

tuesday

I'm used to everyone's eyes on me; that's nothing new. When you're Anna Morrison's best friend, people look. We're the kind of popular that parents like to pretend doesn't exist so they can sleep at night, and we're the kind of popular that makes our peers unable to sleep at night. Everyone hates us, but they're afraid of us, too. Anna thrives on it. She says the day people stop hating us is the day something is really wrong. She says I should look at it that way, but I can't. Everyone hates us, and it makes me a total wreck.

She hated that about me.

*These people are nothing. They don't matter. None of this matters. There's a whole world outside of this hellhole. God, Regina. You could at least act like you don't give a damn.*

So I do it like she does it: I square my shoulders and march across the parking lot, my jaw clenched and my eyes narrowed. I try not to let the heat touch me or flinch at the blast of cold air on my skin when I step through the school doors.

I'm ushered in by whispers and stares. Half the student body relishes it; they've waited a long time to show me just how much they hate me. The other half doesn't know what to make of it after spending four years fearfully revering me.

Principal Holt makes quick work of restoring my locker, but whoever repainted it doesn't know how to color-match. My locker

has been painted red. Every other locker in this school is a bright, hideous pumpkin orange. It's a wash of a coat, too.

I can still see the WHORE forcing its way through.

I grab my books. Two girls go by, and I hear my name but not the context surrounding it. Probably something like: *Regina Afton is a slut who slept with Anna Morrison's boyfriend I know can you believe it pass it on.*

I will kill myself before I get used to this.

Anna catches my eye then, swaggering down the hall in the opposite direction. A dozen guys watch her as she goes; it's the way her skirt moves with her hips when she walks. She takes a sharp turn left, and I know where she's going. And she's alone.

This is my chance.

I take the same left, push through the pale blue door that opens into the girls' washroom, and there she is, admiring her reflection in the mirrors over the sinks. I don't blame her. Anna is beautiful, with her soft, fine auburn hair and the kind of body that brings guys to their knees. It's cliché, but she's a Siren. Impossible to fight, there's no better feeling than to hear her sing your name until she has you and eats you alive. The people at this school think it's hard enough living beneath her, but it's even harder being her friend. Anna.

The door swings shut. She stiffens and turns, and the air leaves my lungs. I'm torn between wanting to be far away from her and wanting to throw myself at her feet to beg forgiveness for something I didn't do. As long as it means we can be friends again.

*I'm sorry. I'll never sleep with your boyfriend again, never, never, never. . . .*

Maybe I should've thought this out better.

She takes me in slowly, one eyebrow arched. She wants me to feel like I'm not good enough to be acknowledged, and it's working. I'm suddenly aware of the sloppy ponytail tied at the back of my head and how dumb my outfit looks—jeans and a sweater on another sweltering day—but it doesn't matter. She's always been prettier than me.

“Nice job you did on my locker,” I say.

We stare at each other, Western-movie-showdown-style. Several agonizing seconds pass, but Anna never draws her gun, which is good, because I’m totally unarmed. She turns back to the mirror and digs through the makeup bag in front of her.

“I didn’t do it.” She pulls out some lip gloss. “I had it done.”

“I didn’t have sex with him, Anna.”

“Wow,” she says. “You almost sound like you mean it.”

“Kara’s lying to you. She set me up—”

She snorts. “Don’t even.”

“She is. She set me up. You know she hates my guts—”

“How dumb do you think I am, Regina? You know the part that really makes me sick?” She tilts her chin up, eyes never straying from her reflection. “I was *right there*. Did you get off on that?”

“Anna, he—” The words come out of my mouth fast and stupid, because if I think about them too much, I won’t be able to say them. “Anna, he tried to rape me—”

It doesn’t go over well. She slams the gloss down and whirls around, her face as red as her hair.

“I cannot *believe* you just said that.”

This is the air sucked out of my lungs, this is a punch in the stomach, this is a slap across the face, and *that is not* what she was supposed to say.

“I’m your best friend,” I choke out.

“You were until you fucked my boyfriend.”

“Anna, I *didn’t*.”

She drops the gloss back into her bag. “I’ve been saying it forever. You always acted like you hated him, and you tried every trick in the book to get me to break up with him, and when that didn’t work, you waited. Now you’re caught and you’re scared and you’re standing there telling me he tried to *rape* you? That is *fucked*, Regina.”

“Wait—I’ll show—I’ll show you—”

I’ll show her the bruises. I fumble with my sleeves, my hands shaking horribly, while Anna zips up her bag. The washroom door

swings open, interrupting me, and when I turn around, it's Kara. She looks so different. Like, confident.

So this is really bad.

"Bell's gonna go," she says over me. "Are you coming?"

I turn back to Anna. She smiles at me. No, not *at* me—through me. She's smiling at Kara, through me, but this can't be over because I haven't had my say. In the movies, you get the time to make the speech that saves your life, and everyone wants to listen to you. She hasn't even seen the bruises yet.

"Anna, just wait—"

"Yeah," Anna says to Kara, over me. "Let's go."

"Anna—"

"You hear something?" Kara asks Anna, grinning.

"Anna, please." Anna gives herself one last look in the mirror, grabs her makeup bag, and passes me on her way out. The air that follows her smells berry sweet, and I beg after it. "Anna, Anna, *Anna*—"

"Fuck off, Regina," she says in a singsong voice.

And she leaves.

Kara doesn't. I feel her behind me; I feel every part of her enjoying this. I take Anna's place in front of the mirror, trying to ignore how sick it makes me that every part of Kara is enjoying this. I try to conjure the Regina she was afraid of. The one who put her in her place. Over and over again.

I can't.

"You talked me out of it." My voice breaks. "You told me not to tell."

"Well, it wouldn't have done *me* any good if you had," she says in that same singsong voice that Anna used, and then she leaves, and I bite my lip until I taste blood.

It hurts less than what just happened here.

For the first time in four years at this school, I'm aware of the cafeteria like I've never been aware of it before. Greasy, overcrowded, hot and loud.

I can see *everyone*.

Those teen movies that use the cafeteria to present the social hierarchies of high school, the ones where the lunch tables become little islands, spaces for you and people like you and no one else, where the overlap is nonexistent—they're all wrong. Hallowell High's cafeteria is *only* overlap. Cliques bleed into other cliques for lack of space, and there's only one exception: Anna's table. It's always been Anna and everyone else.

And now me.

This must be what the first day of ninth grade felt like for people who didn't have seating insurance. I scan rows of tables for an empty chair, but my gaze keeps drifting back to home base, where there are two—mine and Donnie's.

They're all watching me.

Fourteen pairs of eyes track this moment where I'm lost and it's obvious. I maneuver around tables with as much purpose as I can muster, pretending I've got somewhere to be until I find somewhere to be. I end up at the table at the back, the one next to the long line of garbage cans. It's the Garbage Table. It's Michael Hayden's table. It's nearly always empty because no one likes eating next to the garbage.

No one likes eating next to Michael Hayden.

He's hunched over a burger and Coke, writing in the Moleskine he's constantly carrying around. Michael Hayden: Unