that Riley knew from her own mirror stared into hers, the worry apparent. “You *never* look like this.” She gestured tentatively at Riley’s tear-stained face. “You always have it together. It’s making me nervous.”

“I never look like this *around you*,” she corrected, entirely unthinkingly. She squeezed her eyes closed again, after she said it. Even though it was technically the truth, the regret piled on to everything else inside of her.

A few seconds ticked by in silence as Riley’s insides twisted up painfully and Ellie’s face scrunched together when she really registered what Riley had

said.

“What?” Ellie turned to look more completely at Riley. There was less of a hurt expression – thankfully, because Riley did not have it in her to hurt the sister she’d spent a literal lifetime trying to protect – and more a look of confusion. “What does that mean?”

Honesty was the best policy. She was living proof.

And, as she stared at her sister, she heard Gianna’s comment earlier, echoing through her mind. *You can’t live your life in fear of something that happened once, over a decade ago.*

She took a deep breath and tried to use it to quell any guilt or nerves, as she quietly admitted, “I don’t like to tell you things that I think will stress you out. When I feel like *this*, I usually go to Gianna. So that you don’t get stressed, or worried, or anxious.”

She watched Ellie’s face for the reaction to her words, and for several seconds, it was blank as Ellie clearly took in what she said. Then she frowned, an expression Riley could read as both hurt and anger etching over her features. “So... what? You don’t think I’m capable of handling feelings? Like, in a robot way? Like I don’t have them? Or like I need to be emotionally babysat?”

Ellie leaned away from her, crossing her own arms around her mid-section, before her voice got low and quiet. Betrayed. “I know I’m not always great at expressing my own emotions or even knowing what to say to other people. But,” she looked at Riley with wide, imploring eyes, sad eyes. “I always thought that out of anyone in the world, *you* knew me, better.”

God, that *dug* right into Riley’s already aching chest. It made her want to stop and reassure and...

No. She’d started this, and she was going to see it through.

“Ellie, I—” She sighed, ending it on a helplessly exasperated groan as she raked her hands through her hair, before she promised, “I *know* you feel things, deeply. And I know you want to be there for people you care about, even if you don’t always know what to say. I do know that better than anyone else.”

Ellie’s features softened from the hurt anger into something clearly deeply unsure. “Then, what—”

“I’m constantly worried about you. That when something bad happens, you will go into your emotional hidey-hole, and it’ll be like the year after dad died all over again,” she confessed. And even though she didn’t want to say

it, it did feel somewhat freeing. “It’s why I still have to be the go-between with you and mom, where you both get frustrated at me for how much or little I tell the other about you, but barely ever communicate directly with each other.”

That was certainly freeing, even as it made anxiety rattle through her. A truth and a stress that had been on her chest since before graduating high school. But she held her ground, holding Ellie’s gaze.

“Like, why are you here, asking me which microbial terrarium we should get mom? Ellie, *you* are a scientist and so is she. That’s a perfect decision for *you* to make.” She gestured at herself, at the utter mess she was right now, still wearing her clothing from today, even though she couldn’t look more disheveled if she *tried*, clothing wrinkled with Gianna’s makeup was still smeared across it. “I’m a news producer, whose career might be flushed down the toilet in less than three days.”

Ellie’s expression turned from defensive to sheepish to just... a little sad, her hands dropping to her lap.

Riley dropped her face into her hands, hating *everything* about the last twelve hours. “I’m sorry, El,” she whispered, hoarsely. “I don’t want to hurt your feelings.”

“I know,” Ellie whispered back, her voice a little thick, which added to that gnawing feeling in her gut. Ellie moved her hand to Riley’s lap, a comforting warmth. “I know you’d never intend to hurt my feelings. And... I can see your point,” she acknowledged, blowing out a deep breath.

Riley slid her hand to hold onto Ellie’s. It was nice to have it as an anchor, amidst everything with Gianna. Given that in typical situations of sadness and heartache, she would be holding *Gianna’s* hand. And there was that aching feeling all over again.

“I can work on the Mom thing,” Ellie added after a few moments in quiet together. It was begrudging, but Riley still was surprised, turning to look at Ellie.

Who was frowning in consternation, even as she nodded. “But, um... Riley, you made the choice to not tell me about those things.” Ellie pointed out, astutely. Not angry, but matter of fact. “I never told you not to tell me things or said I couldn’t handle them.”

Which was fair. It was true. Riley had to accept that. And she did, even if it was difficult to swallow. “I know,” she allowed, before she squeezed Ellie’s hand again. “I just... I’ll never forget what it felt like when I thought

something might happen to you.”

Ellie squeezed her hand back. “I’m an adult. I have a whole life I can manage on my own. And I *want* to be here for you. The way you’ve always been there for me.”

The earnest look in Ellie’s eyes combined with the sincere sound of her voice made every feeling she’d been drowning in demand to be let out. Even if she’d tried to stop it, she wasn’t sure she would be able to actually be able to swallow down the words bubbling up in her throat.

“Gianna and I slept together. Have *been* sleeping together,” Riley admitted, the confession filling the whole room, nerves tangling together as she made herself elaborate, “For a couple of months.”

Ellie’s eyes widened, shock running over her face as her hand went slack in Riley’s. She thought for a moment that her sister was going to shout the way she had when Riley had first told her about the start of all of this, on Christmas. Which had only been a little over two months ago, but felt like a lifetime, by now. She braced herself for it.

But no sounds left Ellie’s mouth. Silent words formed on her lips, nothing actually emerging.

“What?!” She finally managed to squeak out.

Riley let out a laugh that was both genuinely amused at her sister and so very unamused at her own situation. “Yeah,” she breathed out, the maelstrom of everything from earlier today reaching up and gripping at her throat in a chokehold.

She dropped her eyes down to her lap, because just holding her head upright felt like too much effort right now.

“Unsurprisingly, El, you were right,” she admitted. It never really felt good to have to accept and acknowledge when you were wrong in the face of someone who had opposed you, but it was at least honest. Like the universe could start stitching back together in these moments. “It wasn’t a good idea.”

That didn’t sit right, though, and Riley couldn’t quite figure it all out. Frustratingly confused, she tossed her head back, throwing her free hand in the air.

“But – I don’t know! Sometimes, it was a good idea?”

Because despite her heart feeling so bruised, it didn’t erase the fact that Riley had experienced some of the best moments – emotionally, physically, intimately – in her life.

As seconds beat by and Ellie didn’t say anything, Riley turned again to

look at her.

Ellie was staring at her, though, like Riley was one of her science equations. Like she was an experiment in the lab that Ellie had to piece together. And her tone reflected it, sounding so incredibly cautious, “So, you and Gianna have been, uh, engaging in intercourse—”

A snort of surprised laughter that shot out of Riley’s mouth, and she could only stare at Ellie in disbelief. “Oh my god. *Intercourse?*”

Ellie frowned at her, ignoring her entirely, “And that’s why you look...?” She gestured up at Riley’s face.

“Yes, El. That’s why I look like shit,” she deadpanned, “Because Gianna and I were engaging in intercourse.”

“Right. But, what happened?” Ellie asked, still sounding very wary. “Did she...?”

Riley nodded, her laughter dissipating. “She cut it off. *God.*” She unclasped her hand from Ellie’s, using both of her sleeves to carefully wipe under her eyes as the fresh tears came in. “I ended up having feelings for her, which is my own fault. I know that.”

“You – but she – why – *what?*” Ellie spit the words out quickly, but unclearly. She was no longer speaking slow and guarded; apparently, she’d now processed the news.

“Yeah. And it... it really hurts,” she said thickly, her voice breaking with it as she wrapped her arms around her stomach.

“No,” Ellie’s voice was suddenly very strong. “No way.”

Riley turned to look at her, confused. “I can assure you, El, that’s what happened.”

Ellie gaped at her, though, shaking her head. “But—”

“I know I’m an idiot for letting it go further as soon as I felt an inkling of real feelings. I can own up to that, too.”

“Gianna ended it,” Ellie stated, eyebrows knit together in a firm line across her brow. “*She ended things.*”

“You know, it feels worse every time you say it,” Riley informed her sister, incredulously. This, admittedly, was maybe a part where Ellie fumbled a little in the comfort department.

“Sorry, I – I just... I mean...” Ellie seemed to give up on trying to figure out what to say, shrugging heavily, before she stared out into the living room as if she was trying to figure out the world’s toughest problem.

“And I *don’t* want you to say anything to her,” Riley warned as a

precaution, even though she didn't necessarily think she had to.

"But, um – no. Wait—" Ellie started to protest, much to her surprise.

"No. Eleanor Beckett, *no*. Since when do you want to go around and talk about people's personal lives and feelings, anyway?" She asked, unable to understand what in the world Ellie was even thinking; Ellie meddling in someone's personal life was so incredibly *not* in character, Riley couldn't believe her sister had pushed back against this boundary.

"This is hard enough to figure out without another party entering the chat. Twin's honor."

She and Ellie didn't often pull twin's honor on each other in adulthood, but it was their most sacred pact and promise to one another. When Ellie had been the one to accidentally break their grandmother's glassware, Riley had twin honored to take it to her grave. When Riley had thrown a party when their parents went out of town when she and Ellie had been fifteen, Ellie had twin honored.

Ellie's shoulders sagged, but she grudgingly relented, "Twin's honor."

"Thank you." She bumped Ellie's shoulder with hers, then settled there.

They sat in comfortable, comforting silence for a little while, before Riley found herself asking softly, "How did you do it?"

Because she felt wrecked and unsure and yearning and so – *sad*, and it had only been a few hours. She'd only been living this way, with these heartbroken and loving feelings for her best friend, for only hours, and it was exhausting. It was awful. And before today, she'd only lived with her feelings for Gianna for several weeks.

Ellie looked at her, clearly wondering what Riley meant.

"You were in love with Mia for over two years," she explained. "*How?*"

Ellie took in a deep breath, contemplating an answer, before she said, "It felt like my heart was pulverized. All of the time."

Riley reached up and rubbed a hand over her chest. Yeah. She felt that.

"But... I loved her," Ellie explained, the simple and beautiful truth. "So even though it hurt, I had to figure it out. It was in the small things. Playing pool together or getting coffee. The little things that I could piece together, that reminded me even when everything ached, that life still felt better with Mia than it ever did without her."

Riley stared at Ellie, entirely caught up in that moment. "That was really sweet, El."

Clearly embarrassed, Ellie shrugged. "I mean, it's just what I felt."

Another reminder that Ellie had maybe the biggest heart under all of her layers.

She gave Riley a small, tentative smile. “You’ll figure it out, too.”

Riley knew she would. Eventually. She and Gianna, they would find a way forward.

She just, troublingly, didn’t know what way could be better than what they’d been doing.

CHAPTER 27



Riley paced the floor of the meeting room that she and Joel had been allocated for the first livestream of BostonNow Digital.

The *great* news, was that she was so stressed about her job, she didn't have time to be wallowing in her feelings. She hadn't even had time to stress clean her home, because she'd essentially lived at the station.

"Okay, I have everything in place," Joel announced victoriously, nodding proudly at his handiwork.

The tech setup was, admittedly, a little spotty. Given that Joel's favorite camera to work with was a large, newsroom camera that didn't actively stream on WiFi, he'd had to finagle it with a computer hookup in order to properly stream.

Joel re-checked something on the laptop. "Yep, connectivity test went perfectly."

"Great," she muttered as she paced the floor. Before she winced in regret and forced herself to pause and take a deep breath, agitated with herself. She shot him an apologetic look, telling him with the sincerity he deserved, "Seriously, Joel, I mean that. You've been *great*, and I appreciate everything you've done, for me and for the launch."

Figuring out the exact tech setup hadn't been anything Riley would have wanted to be in charge of and wouldn't know what to do if she had been in charge of it. Joel was the best she'd ever worked with in terms of high-quality tech and camera work, and she was lucky he'd joined her on this project at BostonNow. She knew that.

What was stopping her from being able to truly appreciate him – or anyone or anything, right now – was that she also knew they were going live

in barely *twenty minutes*, for the first time.

She started to pace again, her hands falling to her hips as she moved, the nervous energy keeping her wound so tightly, she simply wasn't able to keep still.

Making the news more accessible and more interesting to a new and bigger audience had been her goal for... she didn't even know how long at this point. It *mattered* to her. So, so deeply.

She had always been passionate about her job, but this was the mark she'd been working toward making for years. If the launch was a total flop, if they got barely any viewers or no engagement, or completely disregarded... it was over.

It would prove that her last employer had been correct in not giving her the allowance to focus on this as her main priority. It would prove that something she was so deeply invested in had been a waste of so much time and energy.

And it would very likely mean that her time at BostonNow would be over in that case, as well, given that it would prove they were wrong to take this chance on her.

“Where *is* he?” She muttered darkly as her anxiety spiked.

She spun on her heel and tapped her finger impatiently at her phone to check for any new messages.

Messages she knew she hadn't gotten. Because she had been obsessively checking her phone every thirty seconds for the last hour, constantly searching for the same thing.

For any word from or about Owen.

He had been radio silent since this morning, which was fine *in the morning*. As of the last hour, as she and Joel had started the livestream setup, his silence had become marginally less acceptable, and she'd started to attempt to contact him.

Her texts had started politely and professionally – *Are you ready? The big night is upon us. Joel and I are already doing set up, feel free to meet us as soon as you're in.* And messages of a similar tone.

Then, twenty minutes ago, her messages had started to get a little more intense – *We're in Exec Room 1, the room with the view over the city. In case it slipped your mind in the excitement of the day. I want to run through the intro one more time before we go live when you get here. Which should be soon?*

And her final messages in the last ten minutes had gotten... more... intense – *Owen, WHERE ARE YOU? You're supposed to be going live in less than a half hour. You were supposed to be here, in this room, fifteen minutes ago! Fifteen minutes ago at the LATEST!*

Joel frowned, adjusting his tie – a clear sign he was feeling some stress, too. “I’ll call him,” he volunteered, a panicky edge to his voice.

Riley gestured for him to go right ahead; she’d called him a multiple times in the last twenty minutes herself and had received no answer.

Her heart leapt when her phone vibrated – thank god! – before she scoffed out a laugh. She was so fucking keyed up and anxious that a text from *Owen Grady* was making her heart leap. Absolutely insane –

She swallowed thickly, absurd laugh dying off as soon as it had come. Not Owen, after all.

Instead, her heart leapt for a different reason altogether. Different reasons.

Gianna – 3:39PM

*Hey, you. I know we've been ships in the night
the last few days, but you're going to kill it today.
I'll be here, streaming your channel on all of my
channels, too ❤️*

In spite of all of the twisty feelings she’d experienced in the last few days over *everything* playing out between herself and Gianna, this message unlocked something inside of her.

Something sweet and sacred, something she still had no idea how to stop. Something she’d been dedicatedly not thinking about at all.

A sigh escaped her at the little heart, her own lurching with it. Ridiculous. “So ridiculous,” she muttered at herself. Yes, it was ridiculous.

But she was a total and complete sucker for Gianna, and the unwavering support she gave Riley, even when Riley had been burying herself in work to avoid having to see Gianna while she was still figuring out everything, was... perfect.

She was perfect. Gianna was ridiculously and annoyingly and beautifully perfect.

Joel slipped back into the room, snapping her attention from Gianna back to him.

She supposed the great thing was that it was easy to not let herself get well and truly dragged into the depths of despair, wondering how something could possibly ever compare to what she’d had with Gianna, when she was so

anxious about her career. Who knew work stress could be such a blessing in disguise?

From his rigid posture and clearly terrified look in his eyes, she already knew Joel hadn't had any better luck than she did when trying to reach Owen even before he said, "Okay, so he didn't answer, but I didn't go right to voicemail, either, so – progress?"

He was using the least convincing faux-positive tone she'd ever heard, and on one level, she could appreciate it.

On the other level, she dropped her head into her hands with a groan.

Out of all of the ways this could fail – and she'd combed over what she'd believed was every single possibility – she'd literally *never* thought it would be because Owen didn't even show up!

Miraculously, in that moment, both of their phones vibrated. Riley snapped her head up, catching Joel's wide eyes with her own, before they both immediately looked down at their phones.

"Cutting it *real* close," she murmured, even as relief moved through her as soon as she saw the name on the screen.

Owen Grady – 3:44PM

Joel and Riley –

I wanted to let you both know that I sincerely am grateful for you picking me to be your digital news anchor. It's been such an honor to have worked with you for the last few months.

However, as I was leaving my apartment today, I was struck with the uncomfortable reality that I've been trying to ignore for a while, now.

This is not the avenue for me. I want to focus on harder hitting news and I'm not sure my career will continue to flourish on the journey you two are on.

I wish you the very best. And please, give my best to Gianna, as well. I don't want to let her down, either.

Riley's phone slipped out of her hands and clattered to the floor. She had no idea what emotion was strongest – rage? Shock? Disbelief? Distress?

It was all very present and her knees shook with it, threatening to give out. Her stomach not only dropped to her knees, but down to the goddamn

lobby. Maybe into the sewage system.

“I didn’t even pick him!” Joel insisted, insult dripping from his tone, as he pointed at the first sentence of the message. “I never wanted him to begin with!”

She couldn’t even look in his general direction as she stumbled backwards, her knees so incredibly weak. She hit the conference table and braced herself against it, grateful, because otherwise, she’d probably have fallen right down. Blankly, she stared down at her phone on the floor, then to Joel.

What the hell was *happening*?

Joel’s offended expression faded as he looked at her, “Riley?”

She opened her mouth, but only a shaky breath escaped. There were simply no words. Nothing.

Her phone vibrated again where it lay on the ground, and they both looked down. Joel quickly bent down and picked it up, offering it to her with a look that was both hopeful and nervous. “Maybe this time it’s good news?”

If it was Owen, apologizing, declaring that he realized he’d made a giant ass of himself upon sending his previous message, and that he would be here in less than five minutes, only then would it be good news.

Despite the fact that she wasn’t capable of feeling hope at present, she looked down at her phone.

Marika Hendrick – 3:46PM

Tuned in and looking forward to the broadcast, Ms. Beckett.

A gasp, something that ripped itself from her very soul, exited her throat.

“I’m going to lose my job,” she breathed out, her stomach roiling so intensely, she really wasn’t sure if she was going to be sick. She pressed her fingertips over her mouth, trying to ensure that wouldn’t happen and vaguely glad she’d been too stressed to consume anything except for water and coffee all morning.

She looked at Joel as the daze faded just enough for her to see into her future. “I’m going to get fired.”

“Maybe not?” Joel tried to smile, but it was a very uneasy and uncertain grin that was the opposite of comforting. The *only* thing remotely comforting to her, in the very back of her mind, was that Joel himself was a very talented camera techie and had been working as the main part of his job with the evening news broadcast. So even as this blew up in their faces, at least he was

safe from being unemployed.

That was good, she thought through the rushing of blood in her ears. That... was good. She would have felt impossibly worse knowing that she was responsible for Joel leaving his previous job, if he also was going to get fired at the end of today.

She stared at Joel's bleak smile. A smile that he was clearly pasted on, twitching at the corners, because he, too, knew that this was worst case scenario.

The longer she stared at Joel's sweet, terrified, unconvincing smile, the more it all settled in. Yes, everything was very, very clear right now.

And that clarity did something that should have been *impossible* –

It made her laugh.

The first, jarring, nearly manic chortle burst from her lips as she slapped her hands on the table behind her, still holding her up.

She had feelings for Gianna, who was also her best friend and favorite person, who also didn't want anything to do with romantic relationships and didn't even want to have sex with Riley, anymore. Because she *loved her too much!*

She'd spent the last two years dedicating herself to this passion project – first, workshopping and gathering information and data and figuring out an action plan while she'd been working at NBC. Then, when they hadn't wanted to buy into or believe in her vision, she'd decided that she believed in herself enough to seek out a new job, and she'd poured herself into it.

And now! The guy – who *also* kindled a romantic flame for Gianna, for a fun little addition – that she'd spent months preparing to carry out her passion project, quit! Fifteen minutes before he went on air! Blowing Riley's dream up in the process! And very likely her whole job!

“Riley?” Joel hesitantly asked, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Are you... okay?”

She could barely breathe through her laughter, wiping away literal tears that formed in her eyes, as she shook her head. “No. No, I’m not.” She met Joel’s eyes. “I’m so, so far from okay!”

But it seemed so unlikely that everything she'd had going for her, everything she'd pinned hopes and excitement onto, was crashing down around her so spectacularly, she either had to laugh with it or she'd be sobbing on the floor.

For all she knew, that was coming next.

She could *see* the fear on Joel's face, and she very much understood it – she was pretty fearful right now, herself.

He reached down and fumbled with a button on his phone, then brought it to his ear to say, “Hey... uh. Riley needs you? Like, *bad*.”

He held the phone out to her, her laughter cutting abruptly off as soon as she saw Gianna's name. She froze, everything inside of her freezing as well, as she shot Joel a look.

He offered a helpless shrug, insistently pressing his phone out to her again.

For a beat, she could only stare. It would be the first time she'd communicate with Gianna in any way other than text form for days. Reluctantly, her heart lurching in her chest, she took it.

“– ou mean, *Riley needs me?* Joel? You can't just say that and then not answer?” Gianna's voice demanded a response, clearly worked up. “I can be at the station in, like, twenty-five minutes. Is that where you are?”

Something about hearing Gianna's voice centered everything in Riley. Their romantic/sexual complications... she found that the turmoil, the aching, it didn't land, right now. Not in the face of everything else falling down around her. Gianna's voice was a comfort. One she latched onto.

She had no more desperate laughter to let out. She didn't even have weak knees of despair.

What she had was Gianna, on the phone. “Owen quit. He just... quit.”

There. So simple, yet so destructive. It took so much out of her to get the words out of her raw, raspy throat. She closed her eyes at the reality of it all, trying not to give in and cry, here and now.

“Shut the fuck up. He *what?*” Gianna shouted, before she cut herself off and exhaled, sharply. “I – sorry, I'll save my rage for another time. Preferably for if I ever see that rat-faced weasel miscreant shitbag ever again.”

“Weasel rat shitbag,” Riley echoed with approval. It felt very fitting. And yet, it didn't really matter. “Oh, he wanted me to say goodbye to you, too.”

The ludicrousness of it all threatened to swamp her again, but she managed to swallow it down this time.

“I'm going to murder him,” Gianna threatened. The angry, protective tone was rare for Gianna, and it made Riley's stomach flip-flop.

Even if Gianna wasn't *in love* with her, she *loved* Riley. And right now, in this moment, it was enough to give her solace.

“Bella... what are you going to do?” Her voice was so gentle as she asked

Riley for answers she didn't have.

"Watch my entire launch go down in flames?" She answered, entirely honestly. She bit her lip, feeling the backs of her eyes burn with those persistent tears. Her throat felt tight and raw as she whispered, "I can't believe it."

Gianna was quiet for a few moments, before she sharply and decisively said, "No."

"No?" She echoed, confusion pushing through her.

"No," Gianna insisted, and Riley could perfectly picture her on the other end of the call. Using this tone, straightening out her shoulders, her posture becoming commanding as commanding as her tone, "This is not it, Riley. Are you kidding?"

"What are you talking about?" Riley couldn't wrap her own mind around what Gianna was trying to say. But maybe Gianna *did* have an answer, somehow. Maybe –

"You have to do it," Gianna's voice went soft. Coaxing but firm.

Riley reeled back, looking at the phone as if she was looking at Gianna, like she'd lost her damn mind. As if that was the actual answer?

She reached up and rubbed at her eyes, deflated. "I really thought you had a solution for a second."

"I *do*," she insisted, "I told you before, you should always come to me when you have a problem."

Riley remembered that, clear as day. Right after they'd had sex for the first life-altering time.

She swallowed heavily against the memory, deliberately settling back to the topic at hand. "I can't do it."

"Why?"

Riley couldn't believe Gianna was even serious; she *well* knew that Riley was not an in-front-of-the-camera person. "*Gianna.*"

"Why, Riley?" Gianna demanded an answer. Not a mean tone, but one that pushed for a real answer. "Why are you going to let this project that you've spent countless hours investing yourself into, fail?"

"I'm not *letting* it fail!" She cried out, desperate, tossing her free hand into the air. It didn't feel like nearly enough with everything that was in tumult inside of her right now, though. "Owen quit, and now I have no one to go on air."

"What have you always said is the worst thing that can happen when

you're live?" Gianna asked, imperiously.

"Dead air?" She knew that was the correct answer; what she didn't know was exactly what Gianna was getting to.

"Exactly. And you already have your accounts set up for the livestream. If you don't go on, it's going to be dead air. If you don't try, *you* are letting it fail."

The conviction in her tone was so palpable, Riley could only gape at the wall in front of her in shock. Gianna was entirely serious about this. About her going on, live.

Riley, frankly, couldn't believe what in the world she was hearing.

She had been featured, many times, in front of Joel's camera for projects in college. This wasn't some insecure play at shyness; Riley had been forced to reckon with her screen presence – or lack thereof – enough to accept it. Whatever natural charisma Riley could muster in her day-to-day life, disappeared in front of the camera.

It was how she'd known that the right move was to throw herself into behind-the-scenes work. That where she shined was in curating pieces and prepping others for delivery, not in delivering them herself. At the time – *ten years ago* – she'd been a little disheartened, but she'd found her very secure footing in production.

"You've seen me whenever I've had to be on camera. We used to have those mortifying viewing parties whenever Joel and I worked on a project together that I only allowed because they were so hilariously badly executed," she managed to get out, pushing through her disbelief.

Gianna was quiet for a few seconds, but when she spoke again, it wasn't what Riley was expecting. She'd expected the same tone – commanding and certain, clearly trying to bolster Riley in the same way.

Instead, Gianna's voice went low and soft, "Riley, babe, come on. Yes, I loved to watch those videos back in college."

A humorless vindication slid through her. "So, you admit that I was terrible."

Gianna reluctantly acquiesced, "I *admit* that you lacked your usual charm." Before Riley could *a-ha* her, she added, "But, we aren't in college, anymore. This isn't some journalism project; this is your *dream*. This is your vision, your passion, your dedication, your time, your energy. It's *yours*. You can do it because it's yours and I know you won't give up on something that's yours. You never give up when you care. And I love that about you."

The words – sweet and honest – made Riley’s heart skip a beat at the same time that they made her throat feel thick with emotion.

“Do you remember the first time I tried to design and create my own bra?” Gianna added, coaxing laughter in her voice. It worked to pull a smile onto Riley’s lips.

“If I recall, that bra would have meant one of your breasts was a size G and the other was a B.” When Riley knew acutely well that both of Gianna’s breasts were a perfectly shaped C.

“Exactly. And, if you recall, I didn’t want to spend all of that time and energy making another bra!”

Riley did recall. She could easily remember Gianna’s frustration and her offense at the garment she’d created, bemoaning all of the time she’d spent on it.

“But you sat me down and we walked back through my process to figure out where I went wrong. You told me that the world wasn’t over, I would get through it, and that I had to keep seeing it through. You didn’t let me quit just because, at the root of everything, I was scared that I’d fall on my face again. If we didn’t do that, who knows if Worthy would even exist?” Gianna pointed out. “If you don’t do this, the world will *not* end, babe. You’ll get through it. But you’ll also regret it. I know you will, Riley Beckett.”

Riley couldn’t believe that she was seriously *considering* it, but... Gianna wasn’t wrong. Everything she said was true, and the way she said it – full of sincere belief – made even a part of Riley feel like she actually, maybe, could do this.

Nerves streaked through her at the realization that she was actually considering it.

“I’m not dressed for it,” she found herself saying, anxiously glancing down at herself.

“What are you wearing?”

“My burgundy high-waisted pants and that Hélène Pierce black sweater.”

Gianna hummed under her breath. “That’s perfect. I trust that Joel has all of the right lighting and visual tech figured out, so the contrast should look great on camera. And you are so gorgeous; that isn’t a concern you need to have.”

There it was, that sincerity in her voice that Riley had no choice but to buy into, and it bolstered her extremely shaky confidence.

“Riley, you cannot let this project go down in flames all because of *Owen*

Grady, wannabee anchor. He never understood what you're doing here or why it means so much. Not like you understand it. When you tell me about this project and the news and why it's important, you are so passionate. It's captivating," Gianna told her in a voice full of promise. "Pretend it's just me, if you have to. Pretend you're telling me about it."

"For the hundredth time," she joked, faintly. Because, admittedly, she *did* feel a little faint. She really was thinking about doing this. About streaming, live, on camera.

"And I'd be just as interested in listening to you as I was the first time," Gianna asserted right away, sounding so sure.

"I..." She couldn't believe what she was about to do. But she found herself pulled in and convinced. "Okay," she rasped out.

Because Gianna was right. If she gave up now and didn't do everything in her power to course correct, it would be a disservice to herself and her career. Maybe she would get fired, but at least she would know she did everything she could have.

"Good," Gianna's voice was firm and steady, an anchor. One that Riley desperately needed right now. "Because you're going live in a minute. You can do this; I know it."

"Thank you," she breathed back, so full of sheer *love* for this woman.

They hung up, and Riley's heartbeat that had calmed with Gianna's voice, dialed right back up as she looked at Joel. He was standing a foot away, bouncing on his heels as he stared at her expectantly. "So? It seemed like it went well? What's the plan? Do we have a plan?"

She handed him back his phone, her hand trembling. Determined and still terrified, she held his gaze. "I'm going to do it."

Joel stared at her blankly. "Do... what?"

His abject confusion brought her back to herself just a bit, just enough, as she rolled her shoulders back and explained, "I'm going to be your anchor."

His eyes went wide as saucers. "You *are*? You *are*?"

Though she couldn't begrudge his shock in the least, Riley cut him an exasperated glare. "Trust me, I get it, but right now I need as much encouragement as you can give me in the next thirty seconds."

Joel nodded. Vigorously and unnaturally. "Right, great! Yeah! You're *amazing*, you have *amazing* screen presence. This is going to be *amazing*."

She could only stare at him in horror, the fear that Gianna had somewhat talked down coming right back. With a vengeance. Strong enough to make

her stomach churn. She swallowed hard against it, holding a hand to her stomach. “Oh, god.”

Joel stopped nodding. “Right, that was a little too crazy to be encouraging. Sorry.”

Riley brought both of her hands up and scrubbed them intently over her face, then kept them there. Just to comfort herself, to gather any wits she possibly could, as she directed, “Let’s get the camera on. I’m your anchor.”

Yeah, it still sounded unnatural.

“On it!”

He hurried back, quickly making sure the camera and laptop were all connected and running as they should be, and Riley attempted to calm herself down enough that she didn’t think she was going to be sick.

Sick, because she would be streaming live to anyone that had already subscribed to their account from the network’s main page *and* to Gianna’s literal millions of followers.

How did Gianna do it? She tried to think of the natural and seamless way Gianna positioned herself on video. She tried to think of the way Riley, as a producer, instructed anchors to stand. But she was drawing a blank on how to do it, herself, and all she could do was simply... stand there. In the middle of the room, with her arms hanging limply at her sides.

“We’re going live, streaming to Tiktok, Insta, and Facebook, in 3, 2—” Joel motioned, something she’d seen thousands of times over the years at the station, but never *at her*.

It was time.

Fuck.

Riley’s heart pounded in her chest as she stared right into the camera, unmoving. As if she’d never spoken a word in her life. Everything she’d ever coached *any* anchor on fled her mind.

Joel cleared his throat, breaking into her panic.

“Uh. Hi. Welcome to BostonNow. Digital, that is. BostonNow Digital.” She knew as soon as she spoke that it was the most awkward greeting she’d given in her entire life.

In the next beat, she realized that for the *life* of her, she couldn’t remember any of the prep notes she’d given Owen for this exact moment. Riley tangled her hands in front of her, staring into the camera in too many seconds of silence.

Dead air, she thought in dazed terror, feeling her palms sweat.

Pretend you're telling me about it, Gianna's advice rang in her ears, and that was just enough to push her from ducking out of the camera line.

She swallowed hard, forcing herself to keep going. "If you're a viewer who's caught any of the pieces we've put out through the main network in the last few months or you're here from any of the ads our amazing marketing team has been pushing on socials, you might recognize that... I'm not Owen Grady."

She gestured down at herself, laughing uncomfortably for a few seconds. "He... couldn't join us, today." She grit out the excuse, trying not to let herself get into the yet to be explored anger at him. She paused – huh.

She waved her hands in front of her, shoulders releasing some of the tension she was holding, because – if she was doing this, she was just going to have to *go for it*. That's what Gianna would do.

So, instead of pushing down that feeling of utter *rage* from Owen, she let it flow, holding up a finger to the camera. "Actually, no. That's not what happened."

"Owen – as you may have seen for the last few months, if you have already subscribed to or been a viewer at BostonNow – was *supposed* to be the digital anchor. He was supposed to be here tonight. Right now. But he quit." She glimpsed up at the click above the door, calculating quickly. "About seventeen minutes ago. Right before this stream."

She took a minute to shake out her hands, trying to push out the remaining nerves, even though she was, admittedly, feeling a little bit better. Saying the truth, saying what she felt. Believing in Gianna's belief in her.

"I'm Riley Beckett, and I am *not* a news anchor. In fact, I've structured my entire career building a life behind the camera. But I am going to tell you exactly what is on my mind this afternoon."

Joel whipped his head up from where he'd been intently staring at the computer, checking the viewer count on the videos. He gave her an encouraging smile – a genuinely excited one. Which meant he liked whatever he was seeing.

And it was enough to keep Riley going, relaxing even more.

"I'm going to bet that the vast majority of people watching this right now, probably don't watch your daily news?" She paused, knowing she was right even though she obviously couldn't get a real-time response. But it was the beginning of her very impassioned rant about this very topic, and she could *feel* herself getting into it.

“You probably catch up on the really big things, the things that make it viral on the internet. Celebrity news, wars, big political races – those are pieces of what I call macro news. But what I think a lot of people in this country miss out on more and more, is everything else. Because there are current events happening that are literally shaping our world, locally, nationally, and globally, that *don’t* go viral. Things that the average person isn’t seeing unless they seek it out. Which is crazy!” She took in a deep breath, brushing her hands down over her hips as she laughed at herself, more natural this time.

A little embarrassed, but comfortable enough to exist as herself – finally – she offered a little smile to the camera. “Sorry... as you might have been able to tell, this is my *thing*. So, just, hang in here with me?”

“Because the thing is, while so many people are uninformed, I don’t think it’s your – the viewer’s – fault. There are so many reasons for the decline in news viewership,” she barely managed to keep herself from starting to list them off as she really got going. Because she *did* know this like the back of her hand, and she *could* deliver it better than Owen.

She would.

“But at the end of the day, it’s the responsibility of the news and networks to keep up with technology. And it used to! The papers, then the radio, then the television,” she listed, biting her lip as she realized what she’d said – *live*. “And, ha, I mean no offense to my own network, which is still primarily rooted in television.”

Joel shot her a laughably ridiculous smile, but waved his hand for her to keep talking, ending with a thumbs up.

“People used to keep up with current events – worldwide and local – with the media they had available to them. But digital streaming and social medias becoming the most-used communications, the news stopped becoming something that was accessible to everyone on their media of choice,” she broke off, scoffing out a laugh, “Which, for the record, is *crazy*. Because we live in a world, now, where current events can be delivered to you in real time while you’re just scrolling on your phone. But, usually, unless you’re seeking it out, you’re not seeing it. You’re not seeing that micro-news or even the non-viral macro news! Because to do that... you have to *care*.”

She rolled her lips, debating on how best to say the next part. Because she didn’t want to be rude or off-putting, but she was used to writing these pieces and taking time to think them through, before they were put into the

audience.

There was only straight truth to have, right here, right now, though. And she merely had to lean into it.

“And I know it’s easy to not care,” she shrugged, because... it was honest. “And, once again, I don’t think it’s necessarily your fault,” she gestured at the camera. “Because of politics, and wars, and foreign affairs, and capitalism, even down to local crime – just to name a few things – the future of the world looks pretty fucking bleak, especially on the news. Who wants to watch that all of the time?”

She caught herself for a moment, after dropping the swear. She shot an uncertain look into the camera, “We typically aren’t supposed to swear...” Riley lifted her hand and ran it through her hair, that tug of stress coming back. “But, this isn’t cable; this is the internet. And the point of this channel is to just give people the facts. To present the truth, and let you take from it what you will.”

“I think the situation calls for expletive embellishments, though. The world is fucking grim, when you look at all of the things that seem inevitably bad. I get that; I work in a news station. I hear it all of the time.” She took a moment to sit with what she was about to say, to sit with the uncertainty of her future. “In total transparency? I’m not sure how long I’ll be employed at the station. But even if I’m *not*, I’ll still be watching the news.”

“Because being informed about all of those things, about politics and wars and foreign affairs and capitalism and local crime – about how bleak everything could be – is the only way you can ever change it. It’s as simple as that. And with the reach of digital media like this? The unity you can find in a cause, especially when you can connect with people cities, states – countries, even – away from where you are? We’re living in an age where being informed and making changes should be the easiest it’s ever been!”

The wonder of that, of the potential of true connection and true change, had been what had gotten her so passionate about this in the first place.

“But you have to care. Not about everything, all of the time.” She frowned, rolling her eyes at the idea. “Which is exhausting, and unrealistic.” Pushing that aside, she aimed a beseeching look at the camera. “But I believe that you do care. I believe everyone cares, about *some* causes, *sometimes*. Everyone has something important, something that affects them or people they care about. I know it,” the strength of that belief sustained her, here. “Maybe people like Owen Grady don’t believe in that. Maybe they don’t

believe something like this can be successful. Or maybe they don't realize that you can care about celebrity gossip and social media and current events, because we aren't one-dimensional robots."

"In putting together BostonNow Digital, though, I've thrown my career in with the fact that there *is* an audience here. An audience who wants to know about the world we're living in, maybe even an audience who will be able to do something to make it better. I'm just making it my responsibility to make it accessible for you."

She found herself running out of steam, the passion that had fueled her slowly leeching away, as she cleared her throat, grinning self-deprecatingly. "So, if any of that resonated with you, then... subscribe. If you do, maybe we can really do this," she gestured at herself and then around the room. "Maybe we can all care about *something* in the world, together. There are already some videos live, now, if you want to check it out."

A second beat by, Joel straightening up from the laptop and touching something on the camera as he said, "Aaaand, cut."

Everything – nerves and courage and everything else that had run through her during those minutes – escaped, and she felt dizzy with it all as she took a step back and braced herself against the table. "Wow."

It was all she could say.

Wow.

"We did it." She didn't even know for sure *how* they did yet, but – they *did it*.

"*You did it!*" Joel shouted, his excitement contagious and his smile blinding. "And it was way better than whatever uninspired bullshit Owen would have spewed." He shook his head in amazement. "You got great numbers – over a *million*. Probably because of Gianna sharing the stream for the launch, but still!"

Riley's mouth fell open in utter shock. "A million?! Are you... sure?"

Joel shot her a ridiculous look. "Riley, I'm the tech guy; I can read engagement numbers on a screen. But, I recorded it so you can see the live comments, later. People *really* liked it," his voice finally fell into something quieter. Something encouraging.

It felt good. It really did. Insane and terrifying, but *good*. "I just launched as the face of BostonNow Digital," she stated, just to hear it out loud as she still felt like she wasn't quite in reality.

"Hell yeah you did!" Joel jumped where he was standing, dragging his

hands through his hair. “I’m going to start singing, soon.”

“Please, don’t,” she discouraged, but she could only do it half-heartedly, as she felt the same buzz. “God, I feel like I ran a marathon. I feel like I still *could* run a marathon.”

“Me, too!” Joel sent her a little, silly smile as he wiggled his eyebrows and shimmied his shoulders. “We need to celebrate! Wherever you want to go. We have to call Gianna and Ellie and Mia, and—” He cut himself off, his excitement clearly dying down as he turned to her with a curious, cautious look. “Are we going to invite Gianna? To celebrate?”

Just as abruptly, her own high was cut off, and she sucked in a sharp breath.

Especially as she realized that now that the launch was done, she no longer had a more pressing, urgent issue to dedicate herself to. Now, the biggest and most pressing issue, was how in the world to manage her feelings for Gianna.

“We don’t have to,” Joel hastily added on, waving his hands. “No, we probably shouldn’t. Just you and me! That could be really fun!” He tried to summon his enthusiasm from only moments ago, but it was a pale imitation.

She appreciated him. She really, really did, and she felt it roll through her, even as she shook her head.

“No. Don’t be ridiculous; we have to invite Gianna. We would never go out and celebrate something and *not* invite Gianna,” she reasoned, with both of them.

Joel frowned. “But, that was before... you haven’t even seen her since you two stopped having sex. Tonight should be *fun*.”

Riley let out a sad laugh, as she pointed out the cold, hard truth. “But, it wouldn’t be fun without Gianna. It wouldn’t feel right.” She tried to imagine it. Imagine going out, getting dinner at one of their favorite places, going to get drinks, having any sort of celebratory night out, without Gianna at her side. But she literally couldn’t picture it.

She felt an anvil of guilt at the fact that she was even trying to imagine it.

“Gianna would be *crushed* if she knew we went out to celebrate and she wasn’t even told about it.” She could picture it so clearly, Gianna’s confused and crestfallen expression. And then she let out a snort of derisive laughter, because, “And she would probably show up wherever we were and demand to know what was up.”

That, she could certainly picture.

"I see your point," Joel acknowledged, before he moved to stand right beside her, leaning against the table as well. He spoke slowly, as if choosing his words carefully, "But it's only been a couple of days since you two broke things off. Er – stopped having sex?" He scratched at the back of his neck, shrugging, "Either way. It's only been two days. You're allowed to take a little bit of time for yourself."

"That's just it," she insisted, holding his gaze level with her own. "I'm not. That's what I agreed to."

"Okay, well, maybe that was what you *agreed* to, but you felt more than friendship! I know it, you don't have to hide it from me," he bumped his shoulder cajolingly into hers. "With me, you can take a little bit of time to figure it out. To mourn the *could-have-been* feeling."

A sweet, humorless smile tugged at her lips as she looked up at him.

"The most insane thing, though, is that even though I know seeing Gianna might make me want to cry, it might totally crush me?" She shook her head, swallowing thickly as she admitted, "She's also the person I *want* to see, to celebrate with, most of all."

Everything, now, felt more complicated. But, at the root of it, regardless of her romantic feelings, Gianna was still her person. It made her ache, knowing that it wasn't in all of the ways she could now so easily envision. All of the ways she wanted. But it didn't change the base fact.

Joel's eyes were so big and so sweet as he stared at her. "I..." he licked his lips, shaking his head as he hit his palm against the table behind them. "I have to say it, just this once, okay?"

Confused, she nodded.

"I get why you don't want to tell her about your feelings. I get that it makes things harder and that it makes you feel guilty and everything else. But maybe – *maybe* – it could do something good!"

There was a hopeful tone in his voice that she refused to get pulled into. She steeled herself against it, looking at him incredulously.

"Come on! Gianna *loves* you. So much! Everyone sees it! That's why they always wonder if you two are together," he propelled himself on, even though Riley knew that they *both* knew he was grasping at straws.

"Joel, when I told you about us, you knew the same way I did that for Gianna, it would never be something deeper than sex. *You* were the driving force behind not telling her the truth, because it wouldn't change anything!" She couldn't help the desperate accusation in her voice. But she knew she

wasn't wrong, and even more than that, she knew the last thing she needed was for any part of her to believe otherwise. "I don't even really know, yet, how I'm going to move on from this," her throat ached with the truth of the words, "I don't know how I ever possibly could, if any part of me thinks there's something there."

And she'd thought about it, in her most desperate moments of the last few days, the moments where her head popped out of the work bubble. She'd re-examined the last few months, even when she tried not to.

"I know," Joel admitted, hanging his head on a disappointed sigh. "I know I said it wouldn't change anything, but that was before you two broke things off." He circled his thumbs around each other, an obvious tell-tale sign that he had something else on his mind.

He didn't seem like he was capable of keeping it in even long enough for her to ask.

"I kind of thought..." Joel turned to look at her, apology written all over his face. "I really had this thought that if you two kept sleeping together, it would inevitably have to *become* something."

She pushed away from the table, shaking her head as she resumed her pacing from earlier and tried to wrap her mind around that. She wasn't sure if she was more hurt that he'd clearly hid that part from her when encouraging her to keep having sex with Gianna or more baffled as to –

"*Why?*" She demanded. "Why would you think that?"

Joel lifted his hands and then dropped them helplessly to his sides. "I don't know!"

"Gianna, in our adult lives, has never expressed wanting a romantic relationship with *anyone*," she pressed. "As far as we know, she has no desire to."

"I asked her, once, if she was aromantic," Joel insisted, desperation lacing his tone as he beseeched, "And she said no! Why would she say that, then? That means that some part of her, somewhere, could want a romantic relationship."

Riley's pacing slowed as she stared at Joel in disbelief. "Even if she doesn't identify as aromantic, it doesn't mean – anything!"

"You were so happy," he cut in, quietly. "I know you were feeling guilty, too, and that it wasn't all perfect, but... it's been so long since you've seemed so happy with anything in your romantic – er, sexual? *Both* – life." He shrugged, obvious remorse written all over his face. "I just thought, or hoped,

that since you both love each other so much and you were both so happy with sleeping together, that maybe it was a good thing to keep it going.”

The wind went right out of Riley’s sails. Not only because she knew Joel, and she knew he only ever had the best of intentions, but because she hadn’t planned on listening to him, anyway. She’d planned on telling Gianna and she’d been the sole reason that she couldn’t bring herself to do it. All of her actions were her own.

“I didn’t think you should tell her, because if you *told* Gianna how you felt, maybe she would get scared or upset or something, and end it. But I really, seriously, believed that she wouldn’t end it when it seemed like such a good thing.” He scrunched up his face, confused.

“Well. She did,” Riley sighed out, reaching up and rubbing at her temples for what was certain to be an oncoming killer headache. “Honestly, Joel, I’ve gotten barely three hours of sleep a night for the last few days, haven’t eaten a solid meal since...” She frowned in thought. “Maybe breakfast, yesterday?” Riley shook her head; that didn’t matter. “And I’m living in one of the weirdest, hardest, most intense emotional moments of my life.”

It was nice to slide back into reality, regardless of how complicated that reality was.

“So... I’m proud of us.” She really, really was. And if she tried, she could still feel that echo of amazed relief from the success of the launch. “But I’m not up for a big celebration. The best celebration for me tonight is getting something for dinner, taking a bath, and being grateful that I still have a job.”

He opened his mouth, then seemed to bite back whatever he was initially going to say, before he sighed. “Yeah. All right. Maybe next week we can plan something.”

She was grateful that he didn’t push. And yet, as emotionally wrung out as she was, she couldn’t help but circle back to his original comment that started all of this. “Why do you think, in any way, that I should tell her how I feel, now?”

Joel waved his hand out in front of himself, dismissive. “It’s not...” He trailed off, frowning. “Actually, okay, here’s the thing – clearly, I was wrong that she wasn’t going to end the whole sex thing. But, you still have these feelings!”

Riley arched an eyebrow at him, very obviously not following.

He was quick to add on, “Now, it’s the do-or-die moment! If you want to be with Gianna, don’t you want to know that you did everything you could to

make it happen?”

Riley paused, her heart lurching at how similar his comment was to Gianna’s, when she’d talked Riley into doing the livestream.

And, the livestream had worked out, hadn’t it? A desperate, insistent voice from the back of her mind piped up.

Quickly, though, she shut it down.

“No.” Riley resolutely shook her head, at Joel and the unbidden thought. “What am I going to say to her, now? That I know she already ended things and I know she isn’t interested in relationships, but that being with her feels as normal as breathing? That – that being with her and totally blurring the lines between platonic and *more* shouldn’t have made me feel like I’m seeing everything more clearly, but that’s exactly what happened?”

She lifted her eyebrows expectantly at Joel, who reluctantly shrugged. “I mean... maybe?”

Undeniably and uncontrollably incredulous, she pushed further. “Do you think I should tell her about how I can’t help but wonder, now, if my relationship with Gianna played a part in why I haven’t really had a romantically fulfilling relationship in my adult life? Because she was already filling all of my emotionally intimate needs, long before she filled the physical ones?”

And even though Riley couldn’t confirm that with certainty, the more the thought had occurred to her in the last few days, the more she’d had a sinking feeling that it was true.

Damningly, so damningly, there was more. There was so much more that she would say to Gianna, if she thought it was the right thing to do. And she couldn’t stop herself, now, her heart pounding in her ears, as she took in another breath –

The door burst open, making both her and Joel jump in surprise.

Aida, an intern, stared at them both, wide-eyed and panting, as she waved her phone in the air. “You’re still streaming!”

CHAPTER 28



*S*hock and disbelief and *no, no, no* pounded through Riley's veins as she could only stare at Joel, as he ran so quickly over to the setup he'd configured, he almost knocked the camera off the stand.

Gasping, he steadied it, before running his fingers carefully over it... and then he looked up with a thoughtful frown. "The camera isn't on."

Aida shook her head, still panting as she leaned heavily on the door handle. She held up her phone once again for them to see. "It's just audio."

Riley wanted to believe, with anything she possibly could hold onto, that it wasn't true. That there was some other explanation for Aida, a typically very nice and very quiet, intern to tell them for some ungodly reason, that the last few minutes had been part of a livestream.

There was a blessed numbness that worked through her, as she tried to cling to that.

Joel whipped around to look at the laptop, though, before he swore and slammed it shut. He turned to look at Riley, then, looking completely shocked. Stricken.

"I'm sorry! I cut the camera and I ended the stream on the laptop, I did," he swore, looking petrified. "But, then, when I fiddled with it just after you finished – I was trying to get your top engagement number," Joel spoke so quickly, everything he said was choppy and jumbling together. "And I think I – I mean, I *had* to have? – accidentally, started to stream again."

Aida nodded. "Yeah, the first live ended, but then almost immediately a second one started..." She bit her lip, brushing her hair awkwardly back behind her ear, shooting Riley a guilty look. "And, um. Well. You know what you said."

Riley certainly did. She'd broadcasted every step her personal life had taken in the last three months, including her arrangement to having sex with her best friend as well as how she'd fallen for her.

It was that thought that shattered the numbness completely.

Life swung back into full force around her, but the only thing Riley could focus on was that *Gianna* had heard. She'd heard everything.

After tearfully confessing to Riley only days ago that she loved Riley too much for anything to change their friendship, she'd just heard *everything*.

She moved on autopilot, then, a strange sort of calm overpowering everything else inside of her. She was utterly mortified, so incredibly anxious, a whole cacophony of other emotions trying to break through.

She was sure they would get to her eventually.

But all she could do right now was put her jacket on.

"Maybe no one listened to it," Joel proposed, unconvincingly, eyes following her around the room as she looked for wherever her phone had ended up. "Maybe *Gianna* didn't, at the very least."

Riley found her phone, hastily shoving it into her pocket as she outright rejected that. "She listened to it."

If Riley's channel went live, Gianna would have tuned in. If Riley could be sure of anything in this world, she was sure that Gianna had showed up for her.

* * *

AMIDST THE SIXTY-FOUR texts she'd received and handful of phone calls – those being mostly from Ellie – Riley expected to receive very few messages from Gianna.

She'd anxiously, shakily, scrolled through everyone who had contacted her on the ride over here. And she'd braced herself for what she thought she would find, that being a very similar showing to what happened earlier this week, with Gianna's parents.

Gianna closing her out. It was Gianna's classic defense mechanism. She just... didn't usually use it from Riley. And the thought that she might, left Riley chilled to the bone.

But that wasn't what had happened.

It was the only thing Riley kept circling back to as she found herself on

Gianna's doorstep.

Her recollection of running out of the building, bypassing her coworkers, her boss, and even calling for her car, was a bit of a blur.

All she could really focus on, between leaving the conference room and now, were those texts.

Gianna – 4:12PM

And that's a wrap! Honestly, babe, you killed it. I'm so fucking proud of you.

Gianna – 4:12PM

For the record, being proud doesn't mean that I'm surprised you nailed it. I knew you could

Gianna – 4:13PM

HEY! You and Joel being all giggly and excited over your success is super cute, but you should end the livestream lol

Gianna – 4:14PM

Why the hell is Joel suggesting that I should not be invited to celebrate with you tonight????

Gianna – 4:14PM

*Wait. When did you tell Joel about us?
Why did you?*

Gianna – 4:14PM

Why didn't you tell me?

Gianna – 4:15PM

*RILEY. CAN ONE OF YOU LOOK AT
YOUR PHONES?*

Gianna – 4:16PM

*For the love of god, one of you please
look at your phones*

Gianna – 4:16PM

Riley, wh

Gianna – 4:19PM

*I have to hand it to you, that's certainly
one way to grip an audience*

What the fuck did that mean? What did it mean?!

Riley – 4:27PM

I'm on my way over

Riley – 4:28PM

I'm sorry.

Gianna had immediately seen her messages and had taken two minutes to respond in any way, and all she'd said was *Okay, the door's unlocked.*

She'd thought that the worst case scenario would be Gianna being angry or betrayed or freezing her out. But this – seemingly *no response* – was far more unsettling.

“Gianna?” She tentatively called as she opened the door.

The sweeping warmth that encompassed her from the outside cold did very little to alleviate any of the chilly nerves inside of her. Only two steps in, she froze as she saw Gianna standing in the hallway, apparently having waited for her.

Which only added to Riley's feeling that no matter what Gianna said in text, this wasn't right or normal.

“Hi,” she breathed out, offering a nervous smile. It was all she had, especially as the guilt and stress surged through her.

“Hey, you. I made coffee? I know it's a little later in the day, but it's not even five, yet, and I know you've had a long week,” Gianna said, tilting her head in the direction of the kitchen.

Riley gaped at her, unable to form any sort of response.

“Why don't you take off your coat?” Gianna suggested, tilting her head at the hanger on the wall next to Riley. As if Riley didn't know where to hang her jacket, here.

Blinking widely, Riley moved slowly as she followed Gianna's suggestion. Mostly, though, because she was so uncertain as to what the hell was going on and she didn't want to make any sudden movements.

“Gianna, I—”

Gianna shook her head, though, cutting Riley off. “Why don't you tell me the best part about everything,” she broke off, her cheeks flushing as she cleared her throat, before she seemed to catch herself. “About tonight. You can take a breather and then maybe we can go out and celebrate. Or, if you want, you can go home and take a bath; whatever you want.”

Riley would have truly thought she'd stepped into the Twilight Zone, if not for that three-second pause. The pause that told her in bright, screaming

color that for all of Gianna's outward posturing, even she didn't feel like this was normal.

And even though it was terrifying to have to address this to Gianna, face-to-face, Riley latched onto the fact that it was *Gianna*. That she didn't have to be afraid of her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her heart replicating that aching feeling again. It seemed, though, now that she'd started to find they words, they just kept coming. "I'm so sorry. Sorry that I didn't tell you, before. Sorry that you had to hear about it like that. Sorry—"

"Riley, it's fine!" Gianna cut her off, her voice high-pitched and edging on sharp. Not angry-sharp, Riley didn't think, but... sharp. "It's *fine*," she repeated more calmly after she took a deep breath.

There it was, again. Something new in Gianna's tone, in the way she held herself. Edgy, almost. Uncertain? She saw it again as Gianna drew her hand through her hair, but it didn't look casual. It looked erratic.

"It's not fine that I didn't tell you," she disagreed, that slither of guilt sliding through her again. "I didn't do anything wrong in..."

She stared at Gianna, only feet away from her, wearing the tailored slacks she'd likely worn to her meeting this morning and an off-the-shoulder knit sweater. Her feet were bare, toes painted dark red. She looked exactly like Gianna always looked, and Riley *felt* the impact of her.

Just as she felt the impact of the words that worked their way out of her, even before they were spoken aloud.

"Maybe it wasn't wrong to develop feelings for you."

Gianna's breath caught at Riley words, and even though the sound was so quiet, it ensnared Riley. Gripped her. Made her heart lurch in her chest, even as it confirmed what she already knew: that despite Gianna's words, this was not *fine*.

She'd said it.

She'd said it to Gianna's face and the world didn't fall apart. There was some sort of comfort to take from that. Riley might even find it, eventually.

"But I know it was wrong to lie to you. God, I've hated not being honest with you, I really have," there was a desperation inside of her that she needed Gianna to hear. To believe.

Cautiously, she started moving closer. Gianna seemed to be frozen to the spot, watching Riley approach with wide eyes. Eyes that looked – scared.

Which only made Riley feel even worse.

"I know I disrespected you, when I disregarded your rules. I did it because I didn't want to stop sleeping with you, and that was so fucking wrong. I know it was. But I don't mean – I didn't do it because I was trying to be lecherous or – anything," she swore, but had no idea if that mattered or not. "I just... I wanted as much of you as I could have, before it was over."

She squeezed her eyes closed, reaching up and rubbing at them. They felt gritty and sore and the space around her heart felt exactly the same.

"Riley, stop," Gianna's voice was so soft. Barely a whisper. Barely *anything*.

It pushed her to keep going. "When I hear myself say it out loud, I can *hear* how awful it is." It made her feel disgusted with herself, and she dropped her hands uselessly to her sides, staring at Gianna. "I never *once* thought that I would be like the people in your life that you've complained about all of these years. I can't believe that I'm one of them."

"Riley, stop," Gianna asserted, louder and firmer, this time.

Still, she shook her head. She *had* to say it. She had to lay it all on the line, now that she'd finally opened the door. No secrets.

"I understand more than anyone how sensitive you are to the idea of people using you. To people hiding things from you." How many times had she seen people do it over the years? People wanting to be friends with Gianna for clout, people trying to weasel their way into her life. "You're allowed to have a reaction to the fact that I behaved in a similar way to them."

"*Riley...*" Gianna's voice could only be described as a plea. Probably a plea for her to stop, but she still couldn't.

"And I know how much you love me," she rasped out, staring searchingly up at Gianna. "I understand that you love me too much to let anything come between us. But I need you to just – to let yourself be upset with me, right now." She didn't think, even during sex, she'd ever begged for anything from Gianna the way she was in this moment. "I *need* you to be upset with me for not telling you the truth. For continuing our sexual relationship when I knew we weren't on the same page. Be mad. Be – be flippant. Tell me off. Just, don't act like it's nothing."

Maybe it was because she knew it was a complete farce, Gianna acting like she had no reaction to Riley's accidental livestream. And, admittedly, maybe there was more to it. Maybe it was also, a little bit – selfishly – because, under everything else, it hurt to know that her feelings for Gianna

were so *big* and meaningful for her, but that they could somehow mean so little to Gianna.

Even if she didn't have a positive response, she had to have *a response*. Right?

She stared up at Gianna, breathing shallow because her heart was acting like she'd been running a marathon in the last ten minutes.

Gianna's hands were clenched at her sides, so tightly her knuckles were white, the tension so clearly drawn throughout her entire body. She looked like she was ready to *explode*.

It was both terrifying and a relief. Terrifying, because she was blowing up the most stable relationship in her adult life. But a relief, because at least it was real. Honest.

But when Gianna exploded, it didn't happen in any matter that Riley expected. She'd thought Gianna might pace, might ramble in a wild yet captivating mix of Italian, Finnish, and English, might storm away from Riley.

She yelped in shock, though, when Gianna surged forward toward her. Closing the gap between them in one long stride, as she fisted Riley's sweater in her hands and yanked her in close.

Riley's heart went wild, her blood rushing, as she stared up at Gianna in astonishment, her own hands automatically moving to brace herself against Gianna's shoulders for balance. Even if she could have formed words, they would have been swallowed by the bruising pressure of Gianna's mouth on hers.

Everything inside of her went ballistic at it. At the heat, the insistence, the *wanting*.

She matched Gianna beat for beat, surprise melding with her own desire. Unstoppable and urgent and unflagging.

She couldn't help the choked moan that escaped her, right into Gianna's mouth, as Gianna's hands tore under her shirt. They didn't settle anywhere, though. They slid over her hips, her waist, around to her back, then repeating.

Riley really thought she'd never experience it again. That she would never feel Gianna's lips and the exacting yet coaxing slide of them again.

Maybe it was *because* of that belief that she felt like this kiss was different than all of their others. Regardless of the reason, she was feeling it – the urgency, the ardency, the potency – so much stronger than ever before.

Gianna let out a whine against Riley's mouth as she drew Gianna's

bottom lip between her teeth.

Their last kiss had only been days ago, she vaguely registered in the back of her mind. Right before Gianna had broken this off between them.

That memory was like a douse of cold water through her veins. Gianna crying into her kiss. Telling her that she loved Riley so much –

Her stomach revolted again, and she used her hold on Gianna's shirt to push Gianna away. Breathing heavily, she was already shaking her head, panting out, "What is going on?" She stood, body pressing into Gianna's, as she stared up at her. Needing answers. Needing so badly to understand. "What...? Why?"

She released Gianna, then, needing to not get so caught up in her as she roughly rubbed her hands over her face, before dropping them and staring at Gianna, intently.

Gianna's fingers were touching her lips. Just, touching. Exactly like she'd done the first time they'd kissed all those months ago.

"Why did you kiss me?" She asked, trying to keep her voice level. Trying to not let herself run away with any of the many insanely hopeful thoughts that were trying to take root. None of those hopes mattered if they weren't the truth. "And, I swear, if it was for some crazy reason that you thought it would make me feel better or something—"

"I'm scared," Gianna breathed out, fingertips finally falling from her lips. Only a few inches, though, as they pressed against her own chest.

Riley wondered if her heart was racing the same way Riley's was.

Still, she didn't let herself run with it. She couldn't.

It didn't stop her hands from shaking, though, as she forced herself to ignore Gianna's admission. They could get back to that.

Right now, she had to *know*, "Gianna No-Middle-Name Mäkinen, you just *kissed me*." Swallowing thickly, she pushed herself to keep going. "I'm trying not to jump to any conclusions, but if I had to frame a news story around this with the details I have already, this is what I know – you know I have feelings for you. As far as I know, you would never kiss someone who had feelings for you, because you would never want them to get the wrong idea."

Her heart – annoying and undyingly hopeful heart – beat faster with her own words. With what she *had* to believe was the truth.

"I need you to explain to me why you would do that," she challenged, softly but firmly, as she looked up at Gianna, holding her gaze and not letting

it go. “Because I’m starting to get the wrong idea.”

Gianna’s eyes were so wide, but she didn’t look away from Riley. There was sheer anxiety written all over her face, as she admitted in a voice so quiet, “It’s not the wrong idea.”

Riley swore her heart stopped, then. Skipped at least one beat, as she Gianna’s words echoed through her mind.

“God!” Gianna wheeled away from her, shaking her head, “And while you’re standing there, staring up at me like that, I’m two seconds away from doing it again!”

Riley jumped forward, grabbing at Gianna’s sleeve to keep her from putting any more distance between them in this moment, even as she was barely aware of her actions. All she could focus on was *it wasn’t the wrong idea*.

“Would that be a bad thing?” She challenged, unable to decipher if her shock was stronger than the thrilled delight that was starting to slide through her. “You have feelings for me.”

It wasn’t a question, but she still said it like one. Because Gianna – Gianna never caught feelings. The wonder of it slammed through her. “You have feelings for me.”

“Yes. Yes, Riley, I do.” There was a raw desperation in Gianna’s voice that clouded the joy of the moment. “And I kissed you because of that. I kissed you, because I have feelings for you. I kissed you, because when I heard what you said tonight on the livestream, I could have passed out from how fucking *happy* it made me.”

The confession swept everything else inside of her away. She couldn’t think about anything other than the utter passion in Gianna’s voice, the beautiful way her lips trembled into a smile.

“I kissed you, because I’ve missed being able to kiss you for the last three days. Because I couldn’t stand to hear you berate yourself when you didn’t do anything wrong. At least,” a wild, disbelieving laugh broke from her throat, “You didn’t do anything *I* also didn’t do, ten times worse.”

Riley slid her hand down, automatically reaching for Gianna’s hand. Needing to feel the connection. *Wanting* to share in this connection. Wanting to revel in the fact that this wasn’t something she was wrong about feeling, something she should feel guilty over. It wasn’t something she was going to have to figure out how to get over –

But Gianna only allowed the touch for seconds, before she inhaled

sharply, and pulled away. Her hand was flexed, though, like she liked and wanted the contact, and Riley just didn't *understand*.

Gianna crossed her arms tightly over her stomach. "But, Riley, I still..." She broke off, seeming like she truly had to find the strength to finish, "Maybe we shouldn't do this?"

She wasn't sure if emotional whiplash was a real thing, but Riley suspected she was going to get it. Especially because she knew Gianna was referencing to when she'd broken things off.

"But... no," she flat-out rejected the notion. "Gianna—"

Gianna quickly cut her off. "I didn't even know what it was like, for someone to love me the way you do. Even, before all of this," she was quick to explain, shaking her head, as she looked at Riley with pleading eyes.

"You showed me that I'm loveable, Riley," her whisper was thick with emotion, and Riley felt it land inside of her.

She opened her mouth, to affirm that Gianna was loveable, that Riley did love her, that *people* loved her – anything, but Gianna shook her head.

"You did that, all the way back in college. You changed me, fundamentally. You make me better. Having you by my side is the best part of my life." She let out a sweet, soft, incredulous laugh, as she reached up and swiped under her eyes. "And when I'm feeling all of those big, empty awful feelings – like I did earlier this week? You save me from them."

Gianna's voice was so reverent, like it – like Riley – was salvation itself.

"So, what do I do if something happens, and you become someone who can't or won't save me, anymore?" Giana challenged. "You're my *family*. Other than my eighty-one year-old Mummo in Finland, you're the only family I have."

Gianna searched her eyes, the desperation in them, the terror in them, palpable. It made Riley's heart *ache* from it.

"That won't change," she promised with a confidence she'd never felt before. A certainty that she knew right to her core.

"You don't know that," Gianna immediately shot back, shaking her head. "Nobody ever thinks that, when they start a relationship, something is going to go terribly wrong. If anyone thought about that, no one would get married."

Riley didn't say anything to that.

Not when Gianna was right; Riley was the person who knew Gianna well enough to see that she was panicking.

Instead, Riley was determined to keep them on track.

She reached out, cupping Gianna's jaw, her touch tentative but hoping it was grounding. "I know it's scary," she assured. *God*, did she know. "I've been scared since I started feeling this way, too."

A laugh of sheer disbelief escaped her; she didn't know if there had been a moment since she'd opened that damn box that hadn't been scary in some way.

"How could it *not* be scary? Things are changing between us. That's *scary*," she affirmed, for both of them. She could feel it, inside, the *trill* that moved through her, even now. As she stared into the eyes of the person she was closest to – eyes she'd known for over ten years – because now, she couldn't help but think about how ridiculously *beautiful* they were. That was, undoubtedly, scary.

And yet...

It was still a feeling Riley wanted to sink into. Something she craved more of. And now that there was – unpredictably, *insanely*, shockingly – a way for there to be something between them, Riley wasn't going to leave any stone unturned. No way.

"Earlier today, you pushed me to do the livestream even though I was terrified. By your own logic, we shouldn't not try to do something just because it's not what we planned."

Riley had needed Gianna to hold her hand, earlier. To pull her through something nerve-wracking. Developing feelings for someone, wanting something that was more than physical... it must be scary, for Gianna. *Especially* because it was Riley; she understood that.

And she felt an unshakable confidence in it, as she slid her thumb lightly over Gianna's cheek.

"I understand you being afraid, Gianna. Because this is us, because you've spent your entire adult life *not* catching feelings," Riley chuckled, softly, finally feeling like there was a little bit of solid ground underneath her, again. "It's scary."

There was a sweet softness, a warmth, as Gianna leaned into her touch. Something familiar there, that only bolstered Riley forward.

"But, just because this is so new for the both of us, doesn't mean it's bad. It just means it's... new."

Gianna blanched, then, the strength of her wince propelling her backwards. Beyond Riley's touch, and her hand fell to her side.

Riley narrowed her eyes in confusion at what she was missing, here. What had happened to make Gianna react like that? What—

“Maybe it’s new for you, but...” Gianna’s voice was gravelly, shaky, before it dropped into silence, not finishing her sentence.

It took her several long moments to really process it, Gianna’s words hooking sharply into her brain. “What do you mean, it’s new *for me*?”

Gianna’s eyes were so big and so wet with unshed tears that she continuously tried to blink away. And she was *trembling*. Riley could see it, the shaking of her shoulders.

“I’ve had these feelings for... longer than you have,” Gianna whispered, barely audible.

Riley wasn’t sure there was a priest in the world who had heard something sounding more like a sacredly protected confession.

“How much longer?” She pressed, a strange and uncomfortable edge of suspicion starting to coil through her. “Like... the first time we had sex?”

She tried, rapidly, to run through the moments they’d shared in the last few months. Tried to think about the way Gianna had interacted with her for the months leading up to it.

“Riley,” Gianna breathed out, the sound pleading.

Riley snapped her gaze back to Gianna’s, searching. For nearly their entire relationship, Riley would have headed to that tone. A sincere, genuine begging sound that seemed to crawl from the depths of Gianna’s soul, in that single word.

She supposed, though, that was something different between them, now. Because when it pertained to *this*, to them, she couldn’t let it go and pursue it when Gianna was ready.

“How much longer?” She repeated, not meaning to sound as harsh as she did, but her blood was rushing in her ears, and this didn’t feel right. She didn’t like feeling like she was missing something, and she knew, right now, that she was missing something important.

She opened her mouth to ask again, but she didn’t have to.

Gianna seemed both defeated and terrified, as she finally answered, “About... ten years?”

CHAPTER 29



M arch, sophomore year

“Why do you seem nervous?” Gianna asked, softly blowing on Riley’s lips to facilitate the drying of the gloss she’d applied. It was her favorite brand, and once it was applied and dried properly, this gloss would be smudge proof – no matter how many drinks Riley would have, no matter how intensely she might make-out with her date at the end of the night.

Gianna had tested it, tried and true.

“It’s not like this is your first date,” she murmured, eyeing her handiwork – she’d asked Riley to be allowed to do her makeup, just for her own fun. “I’ve seen you go on dates or go home with guys. This is the same thing, only I’ll be there. So, even better.”

She softly pressed her thumb against the middle of Riley’s bottom lip, the fullest, most lush part – her favorite part – to make sure it was dry.

The give in that supple spot was unbelievably soft. She had the slightest fascination with that spot. Gianna blew out a deep breath as she lowered her hand, flexing it against her side as she then leaned back, satisfied. Perfect.

“Yeah, but it’s my first blind date,” Riley explained as she turned from Gianna to grab her shoes.

Oh, the blue Valentino slingbacks Riley had found second-hand a few months ago. So sexy. Perfect choice. Absolutely Gianna-approved.

“Isn’t this, like, a perk of having a twin you’re super close to? You can do things like set each other up?” She turned to look at herself in the mirror, pouting her lips to do her own gloss. She’d thought of using a different one, but the same one she’d used on Riley was already right here, and it was Tom Ford, so...

Her lips tingled as she applied the brush – the same one she'd just used on Riley's lips – flicking her eyes to Riley.

There was something incredibly satisfying that tingled in her stomach at the way their mouths matched so perfectly.

Riley laughed. "Have you met Ellie? The last thing she was interested in throughout our teenage years was dating."

Gianna shrugged, before rubbing her lips together, popping them in the mirror and checking herself out. Perfect. "Well, now you have me."

"And thank god for that." Riley nudged her hip into Gianna's lightly, but didn't move back as she tugged on her jacket. "Where did you meet these guys, again?"

"Does it matter?"

Riley only stared at her, waiting for an answer.

Gianna rolled her eyes. "What do you think, I found them on Craigslist?" She nudged Riley out the door, pulling it closed behind them. "I'm in a study group for my history class with Anthony – your date – and we were chatting, it came up that we were both single, and we thought it would be fun to set each other up with our friends."

It had been a light-hearted, fun conversation, and when Anthony had proposed the idea, Gianna was intrigued. She also found herself excited and intrigued to witness Riley out on a date.

It was the one field of Riley's life that she didn't know, firsthand, yet, and there was an itching fascination she'd developed, the last time Riley had gone out with a guy, last month.

She linked her arm through Riley's as they walked, tugging her close. "We're meeting them at Duck's, that arcade bar a few blocks away, so it should be fun."

Riley's lips pulled down into a considering pout. "I do love skee-ball."

Gianna laughed. "That's the spirit."

* * *

GIANNA, she'd neglected to tell Riley before they'd left, had also never been on a double-date.

But she enjoyed it more than she enjoyed any typical date she'd ever been on, and she found herself laughing as she sipped on her vodka soda, cheering

Riley on as she played against Anthony at the air hockey table.

Her own date was apparently going to have been Bryan, one of Anthony's fraternity brothers, who ended up not being able to come at the last-minute.

So, Gianna supposed, maybe this wasn't exactly a double-date, so much as her tagging along on Riley's date.

Neither Riley nor Anthony had protested, though, so Gianna had given herself the time to have two drinks, play against Riley in skee-ball, beat Anthony in the motorcycle simulation game, and now, cheer Riley to victory in air hockey.

It was a little surprising, given that Riley wasn't amazing at air hockey, but Gianna was thrilled. Especially as Riley turned to her, throwing her arms around Gianna's neck in a victorious embrace.

She melted into the hold, wrapping her own arms around Riley in return. Then wrapping them a little tighter, using her hold to haul Riley up to her tiptoes. "You did it!"

Anthony made his way over, holding his hands up in defeat. "All right, that was a good game, I'll admit."

"Thank you, very much. You didn't make it easy," Riley said, diplomatically before gave him a flirty smile. One that resonated deeply in Gianna's chest, making her heart skip a beat.

Riley was good on a date, she'd learned, even though this was a very untraditional date night. She asked Anthony questions, shared about herself, flirted, and –

"I'm just going to run to the bathroom, while the line is so short," Riley informed both of them giving a flash of a smile, as she quickly made her way to the back of the game floor.

Gianna watched her go, that small smile in place, as she turned back to face Anthony. "I'll probably head out soon, given that Bryan was a no-show and thi–"

She cut herself off on a muffled yelp as Anthony's lips pressed against hers.

It took her a second to process what was happening. To fully realize that Anthony was *kissing her*, while she'd gone out tonight to introduce him to *Riley*, who was in the bathroom not even twenty feet away, and –

She jerked back, shoving at his chest, irritation and disgust burning through her. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" She hissed at him, glaring.

He stared back at her, a wide-eyed, beseeching look on his face. “I never invited Bryan,” he confessed, shaking his head. “You – Gianna, you’re so fucking hot. And I couldn’t help it; your mouth looks...” He gave her a lopsided smile that she supposed was charming, but Gianna was not into it.

She couldn’t be *less* into it, actually, and she shoved at his chest again for good measure. “You’re here on a date with *Riley*,” she reminded him. “And her lips have the same gloss as mine.”

He snorted, shaking his head. “Gianna, c’mon.”

It only further incensed her, as she dug her hands into her hips and stared at him expectantly. “Come on, what?”

“*Riley’s...*” He trailed off, before stating simply, “You know.”

Something very dark, very dangerous, and very unfamiliar slid through her. “No, I don’t have any clue what you’re talking about. She’s *what*? ”

“She’s great!” He started, before shrugging. “Really, she’s – she seems nice and I guess she’s funny. But...”

“*But?*” She demanded, everything inside of her winding tighter and tighter the longer this was dragged out.

He sighed, staring at her with clear frustration. “You’re really going to make me say it? Fine. There’s a difference between people like us,” he gestured between them, “And most other people. Like *Riley*. ”

That feeling that had been slithering through her veins blasted through her and Gianna understood in this moment what it was to see red. “Who are the people like *Riley*, then?”

“*Riley’s* cute,” he hedged, “But, *you*? Like. Out of this world. Crazy sexy.”

He said it with that smile again, a little tentative now, but as if he was sharing with her a compliment.

That white-hot anger burned hotter. “Are you seriously trying to flatter me by insulting my best friend?”

He held up his hands, eyes wide. “No! I’m not *insulting* her. Just saying, there’s a difference between you and her.”

“Oh, and *I* am deserving of you?”

He didn’t need words to confirm his thoughts written all over his face.

“I seriously have no idea how much you think of yourself, but the fact that you *don’t* think *Riley* is good enough is – is–” she spluttered, finding his bullshit incomprehensible. “You’re a moron! She’s double the person I am, and at least twenty times the person you are, asshole. Oh, sorry, it wasn’t

about personality, right?” She mimicked his low timber of voice, “It’s about how sexy I am.”

Gianna had, very literally, never been so insulted, so enraged in her entire life. She had to keep her hands pressed firmly against her sides, because she honestly, otherwise, might strangle him.

“Well, you were right,” she spit the words out, “Riley *is* cute. And she’s fucking hot. She has amazing tits and the softest hair and thighs to die for. She’s funny and sweet and smart and ambitious. She’s – she’s the perfect date!” She spluttered out. “Even if you didn’t totally blow it tonight with whatever you just tried to pull,” she gestured between the two of them. “You’d never be able to pull Riley long-term.”

Anthony’s face moved from insulted to baffled to narrow-eyed contempt as she spoke, before he tossed his arms in the air. “If you think Riley is so perfect, why don’t you date her?”

“Maybe I should,” she shot back, still simmering, but agreeing with that sentiment with her whole fucking heart. “Because you don’t seem to have a clue how to give her what she deserves!”

She turned on her heel at that, needing to not be face-to-face with this man anymore, as she stormed out of the ridiculous arcade bar.

It wasn’t until she made it outside, breathing in a fresh breath of air, that she realized what she’d said.

Maybe I should... date Riley.

It hit her, right in the chest, how very much that idea appealed to her.

CHAPTER 30



Then minutes later, Riley found herself sitting on Gianna's couch, staring out the window.

The sun was setting, casting the sky into gorgeous hues of pink and orange, and Riley... barely even saw it.

Ten years.

Ten years!

Ten years?

It played on a loop in her mind, uncontrollable. Hadn't stopped since Gianna had confessed to her. Hadn't stopped when Gianna sharply took a breath after she'd breathed the word-bomb into life. Hadn't stopped as she'd walked numbly over to the couch and simply dropped onto it.

Riley slowly turned to face Gianna, really looking at her for the first time.

Gianna sat on the cushion next to hers, watching Riley closely. She looked ready to pop up and flee from the scene at any moment as she was chewing at her bottom lip so intently that its pillow-y fullness was starting to look raw.

She'd never seen Gianna so petrified.

It made the deep, aching, painful feeling burrowed into her stomach that she'd had for the last ten minutes twist even harder.

"Ten—" She couldn't even finish the short sentence, still feeling like her entire world was pulled out from under her. "That's almost our entire friendship."

There were little snippets rolling through her mind like a movie reel, short flashes in time from over the years. Every time they'd laughed together, every time they'd cried, every time —

Gianna reached out, then, dragging Riley out of her own head as Gianna's hands landed on her arm. Her nails were painted the same maroon as her toes, she registered dimly, as she stared down at the long, capable fingers holding onto her so desperately.

"I know it is," Gianna acknowledged. She seemed to have been waiting for Riley to say anything before she spoke, herself. "And I know you care so much about the *truth* and you were so torn up when you came here tonight." She shook her head, her long golden hair swaying with it as she squeezed intently at Riley's arm. "I know you felt so badly, *bella*, when you felt like you wronged me by not telling me you had these feelings while we were sleeping together."

Riley could only nod in affirmation, because, yeah. She had felt so fucking *bad*.

But she wasn't thinking about that, right now. In fact, Gianna bringing that up was so far beyond anything Riley herself had been stuck on.

Everything else that had happened tonight was absolutely inconsequential right now, including *anything* about Riley's own romantic feelings.

"And you're probably thinking about how I've been having these feelings before we ever even started. How I lied to you, first and for longer." Gianna's voice was scratchy, so throaty and urgent. "I understand that you're probably mad—"

Riley snapped her head up, baffled – insulted, even. "Mad? You think I'm... mad?"

Gianna's eyebrows arched as her mouth fell open. "Well, obviously, babe! You didn't say *anything* for over ten minutes after I said... what I said," she finished far more softly than she'd started.

But the indignant tone – typical Gianna – slotted in somewhere inside of Riley, comfortingly. She needed it.

Especially as she reached her other hand up, stroking her fingers over the backs of Gianna's hands. She knew these hands so well. These fingers, that could apply professionally done makeup. That could sew, that could draw up fashion designs. These hands, that had wiped away Riley's tears, had reached desperately for her own, looking for something steady and stable when they laughed so hard they cried.

And that was even before she'd felt these hands learn the map of her entire body. Before she'd felt them on her, inside of her, causing her unbelievable pleasure.

She loved these hands.

"I'm not *mad*," she stressed, pressing her palm down against the back of Gianna's hand, firmly.

She needed the steadiness, as she stared into Gianna's wide, scared, sad eyes. "I think I'm allowed to take ten minutes, when you've felt this way for—"

She broke off, then, the hollow feeling from the words choking her.

"Ten years," she managed to say it aloud this time, thickly.

Gianna turned her hand to hold onto Riley's, dropping her own gaze. "I know."

She sounded so sad and so *small* and Riley hurt. So much worse than she had at any point before. Ever.

"Ten years," she repeated, because it was all she could think. It was all she could *feel*.

"I know," Gianna stressed, squeezing Riley's hand. "I know, I—"

But she cut her off, desperately *not* wanting to hear an apology. "Ten years, Gianna," she whispered around the ache in her throat. "You've felt this way for me, for ten years?"

All Gianna did now, was nod. Slowly, reluctantly, as she hesitantly brought her eyes back up to meet Riley's.

Riley lifted one of her hands up to rub at her chest, right over her heart, as if it would dissipate any of the pain.

"I felt like this for you for weeks, and in those weeks, I felt like it was killing me. *Weeks*," she murmured in abject disbelief. "You felt like this for ten years."

She couldn't stop the tears that dripped from her eyes. She couldn't stop them, because the idea of it killed her inside.

The hand she'd had on her chest slid up as she wiped, desperately at her cheeks.

"I came to you, for ten years, to talk about every date I've ever had. Every hookup. Every person that came into my life, and I told you everything about it. I don't know what I would do if you told me you thought you were falling for someone, while I feel like *this*, about you." She managed to breathe in a quivering breath, that did nothing to alleviate the ache inside of her.

The ache that lodged inside of her when she'd thought about just how much pain she must have caused Gianna throughout the course of their

friendship. It was entirely, completely unintentional – how could she have known? Should she have known, somehow? – but, fuck, it ate Riley up inside.

Like she'd said: if Gianna came to Riley while Riley was feeling this way about her, telling her all of the things Riley had told Gianna over the years... the idea of it crushed the air from her lungs.

When Gianna realized where Riley was coming from, her head shot up, already shaking back and forth, as her eyebrows furrowed deeply together.

Riley's stomach rolled. "The way you must have felt..." The way Gianna must have felt, whenever Riley told her about a new person she was seeing. Whenever Riley thought there was potential with someone. The many times Gianna had *met* Riley's dates! Had hung out with them, had seen Riley with them.

"Why couldn't you ever tell me?" She couldn't help but ask. Needing, really, to know. Because even if Gianna had come to her in the before times, Riley would never have treated her poorly or made her feel badly about herself. She knew, unquestionably, that she would have tried to do her best to support Gianna in any way she could.

And she was more than a little scared and sickened that Gianna, herself, might not believe it.

"I wouldn't have told you everything, about every person I dated. I wouldn't have—"

"That's why I didn't tell you," Gianna cut in.

For the first time in a little while, Gianna sounded very sure. There was no hesitation in her voice, now, no fear. The look in her eyes was insistent and fierce as she shook her head.

"If I ever told you, our relationship would have changed," Gianna explained, as if it were that simple. As if, to her, it was. "If I told you, you would have tried to protect me and my feelings. You wouldn't have told me about your personal life, the same way. Maybe you would have felt weird about how tactile we were. Maybe you would have pulled back from all of the time we spent together."

She listed all of it off, like bullet points.

Then again, Riley realized, to Gianna, they were bullet points. They were bullet points on a list she'd probably reviewed many times over the years.

The hold Gianna's hand had on Riley's tightened, commanding her attention. "And I know you never would have done it to hurt me. Okay?" She

ducked in, closer, searching Riley's gaze with her own. "I know that every change you would have made would have been for me. To try to minimize hurting my feelings."

Riley nodded, even though Gianna clearly wasn't looking for reassurance. Clearly, she was starting this as a fact because she *did* know Riley that well.

"But that's not what I wanted." Gianna's shoulders were so poised, and she looked so certain and so sure of herself. "I wanted the friendship we've always had."

Riley just couldn't wrap her mind around it.

"Do you think I don't remember what it was like with Ellie? How in love she was with Mia, and the pain she was in over it?" Riley's lips twitched into a frown, and she caught herself before her chin started to wobble into any more tears. "The thought of me causing you that kind of pain at all, let alone for a decade?"

"Riley, babe, that's the thing: I'm *not* Ellie," she said, her voice quiet, but solid.

"Thank god for that," she muttered automatically.

That beautiful smile flashed over Gianna's face, brightening up her eyes. "Ew. Yes. Thank god." She sobered, stroking her thumb over Riley's. "Look, I respect Ellie and I know that she loves from the bottom of her soul."

Riley had long appreciated Gianna's relationship and inclusion of Ellie; the way she was one of the only people other than Riley – for a long time – who'd ever really appreciated Ellie for who she was. This moment was no different.

"But, Ellie and I..." Gianna rolled her lips as she seemed to search for the correct words. "We love in different ways," she settled on. "And...yes, sometimes it hurt. I won't lie."

Riley's hand tightened on Gianna's.

But Gianna squeezed back tighter. "But, Riley, being your best friend, your confidante, your *person* for the last ten years hasn't been a consolation prize. I wouldn't give up our friendship, not a single fucking second of it, for anything."

The emotion that laced through her words struck Riley right to the core, and she could feel it. She could see and feel that Gianna meant it with everything she was.

She knew Gianna, she assured herself against the little tingle in the base of her stomach at this revelation. The revelation that made her want to scour

through so many moments of the last decade.

But... she *knew* Gianna, she thought as she took in a deep, even breath.

She knew the smell of this home – clean, warm, feminine, vanilla-lavender. She knew the feeling of Gianna’s hand in hers – the hand she’d held whenever they travelled, when something shocking happened in a tv show or movie.

She knew the set of Gianna’s jaw, the hues of her eyes, the sharp cut of her cheekbones. She felt her heart skip a beat at the sincere, certain look in Gianna’s eyes – she knew that look, too.

“I know you’re afraid. And I understand why, I do.” God, in this moment, she really did. And yet, she swallowed hard, pushing against it. “But do you ever really think we could walk away without seeing what we could be?” There was a desperation in her voice that she felt inside of her. The same feeling she’d felt for weeks now – longer – digging at her even deeper, as she held Gianna’s gaze, imploring, “Do you think I will ever find someone who knows me, understands me, laughs with me, wants me, *loves* me, the way you do?”

And it wasn’t some sort of trap. It wasn’t even really rhetorical; Riley needed to know. She *had* to know if Gianna was more scared of losing this than exploring it. Because, to Riley, that sounded like the definition of insanity.

Without overthinking anything, she reached her hand up and gently touched Gianna’s jaw. Just to affirm it all. Just to *feel* the familiar stability, even with this new shift in her reality.

Gianna’s skin was still warm and soft. The contours of her jaw felt the same they’d always felt.

She stroked her thumb down on the underside of Gianna’s jaw – freezing, then, as she felt the hammering of Gianna’s pulse in her neck.

Riley frowned. Because, admittedly, she wasn’t feeling insanely calm, but her heart wasn’t racing. And Gianna *looked* normal, she looked as though her heart rate wasn’t going double-time, as they sat inches away from one another.

Gianna lifted her hands, tangling her fingers together and flexing, as she gazed up at Riley. “Do you want to–” She cleared her throat. “Go out?”

Riley arched an eyebrow at her. “Tonight? Now? Alone or with–”

“I mean, like, properly,” Gianna quickly explained, looking... *shy*, was the only word Riley could think of, as she dropped her gaze, her cheeks

flushing.

It was so incredibly endearing.

“Properly,” Riley echoed.

“Like, I’ll plan something. And I’ll pick you up. And I’ll pay.” Quickly, she cut her gaze back to Riley’s, sternly. “Not because I’m always trying to pay for things for you, but because I think I should pay. Since I’m the one asking you out.”

As Gianna spoke, it felt like she was both confident and uncertain. Finding her footing in the words, but assertive.

And as much as Riley tried to tamp it down, she couldn’t help but smile. So widely, it made her cheeks hurt, even as her eyebrows moved up high on her forehead. “Are you asking me on a *date*?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?” Gianna shot back, gesturing between them as she laughed. “What did you think was going to happen, now?”

Riley blew out a breath, slowly shaking her head. “Honestly, I hadn’t even thought about it.”

When would she have had the time to?! There had been *so much* that had happened in the last couple of hours, Riley felt like she was the main character in one of the video games she sometimes had played with Joel – adapting and evolving just enough to get to the next level.

“Can you blame me for being surprised, though? When’s the last time you went on a proper date?” Exasperation peppered through her words, because she *knew* she was right.

Gianna didn’t date!

Even when Gianna *hung out* with people she was sleeping with, she adamantly did *not* refer to it as a date. Riley knew this very well.

Gianna only stared at Riley for a few moments, before she admitted, “I didn’t want to date anyone else.”

The simplicity of it bulldozed right through Riley’s surprise. The quiet vulnerability, as Gianna looked expectantly at Riley, stamped through everything else she could possibly think or feel because...

Gianna hadn’t had feelings for anyone else in ten years. She hadn’t wanted to date anyone. Hadn’t opted for romance.

All because Gianna wanted *her*.

Yeah, Riley most definitely needed time to fully process that. Time without Gianna’s big blue eyes and beautiful face and intoxicating scent surrounding her.

Still, though, she nodded. Of course, she nodded. It felt like the *only* course of action – and no matter how big or scary or insane or shocking, it was the course of action she wanted.

“Obviously, I want to go out with you. Properly.”

CHAPTER 31



Gianna Mäkinen had a *date* with Riley Beckett.

It was the first thought that rang through her brain as she woke up in the morning. Normally, Gianna was a slow riser. She had to blink her eyes open, force herself not to fall back to sleep, shuffle into the kitchen to get coffee. By nature, she rarely fell asleep before midnight – she preferred to work later in the night than early in the morning, if she could help it.

This morning, she was fully and completely awake before her eyes opened.

The sun was shining in through her windows brighter than normal, her bed was more comfortable than it ever was, today was a brand new day, and *she had a date with Riley Beckett*.

She stared up at her ceiling, grinning like a complete idiot, and she didn't even care.

She had a *date* with *Riley* because *Riley* had feelings for her and knew about Gianna's longest kept and biggest secret. It seemed like it was too good to be true.

The wild elation dimmed, just a bit, as a kernel of suspicion edged in. *Was it too good to be true?*

Quickly, she rolled onto her stomach and snatched her phone up.

The last day had been so truly off the rails, Gianna wouldn't really even be surprised if she'd hit her head after tripping on her treadmill yesterday, somehow made her way up into her bed, and dreamed all of it.

Hell, she wouldn't even be surprised if she'd been in a coma for the last three months.

She'd wake up in the hospital room, pale with chapped lips and brittle

hair, and Riley would be sitting there, diligently working next to her bed. *Ellie just left, Riley would say, she's been researching the-kind-of-coma-your-doctor-said-you-were-in since the unspecified accident happened. Joel will be here this afternoon to say hi on his way home from work. I've missed you so much.*

And she'd give Gianna that sweet, loving smile she had, tearfully stroking her hand over Gianna's face as she continued to lay in her hospital bed. She'd have no idea that Gianna had dreamed of them being lovers, and Gianna would be conflicted over waking, because the reality she'd lived in her head would have been so good, yet she'd never want to miss out on Real Life Riley.

Only, no.

It was all really real.

She quickly thumbed through the messages they'd exchanged once Riley had left. She'd gone home soon after they'd confirmed that Gianna would pick her up tonight at seven. *For their date.* As per always, Riley had texted to confirm she got home safe.

A couple of hours later – when Gianna had been trying to get some work done and ignore both her anxious glee and the obnoxious inundation of messages she was getting on every social media she had – Riley had messaged her again.

Riley – 9:02PM

You have had feelings for me

Riley – 9:02PM

For ten years

Riley – 9:02PM

Please confirm. If not, please disregard.

Riley – 9:03PM

Because a big part of me, now that I'm sitting by myself in the bathtub, feels like somehow, I've totally made it up

Riley – 9:03PM

But you do. You said that tonight. After I went on a livestream and announced to a literal million people that I have feelings for you

Gianna – 9:03PM

*Yes, I can confirm that I have had feelings
for you for the last ten years*

Gianna – 9:04PM

*I can also confirm that you DID announce
to over a million people that you have feelings
for me*

Riley – 9:05PM

*Great. I thought I wasn't losing my mind
but wanted to make sure*

Riley – 9:05PM

And we have a date tomorrow. At 7. Confirm?

Gianna – 9:05PM

SO confirmed, babe

She'd never answered a text so fast in her life.

Riley hadn't written anything back, and Gianna had let her be. Not only did she have to figure out a way to manage the rest of her evening, but she knew Riley. And she knew Riley needed to work through new developments in her mind, to examine them piece by piece.

And she knew that she'd given Riley a lot to process.

Which was still so scary to her. From the bottom depths of her soul, this was scary. While the idea of having a romantic relationship with Riley felt, on one hand, like the best thing that could ever happen to her, it didn't negate that fear.

Riley was the first person who had filled the empty recess inside of Gianna. That dark, angry, painful dull throb that filled her up inside throughout her youth, insulating her heart. The scary place inside of her, where all of her insecurities lived, her biggest self-doubts.

It's not as though she believed that she would regress and become the person she once was – pre-Riley – if something happened to their friendship; that felt like too much pressure to put on Riley's shoulders and like she wasn't giving herself enough credit for the person she'd become.

But neither of those things negated the fact that Gianna didn't want to lose that special Riley-filled place, and that a romantic partnership was inherently a much bigger risk than a friendship.

And with all of those thoughts and feelings she had to sort through, she was resolutely *not* opening all of these other texts, as she scrolled through the mass of unread threads. Leaving anything on socials unanswered was so not her style, in fact it was actually emphatically *against* her style. It literally was a big facet of her career.

This little break to gather herself felt warranted and, for once, wanted. She liked engaging with people, often. She, unapologetically, also enjoyed attention. But sometimes, she needed privacy.

With that in mind, she was tempted to open and read through some – namely, Ellie’s, Joel’s, Mia’s, Athena’s, Cora’s – but she was worried about the rabbit hole she would end up in, if she did that, now.

She only opened one thread.

Mummo – 3:14AM

Riley on rakastunut sinua!

Mummo – 3:15AM

Kuuntelin esitystä.

Mummo – 3:15AM

Voi, kulta, olet odottanut niin kauan.

Riley is in love with you. I listened to the show. Oh, darling, you’ve waited so long. Gianna sat with those words, letting them settle right into her chest, for several minutes as she held her phone close, hovering her thumb over the call button –

Before her doorbell rang.

She made it downstairs after brushing her hair quickly and pulling it into a high pony, brushing her teeth, moving through a very abbreviated version of her morning facial, then pulling on a pair of leggings and sweater.

The only person who saw her with any less preparation was Riley, who didn’t ring her doorbell. And anyone ringing her doorbell without an agreed upon meeting before ten in the morning, was someone who had to know her well enough that they’d be waiting at least five or ten minutes for her to get herself casual-company ready.

While she was correct – it wasn’t Riley – it was close.

She pulled the door open to face Ellie, who had been intently staring at the door, waiting for Gianna to arrive and open it.

“Why didn’t you tell me you two were sleeping together?” Were the first words out of Ellie’s mouth.

And, oh, there was a very special place in Gianna’s heart for Ellie’s

directness. “Good morning, Ellie.”

She opened her door wider, stepping back.

Ellie, clearly rearing to go, walked inside, her eyebrows furrowed, entire face drawn down into an intense frown. “Good morning. Why didn’t you tell me you and Riley were sleeping together?”

Gianna nodded to herself as she shut the door; when Ellie was focused, she was *focused*. It came as no surprise that she was unwavering and inquisitive.

“And you aren’t answering your phone! That’s not like you,” Ellie astutely pointed out as Gianna led them into the kitchen.

She started her espresso machine as she heard Ellie take off her bulky, ill-fitting off-the-rack black winter jacket that Ellie, for some reason, loved. Gianna had been forced to accept that Ellie did not care about anything she wore – even if it was not suited to her coloring or even if it was the wrong size – though she’d done so under duress.

“I’ve needed some time to myself; I believe you can relate to that,” she shot Ellie a bemused look over her shoulder as her espresso machine started to heat up.

“Fine. But – not telling me, at all, for months?” She shrugged, heavily. “I mean, neither of you did, but...” she blew out a deep breath and waved her hand in the air, clearly hoping it would express some of her big, baffled feelings that she didn’t have the words for. It worked. “I, ultimately, get why Riley didn’t! But why didn’t *you*? After you were there for me, with Mia, why...?”

Ellie’s face was the picture of confusion, big eyes and all.

And it was the look in those big, hazel eyes that did, admittedly, dig a small grip into Gianna’s heart. The slightest bit of guilt edged in, as she settled on the opposite side of her kitchen island.

A couple of years ago, when Ellie had fallen for Mia, both Riley and Gianna had seen how she was struggling. Unlike Riley, though, Gianna had been able to relate to Ellie’s predicament, and she’d thought it would be easier for Ellie if she knew she wasn’t alone.

Especially after the night Gianna had overheard Ellie attempt to confess her feelings to Mia. In that moment, even though Gianna was truly happy in having her friendship with Riley, there was a part of her that rebelled against it. That wanted to be brave in the way Ellie was being. The raw vulnerability Ellie had shown echoed inside of Gianna, and she connected to it, so deeply.

So deeply, she had known it was time to tell Ellie about her own feelings for Riley. Her love for Riley was always lurking. It was a constant presence, beating alongside her heart, but Gianna rarely *felt* it as acutely and sharply as she did the night she'd heard Ellie's confession to Mia.

It demanded, then, to be shared.

Telling Ellie about her love for Riley had been for Ellie, but also for Gianna.

And it had been during that time that she felt she'd really solidified her own friendship with Ellie. While she'd had affection for and considered Ellie a peripheral friend for years, their friendship hadn't ever felt so fully realized, before.

"Honestly?" She had to take a moment to settle up with the truth before she could say it. "Because I knew you wouldn't really understand it. Because you would have *never* done something like this with Mia."

"No, I wouldn't have! It would have – it would have..." Ellie trailed off, helplessly, and Gianna didn't need her to explain.

She *did* know. Ellie was so entrenched in her love for Mia, that even a single ill-fated kiss impacted their friendship. And Gianna held no judgment for Ellie over that, at all.

But when Riley had kissed her the week before Christmas – even though she'd walked away from it believing that it had been a total misunderstanding that would never happen again – she didn't feel torn up about it. Her world had been altered for damn sure, but even when she believed it would never happen again, amidst the many feelings that had inspired in her, Gianna hadn't been able to shake the giddy feeling that... Riley Beckett had kissed her.

That was the feeling she'd chased this entire time.

Riley had kissed her – and it had been the best fucking kiss of her life.

Gianna had always known that she was typically regarded as a very attractive person, but she'd never felt so beautiful or so sexy as she did when Riley expressed attraction to her.

Gianna had always loved sex, but having it with Riley – even the thought made her shiver.

None of it made her reconsider her entire relationship – past or present – with Riley. Having sex with Riley didn't have a negative impact.

She met Ellie's gaze, holding her hands up in defense. "For *you*, that makes sense, okay? For *me*... I liked having sex with Riley. Even if it would

have never meant anything more, I wanted to know what it was like.”

She’d *needed* to know, when she’d been given the chance.

She studied Ellie as Ellie took in her words, then slowly nodded. Like she was threading through the fact that she and Gianna were, in fact, very different people.

Finally, she shrugged. “All right.” She paused, biting her lip, as she shot Gianna a look. “But, it *did* mean more.”

Gianna’s cheeks tingled with that unfamiliar heat, even as her lips twitched up.

“I’ve heard from Riley that you two are going on a date, tonight.”

Within seconds, she found herself full-blown smiling. “You’ve heard correctly.”

“Where are you going?” Ellie asked, tapping her fingers against the island.

The warm giddiness seeping through her came to a dead-stop, and Gianna found herself staring at Ellie, eyes wide with the alarm that she now felt. “Oh, god.”

Ellie, now, sat up straight as well, mirroring Gianna’s alarm. “What?”

“I don’t know,” the words slipped out with ice threading through her veins.

“Don’t know what?!” Ellie echoed, loud and panicky, posture drawn up tight and nervous.

“Where I’m taking Riley on our date!” She shouted back, just as panicky.

Ellie narrowed her eyes in question as she shook her head. “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“Obviously, that I *do not* know where we are going,” she retorted.

Ellie rolled her eyes. “Yes, but *how* do you not know? How long have you been in love with my sister?”

“Oh, so you knew exactly where you wanted to take Mia on *your* first date?” She shot back as she heavily leaned against the counter, wracking her brain for options.

“Yes. She’d told me when she was little about how she used to stargaze with her parents at Palo Duro Canyon State Park and one of my grad students also works at the Museum of Science, so I managed to go in after closing and set up a project of footage taken of the night sky from Palo Duro Canyon State Park and got us dinner from our favorite food truck,” Ellie stated, so simply.

Gianna blinked at her. “First – yes, I remember that. Secondly, that’s really sweet. But, thirdly,” she tossed her hands into the air, “Not everyone is as prepared as you are and have thought every single life possibility through with as much attention to detail!”

Ellie shrugged, helplessly once again. “Well, I don’t know! You’ve had feelings for her for a long time, so I assumed–”

“Ellie,” Gianna cut in, arching her eyebrows sternly at her, “I never once thought we would get this far.”

And that was the basis of it all.

Ellie slid off her stool and rounded the island to stand in front of Gianna. She reached up and placed her hands firmly on her shoulders, forcing Gianna to look right at her. Steady and direct, a comforting Ellie specialty, before she said, “You know Riley better than anyone else. You can figure this out.”

“You did have eighteen years with her before I came into the picture,” she glibly reminded Ellie, even though the straightforward and quietly confident words *did* work to steady some of the nerves she felt.

Ellie didn’t waver, though. “You can figure this out,” she repeated, before she flicked her eyes to her own wristwatch. “You have eight hours before you have to leave.”

At that, Gianna wheeled back, holding her hands up to stop Ellie from approaching again. “Eight hours!”

Her mind started to race. Eight hours. Eight hours to plan a date – the biggest date of her *life*, the only one that had ever mattered to her – to go and pick Riley up, to go through all of her skin and haircare rituals, to pick out exactly what she wanted to wear –

“What am I going to wear?”

That thought, also, hadn’t yet occurred to her!

Ellie stared at her like she’d grown two heads. “You have almost a whole work day to figure it out.”

Gianna stared back, disbelieving that Ellie didn’t know her well enough after all of this time. “And?”

Ellie roamed her gaze over Gianna – as if to remind herself that Gianna hadn’t answered her door for ten minutes to ready herself for casual company – before she nodded and took a step back toward where she had her jacket hung over the back of a chair. “Right. So, I think this is my time to leave, because I don’t really *get* that, so...”

“That’s because you have your own fashion sense and I love that for you.

Begrudgingly,” Gianna allowed as she attempted to dull down the nerves inside of her.

“The sweaters you give me for holiday gifts are really comfortable,” Ellie admitted as she shrugged on her jacket.

“Any parting words?” Gianna asked, bracing herself against the counter.

Ellie’s face screwed up in thought. “Uh... if you break her heart, I know thousands of chemical compounds that are lethal to human beings, several of which are untraceable.”

Gianna’s mouth fell open in shock. “Are you shovel-talking me?!” She couldn’t help but dissolve into laughter, more than grateful to focus on that, than the unknown logistics of her impending date. “I would have never expected this.”

Ellie didn’t laugh, though, instead, she zipped up her jacket, holding eye contact. “Well, we both know that I wouldn’t *really* do it. Even though it’s technically true.” She fiddled with her zipper, offering a small smile back. “But, I know mostly that I wouldn’t have to do it because you love Riley too much. And she loves you, too. So it’s all going to be just fine.”

Gianna smiled at her, endeared and calmed, a little. “You’re a secret softie, Ellie Beckett.”

Ellie’s cheeks blushed profusely as she shook her head. Still, she paused before she turned toward the door. “I’m really happy for you.”

* * *

GIANNA STOOD in front of Riley’s apartment door, at six fifty-two, rolling her shoulders back as she stared right at the peephole.

Her hair was down, makeup was done flawlessly – but subtly; the way she would never wear it on a date with anyone else, but... she wanted to be the most effortless version of herself that she could only be with Riley, tonight – and she wore her light wash Ferragamo jeans, cabernet puff sleeve Dior top, with her black Kate Spade boots and jacket.

She was *ready*.

All right, there was still an edge of nerves – how could there not be?

But when Riley had asked Gianna last night if she really thought Riley would ever find someone who knew her, understood her, laughed with her, wanted her, and loved her the way Gianna herself did... something in those

words pushed past the precipice of fear that kept her from letting herself ever think about exploring a romantic relationship.

Because while Gianna had no doubt in the universe that Riley could and would meet someone who would know, understand, laugh with, want, and love her, she *knew* that no one could do it more ardently or unfailingly than herself.

Denying Riley would *also* be denying herself from having the person who loved her the best.

What right in the universe did Gianna have to do that?

Riley was right. She often was, Gianna knew, but this time was absolute. How could she really let this possibility go, *knowing* that Riley had feelings for her, too? She was sure their friendship could survive it. She knew it would.

But one day, when Riley did inevitably meet someone and have the life she wanted and deserved, how could Gianna not hate herself for never trying to see if that life could have been with her?

She sniffed at the thought and knocked solidly on the door; she was no longer in the business of hating herself.

Tonight, her business was in giving Riley Beckett the best date of her damn life.

Her confidence wavered, the slightest bit, with Riley pulled the door open only seconds later.

“You’re early,” Riley commented, running her hazel eyes down Gianna, before slowly moving back up.

There was a heat in them that still rocked her when their gazes connected.

Even as it ignited her own lowkey desire right back, confidence poured through Gianna’s veins. Riley liked her in many states of dress – and undress – she’d learned. But something she’d known for even longer than this aspect of their relationship was how much Riley liked a more casual-Gianna. A jeans and boots night out kind of Gianna.

She *would* have given Riley a bouquet, only she knew that while Riley found the gesture sweet, she also found it a little awkward or cumbersome to be given a gift at the beginning of the date, especially something that needed to be tended to.

“It’s like... do I carry the flowers around all night? Usually, these days, I’m meeting someone out and about, so I have to. But even if we’re at my apartment, do I just toss them inside on the table so we can leave? Do I go

and put them in a vase? Do I have to invite him in? Are we going to be late for the date?" Riley had once expounded after a date with Lavish Lyle, several years ago. That relationship had ended because Lyle did not know the meaning of the words laid-back or casual; even after dating for several weeks, he didn't ever want to have a relaxing night in. Riley had sighed regretfully as she'd leaned into Gianna's side, "I liked him and I like going out! But I expressly asked if we could just... chill and he flat-out said – no. That he likes to always be on-the-go. I can't handle that."

"I happen to have it on good authority that you *really* don't enjoy when a date runs late," Gianna commented smartly.

She ran her own gaze down Riley, then, appreciating the effort she knew Riley would put in. Riley put in effort on all of her dates – her makeup was done well, her thick, soft, honey-blonde hair was half-up in a French braid that Riley was so good at, she wore dark high-rise jeans and a cream-colored fisherman style knit sweater.

She also wore a pair of heels, though, that Gianna clocked and just *knew* they were for her. A beige Stella McCartney chunky heel that she'd bought for Riley, herself, for her birthday last year.

Her stomach swooped up and then dissolved into a smattering of butterfly wings, as she met Riley's soft, knowing smile.

She held her head high, though, returning it with her own mega-watt grin.

Gianna had *always* checked Riley out; she checked out nearly everyone even if just clocking their clothing choices. But being able to openly show her attraction for Riley, to wear it on her face, had been an adjustment Gianna had happily made in the last few months.

"You look incredible," the words escaping her were a promise more than anything.

Riley's smile grew, as she bent her knee and popped up her foot behind her. "It must be the shoes; they're essentially from my personal stylist. It's not a big deal."

"Oh, I beg to differ. It's a labor of love, taken *very* seriously."

"Well, I'm glad you like my outfit either way, because my date refused to tell me exactly where we're going tonight." Riley shot Gianna a measuring look over her shoulder as she locked her door.

"You, however, *were* told what the appropriate dress code was. No?" She challenged, knowing she had the upper hand, as she *also* knew that while Riley didn't mind – and sometimes really liked – being surprised as to date

specifications, she didn't enjoy not knowing what caliber of clothing to wear.

That resonated strongly with Gianna, and as soon as she'd put her date plans into motion earlier today, she'd promptly texted Riley.

"You make a compelling case," Riley acknowledged as she tested the knob to check it was locked, the way she did every time she left her home. She *had* to do it, because sometimes the lock didn't fully engage if the person locking the door didn't jiggle the key just right. When she turned and met Gianna's eyes, she gave her an exasperated look. "I think I finally am going to have to give in and get a new doorknob."

Gianna arched her eyebrows, biting at the inside of her cheek. "I didn't say it, babe." She peered at the door in question. "I do feel like it's getting worse, though."

"You said it with your eyes," Riley shot back, bumping her hip playfully into Gianna's.

"Windows into my soul," she deadpanned, before she remembered – *this was a date, not just a typical night out*. It jolted through her, re-igniting excited nerves. "Shall we?"

"Lead the way."

They walked – the night wasn't as biting-cold as it could or should be in early March and the walk was less than fifteen minutes.

As they drew up to the location, Gianna watched Riley's face as she took in the neon sign above the door, anticipation and excitement and sheer anxiety twisting through her.

They drew to a sudden stop when Riley realized exactly where they were, her hand squeezing Gianna's – she didn't even remember at which point during the walk one or both of them had reached out to intertwine their fingers together.

But she squeezed back, zeroing in on Riley's eyebrows furrowing in confusion, before lifting as high as they could in obvious surprise. "Duck's?"

Her confusion was palpable even before she turned to fully face Gianna, searching her face. "You brought me to Duck's?"

Gianna felt her nerves push through her confidence, even as she cautiously smiled. "Yes?"

After Ellie had left her house this morning, Gianna had felt like a chicken with its head cut off for all of ten minutes, before she'd forced herself to stop.

She could go elegant. Total sweep-Riley-off-of-her-feet style. Gianna knew she could make a call and get a table nearly anywhere in the city for

dinner. Or, even bigger, if she wanted to! She could abscond them to Manhattan or *further*!

She could go totally comfortable and simple. They could stay in at Gianna's, order their favorite food, watch the finale of *The One*.

The options were limitless and choosing *one* – a single option for her *first date* with Riley – felt impossible.

Except, it wasn't.

Gianna realized, then, that she essentially had a cheat sheet. She'd heard every date story Riley had ever experienced. She knew exactly what Riley liked and disliked. Exactly what Riley expected.

She had all of the knowledge and ability to really give Riley the perfect date, unlike the many failures she'd had in the past.

Gianna felt her heart flip-flop in her chest as she cleared her throat and gripped onto her wavering confidence as she asserted, "I think I know exactly how to give you a perfect date, Riley Beckett."

Riley's eyebrows inched up higher as she rocked back, confusion slipping into an interested smile. "Oh, really?"

"Really," Gianna confirmed, nodding along to encourage herself. "You want to go on a date that's *fun*. Ideally, something to do together that's not just dinner and drinks – which is *fine*, but I know you love when someone gets creative." She started to list, holding up a finger, "But, you also like having food and drinks as an option, in an ideal world." She brought her other hand up, cupping around her mouth as she whispered, "That one is just because I know you." She shot Riley a wink before she finished, "So, you like an activity on a first date – however. You don't like if that activity hinders being able to talk to your date. Like, a movie or a show."

Riley's entertained smile had shifted as Gianna spoke, into something inestimably softer. "We both know you aren't wrong." She glanced up at the sign again, though, before turning back to study Gianna. "But why *Duck's*?"

"First, it fits exactly the description I just gave." To a T – a college bar with surprisingly decent food on offer and classic arcade games. "That I know you like."

"I *did*, in college. But, I haven't been here in years." Riley still looked the picture of confusion, unwilling to give up before getting to the bottom of any perceived puzzle. "Also, as far as *I* know, you didn't like it here." Riley pointed out, biting at her full bottom lip as she squinted her eyes. "What was it that you called this place the last time we ever came here, together? After

that hangout that was a failed double-date at the end of our sophomore year?"

Gianna remembered it very well. She remembered even before Riley snapped her fingers victoriously.

"You said that Duck's was overrated, packed to the brim with dicks – that in fact, it should be re-named to Dick's – and that you had no interest in returning. *Especially* if they didn't put in at least three more skee-ball machines." Riley arched her eyebrows up at Gianna, daring her to disagree when they both knew she was right.

"Okay, I was totally *correct* about the skee-ball; it's the most popular game in here and they only have two machines," she insisted. But, as she held Riley's gaze, she felt properly chagrined. "You really liked it, though."

"I... sure." Riley let out a short, incredulous laugh. "Yes, I did. I think it's very, very sweet of you to dig this place up from the recesses of your mind, but – I don't want to go on a date to a place that *you* don't like," Riley insisted, voice earnest and low, as she squeezed Gianna's hand again.

Gianna's stomach twisted with both the truth and the loving look Riley gave her. She could feel her heart start to beat a little faster, as she held fast to Riley's anchoring hand. Giving her enough strength to admit, "I didn't *actually* dislike Duck's."

Even though she'd admitted to the biggest part of her secret feelings for Riley – for just how long she'd felt them – Riley had yet to learn any of the particular details.

"It wasn't the venue, that night, that upset me," she said, breathing deeply through the way her voice wanted to shake. "I..." Still, she had to pause. To meet Riley's questioning, encouraging look, and pushed herself to say, "That night was the first time I realized I felt something for you more than friendship."

And it scared her. *Terrified* her. Rocked her to her fucking core. She'd tried to reject the very notion – vehemently – which had resulted in her acerbic words about Duck's the next time Riley had asked if she wanted to go.

Riley's mouth fell open in a perfectly surprised, perfectly adorable 'o' as she blinked up at Gianna, clearly processing.

"And, that felt like another reason to come here. Full-circle, I suppose," she murmured, as she looked up at the neon Duck's sign, herself, willing her heart rate to return to normal.

She had to get used to sharing these things with Riley. She had to get

used to telling her about these moments, about her feelings.

“Wow,” Riley finally said, after several moments. “I never would have...” She trailed off, rolling her lips. “I guess that makes sense,” there was a bit of wonderment, there. Like she was still wrapping her mind around the duration of Gianna’s feelings for her.

Which Gianna totally understood.

And she happened to find the crease between Riley’s eyebrows that she got in moments like these, when she was working something through that beautiful brain, completely adorable.

“Do you want to go in?” Gianna asked after watching Riley nod to herself for a few seconds.

Riley shook herself out of whatever she’d had on her mind, the crease between her eyebrows disappearing. Smoothing into a look that made Gianna feel impossibly warm. “Do I want to see if I can still beat you at skee-ball? Absolutely.”

Gianna reached for the door, opening it with a dramatic swing, feeling some of her bravado return as she watched Riley’s mouth fall open in surprise.

“Duck’s might have changed in the last nine years, but I can’t believe it changed to the point of being *empty* on a weekend night?” Riley’s curious gaze flitted to every nook they could see, but the only person in either of their sights was the bartender, who waved at them.

It had taken a simple phone call to make her request, but Gianna was more than happy to pay the price.

Riley returned the man’s wave, clearly confused, as she shot Gianna a disbelieving look.

“Riley, I appreciate the sentimentality of this locale as well as the functional date night aspect of it, but I do *not* want to be surrounded by college kids.” She was almost affronted Riley could have believed otherwise.

“Yeah, I didn’t think you would enjoy that,” Riley retorted, “But I’m on a different learning curve with you at the moment, so...”

She trailed off, and her tone was teasing, but Gianna could *feel* the sincerity lurking underneath. The sincerity that meant Riley had been thrown for a loop and was, at some point, going to want more information.

So, Gianna wasn’t *shocked* when, ten minutes later, Riley turned to her as they approached the skee-ball machines in the basement level, where they were completely alone, with that crease back between her eyebrows.

“I...” Riley breathed out, deeply, shaking her head in clear agitation with herself. “I wasn’t going to ask anything, tonight. I *really* was trying not to, but I can’t help it. You brought me to *Duck’s*, and now I can’t stop thinking about everything.”

Her big, hazel eyes that Gianna could – and had – spend hours trying to dissect the exact color on the spectrum that they were at any given moment stared up at her so unyieldingly, yet so apologetically.

“I want to just enjoy tonight, the way we can enjoy everything together. But I have so many questions, and, honestly, I think I need to have answers before I can get to the sheer enjoyment part.” A desperation edged into Riley’s voice, before she groaned. “I’ve really been trying to hold back on this and treat it like I would treat a normal first date. Where I *wouldn’t* interrogate someone, because that’s something you save for more of a third or fourth date.”

She attempted to joke, her lips twitching up with it.

Gianna mirrored the light smile as she reached out and brought her hands up to cup Riley’s jaw in her palms.

And god, the contact felt good. It felt *right*, just to establish this connection. She held Riley’s gaze with her own, wanting to comfort Riley’s obvious turmoil more than she felt the need to try to calm her own.

“Do you think I don’t know you? Do you think I’m surprised that you need to turn over every stone and get to the bottom of this?” She used a teasing tone, but they both knew she was dead-honest.

It was important for Riley to get to the heart of almost everything and everyone. The truth of it. And she always got to Gianna’s.

Even as her stomach clenched, she nodded. “So... let’s do it. Ask me anything.”

CHAPTER 32



“I suppose we – lightly – covered the when,” Riley said, diving right in. She made no move to pull away from Gianna’s touch, as she asked, “I think I know the answer to this, given everything. But. Would you have *ever* made a pass at me?”

Gianna lifted her eyebrows, teasing, “I made a pass at you almost every time we were in the same room, babe.”

Riley sent her a look that screamed *come on*. “Oh yeah? Like in the ways you flirt with everyone? So, you’re also making a pass at half of the other people in the room?”

Gianna’s smile faded, as she gently brushed her thumbs over the soft skin of Riley’s cheeks. “No,” she answered, easily. “I wouldn’t have.”

“And that’s exactly the truth that I already knew, but – it’s just – you are the queen of going after what you want,” Riley murmured, reaching up and wrapping her fingers around Gianna’s wrists in a light hold. The touch was absentminded but sweet, as she kept her eyes firmly on Gianna’s face. “You’re so confident about it.”

“Except, I’m not,” Gianna challenged, softly. “You know that.”

Riley was the one who’d seen Gianna at her most fearful times. The times she was scared of failure or rejection. She was the one who talked Gianna through those times.

“But... when it comes to *people*, you go after who you want,” Riley corrected, squeezing the circle she made around Gianna’s wrists, imploringly. “Even with social media stuff or designing, though, you still *do it*. Even when you’re nervous, you’ve always put yourself out there.”

“Riley, carina, you were never a possibility,” she said, helplessly, as she

gently slid her hands from Riley's jaw. "Anyone I've pursued, sexually, I knew I had a chance with them."

"You could have a chance with just about anyone," Riley's voice was full of loving exasperation.

"But not everyone," she redirected, meaningfully, as she didn't waver from holding Riley's gaze with her own. "There are limits to anyone's appeal, and I never – I mean, maybe *way back then*, I hoped, but..."

She remembered those nights, mostly in college. Where they would stumble in together after a party and giggle and strip. Where Riley would so earnestly compliment her. When they would settle in close – so close, into those full-body cuddles – and Gianna... she'd never done that with anyone who wasn't Riley, with anyone who meant less than what Riley meant to her.

But she'd accepted after a few heart-pounding moments that it wasn't the same for Riley. Eventually, she'd stopped even having the fanciful hope.

"But, no. I never thought it was something that you would have reciprocated. So what was the point? And then..." She shrugged, letting out a self-deprecating laugh, "You meant so much to me, that I didn't even feel the need to hope, anymore. Like I told you last night; I loved our friendship."

While it was complicated and layered and she had so many *feelings*, it was somehow also that simple.

"If you were so sure that we should have never been anything and you didn't want to change it even though you've had feelings for me for so long, then why did you say yes, to this?" Riley gestured between them, before she pressed, "Why did you even agree to sleep with me? Why did we even start this?"

Gianna didn't think she'd ever seen Riley as confused as she looked in this moment, as she held Gianna's gaze, desperate for an answer.

"Because I would have rather experienced everything with you, than to never know," the confession left Gianna before she could even think about her wording. Something in her responded so viscerally to Riley's desperation, and the words poured out, "And maybe that was wrong. But I wanted to take everything you were willing to give me, as soon as you become a possibility."

"Only, you *didn't*," Riley challenged, shaking her head. "You were scared by the idea of our relationship changing; you *didn't* want everything I could give you, because you broke things off, when I would have given you more."

Much to Gianna's complete relief, there was no anger in Riley's expression or her body language. No anger, but she stared at Gianna like she was a puzzle she couldn't solve.

The thing was, Gianna liked when Riley knew how to solve her.

"Because having sex with you was fucking amazing," she had no shame in saying so; the power of it – how perfectly they fit together, how incredible it was – sent an uncontrollable bolt of heat right down her spine. "When you presented it as an option to me, Riley, I didn't think it through. I didn't question it. I didn't stop and wonder what I would do, if we were still having sex in a few months. You *wanted* me."

The raw truth of those words still felt unbelievable to her sometimes.

She would never forget that moment. The moment in Riley's apartment, when Riley's desire for her was apparent. The shock that had melted so quickly into *need*. A need that was far beyond Gianna's control had taken the reins.

Gianna locked eyes with Riley. "Who could think straight, when the only person they've ever *really* wanted, finally wants them back? Who could say no?"

Maybe there was a person out there, but they were a far stronger person than Gianna was.

Whatever had been about to come out of Riley's throat next left on a garbled exhale. She pressed a hand over her chest as she murmured, "God, I am trying to make it through this without getting distracted, but when you say something like that, you make it *really* difficult."

Gianna felt it, too. The emotion, the headiness, the power of it all... she itched to be even closer to Riley than she was, even though there was less than a foot of space between them. Especially as she laid herself so totally bare.

Riley took a few seconds, some of the urgent intensity of the last few minutes leaving, as she asked, "What would you have done if I had ever found someone?" The question was so quiet. So *sad*, as if it made Riley, herself, unbearably sad to even ask it. "If there was ever someone who lasted more than a few months?"

Gianna's heart skipped a beat in her chest. It wasn't like she'd never thought about it; she'd thought about it every time Riley started dating someone new. Maybe *this was the person*.

"I would have supported you," her honest answer was just as quiet, but

less sad, even as she mustered a small, humorless smile, “I mean, I think sometimes it might have been hard; god knows it was back with Ashton.”

She could barely bite out his name without the accompanying eyeroll, even now, years later.

“Even then, though, as much as I never thought he deserved you, as much as I hadn’t yet lived with my feelings for you for long enough that they’d become second-nature, I... I wanted it, for you.” It was as simple as that. It was all she could offer, as she shrugged, helplessly. “You have wanted the loving, unfailing *relationship* part of life since I’ve known you. So, I wanted it for you.”

As soon as she’d finished speaking, Riley was in her arms.

Soft and warm and smelling so good – fresh and vaguely citrussy, like always – Riley’s arms wrapped securely around her waist as her face nestled perfectly against Gianna’s neck.

Gianna wrapped her own arms around Riley automatically, spreading her hands over Riley’s back, and rubbing them down over her spine.

“You are ridiculous,” Riley whispered against her neck.

The soft, tantalizing brush of her lips made Gianna shiver.

“You are ridiculous,” Riley repeated, “And amazing. And such a perfect friend. But...” She trailed off, trailing her nose up Gianna’s neck, turning her shiver into a full-body shudder, and Gianna breathed out a shaky exhale right into Riley’s ear. Head slid fully through her veins as Riley pressed her mouth against the spot right under Gianna’s jaw where her pulse was *pounding*, and her hands tightened on Riley’s back. “Somehow, I think you’ll make an even better partner.”

Fuck.

This was the difference, she dimly thought, between coming here with Riley as only a friend versus coming here with her on a date.

Riley didn’t kiss her neck again – which was *probably* for the best, given that Gianna didn’t exactly feel like she had the best grasp on her self-control. Even if Gianna had rented Duck’s out for the evening, it would still probably be frowned upon to have sex amongst the arcade games on the lower level.

Yeah, that was not in her plans for the evening at all.

Admittedly, neither was Riley staring up at her with intense curiosity as she asked, “Is that what you want to be? My partner?”

“Yes,” the answer was fast and certain, and Gianna stared down at Riley in question. “I mean, is that not the general idea you’ve gotten, after all of

this?"

She laughed softly, stroking her hand up Riley's back where it still rested.

Riley didn't laugh, though. Her lips twisted to the side, her eyes narrowing just the slightest bit as she studied Gianna once more.

It made her stomach squirm. "Why are you staring at me like you've never seen me before? Like you're trying to figure me out?"

"Because I *am* trying to figure you out!" Riley insisted, laughing now as she pulled back from Gianna in order to be able to start pacing. A few steps to the right, before she shot Gianna a look. "So, you want a relationship with me?" Gianna nodded – because, obviously – before Riley wheeled around and paced back the other way. "The crazy thing is that I don't even know what a relationship means to you."

She tossed her hands into the air as she continued her pacing.

"You know me, down to knowing exactly what I want to happen on every step of a date. Do you know how insane that is?" Riley wheeled around, pausing to level Gianna with a baffled stare. "That I know your favorite ice cream flavor and how you detest coconut because of the texture but you love the smell, and the way you organize your closet and the way you dramatically sigh at the end of every episode of *The One*. But I don't know what it means *to you* to be in a relationship. That, until yesterday, I thought you'd never wanted one?"

Again, no anger.

But a desperate pleading.

It reflected in her voice as she asked, "You know what I want, in a relationship. What do *you* want?"

That pure curiosity was back, as Riley watched her.

And amidst everything else tonight, *this* was the question that really gave Gianna pause. *This* was the moment that made her heart pound hard enough for her to hear it echo in her ears, that made her palms itch.

Her breath quickened as she stared back at Riley, unmoving. She felt like the proverbial deer in headlights, as she swallowed, hard.

Riley's gaze gentled. "And, I guess, you don't have to know, right now. You said tonight, you didn't think it was even a possibility, so – I get it. I just–"

"No." Her heart still pounded, pushing the nerves through her veins, as her single word was enough to grab all of Riley's rapt attention. "I know what I want."

Maybe it was unwise to say it, but she didn't want to keep any of this in, anymore. It was too late for that.

Still, though, she laughed nervously as Riley tilted her head, silently encouraging her to continue. Clearly wanting to know more.

"I just don't really know how to say it," she clarified, reaching up and drawing her hand through her hair. How *did* she say it? That she never thought Riley was a possibility, that she never thought this would be a reality, yet she still knew *exactly* what she would want out of this life? Out of a life with Riley?

She locked onto Riley's gaze with her own. This was Riley, she assured herself. She could tell Riley anything.

That thought was apparently the key.

"I want... everything. I want to be with you, at the end of every day, and hear all about work and Joel and Ellie and the weird guy who clicks his tongue who works in the coffee shop next to the station. I want to wake up with you and feel understood and loved without having to say a word. I want to get married," the word escaped her, unbidden, and she found herself laughing at it, as Riley's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Small ceremony or big or anything in between; I don't really care. I want everyone to *know* we're together. I want to see every little line on your face appear while we get older. I want you to talk me out of botox. And I want *kids*. I do. If they're ours, I want a whole herd. I'll carry them, because I know you don't want to be pregnant. Ideally, I'd probably want to use your egg, because I think the idea of having twins sounds incredible. I want – everything," she repeated, drawing in a breath.

She chewed on her bottom lip, staring at Riley as the nerves edged back in. "And you thought you were killing the mood of the first date."

For a few heart-hammering seconds, they only stared at each other.

"Okay," Riley breathed out, lips pulling into a considering pout.

"Okay?" Gianna parroted in utter disbelief. "Riley!"

"Gianna!" Riley teasingly mimicked back.

"I just poured my heart out to you like a *crazy* person. I told you that I want to have your babies! And all you have to say is, *okay?*"

"Did you mean it?" Riley countered, stepping closer to Gianna, tilting her head up at her.

Gianna's eyebrows furrowed in confusion as she looked down at Riley. "Of course. Every unhinged word."

She reached out, tucking a lock of Riley's hair behind her ear. Then she lingered with it, enjoying the touch. Letting herself take the moment to get her emotions back under control... if that was even possible. At the very least, her heartbeat slowed back to normal.

Riley stepped even slower, her whole body pressing against Gianna's, as she whispered, "Then, as I said: okay. It seems like we are *finally* on the same page."

Gianna's breath escaped her, relieved and elated and she reached out, wrapping her arm around Riley's waist and pulling her entirely up against herself as she tilted her head down.

She didn't kiss Riley, then. For a second, she just *felt* her. Felt Riley's heart beating against her own. Felt everything make sense.

And she felt Riley's dexterous fingers slide up the back of her neck, into her hair. They tightened, and Gianna's breath escaped her, shaking and surprised and wanting. She snapped her gaze to Riley's, only inches away, searching and expectant.

"We're going to have to talk about how many kids are in that herd," Riley stipulated, her voice stern and firm, before she broke into a little smile.

Gianna's mouth split into a smile so wide it would have pained her if she could feel pain in that moment. As it was, she pressed her forehead down to Riley's, breathing her in. "I'm open to negotiations."

EPILOGUE



*M*ay, senior year

“We did it!” Riley exclaimed, as she ran toward Gianna.

They’d both finished their respective graduation ceremonies, and were still in their caps and gowns, and the elation ran through Gianna, unstoppable.

Especially as Riley slammed into her, wrapping her up in her arms.

Gianna, as always, melted right into her.

“NBC is gonna be so lucky to have you,” she whispered, holding Riley tightly.

Throughout their senior year, Riley had put on some weight, which she was a little self-conscious about. Gianna, however, found that it made Riley’s breasts bigger, her thighs more eye-catching, and her little stomach was fucking adorable.

Riley was perfect, in every form, to her. Simply perfect.

“And the internet is going to be lucky to have you,” Riley murmured as they pulled back. Riley made a face at it, shaking her head. “I’m still not really sure what the *influencer* life actually means, honestly.”

It had started earlier this year, Gianna’s social media accounts gaining more traction. Mostly because she’d started posting about the products she used, videos of her using it, and some reviews about the things she liked.

It began as a big project for her Econ-Marketing course last fall, but had since started to take on a life of its own.

Gianna laughed. “You’ll see; in a few years, they’ll be everywhere.” She held her head high, sniffing haughtily. “But, I’ll be one of the best. In on the ground floor.”

Riley’s eyes shone up at her, the affection in them clear as day. “We have

a while to go before we get there.” She glanced over her shoulder. “My mom, Ellie, and Ashton are all waiting over near where they parked. Do you and Mummo want to go out to dinner with us?”

Gianna barely managed to control the scowl she wanted to make at Ashton. He’d been around, at this point, for over a year and a half, and he was... fine. Attractive, smart. He was a writer, a year older than the two of them, who Riley met in one of their journalism classes.

She merely didn’t think he treated Riley as well as she deserved. But, her grandmother had given her a sharp look when she’d expressed that thought last night, when she’d gone to Mummo’s hotel room that she’d booked to stay in for Gianna’s graduation, there was a chance Gianna wouldn’t believe anyone treated Riley as well as she deserved.

She’d waited for her feelings for Riley to dim, since she’d realized them that night at Duck’s, but they’d only grown.

At this point, they’d grown... insurmountably big.

Riley squeezed her hands, bringing her back to the moment, and Gianna’s heart flip-flopped in her chest.

“I don’t think so,” she murmured, after several seconds. “Mummo isn’t really the crowded restaurants type, and I’m going to spend some time with her while she’s here.”

Riley accepted that with a nod. “I’ll see you for laundry day, then?”

“Uh, always,” she shot back.

She used the hold she had on Riley’s hands to tug her back in, embracing her once more. Smelling the perfect, citrusy scent of her hair, nuzzling the fresh, clean warm skin of her neck. And she held tighter. “Even though we graduated, we aren’t going to change, right?” She found herself asking, an anxiety sparking. “College brought us together, but we aren’t ending even though it is. Right?”

It had been a niggling fear she’d been battling for a few months, now.

Riley didn’t hug her tighter at that, instead, she pulled back, and stared up at Gianna’s face, baffled. “We’re *never* ending,” she swore, a promise ringing through her words.

Gianna wrapped herself up in that promise. “Never ending,” she repeated.

PRESENT DAY

“You and I... we’re never ending,” Gianna murmured, under her breath,

imperceptible to the dozens of people watching them.

Riley's eyes glinted back brightly into hers. "Never ending," she confirmed, as she slid the ring onto Gianna's finger.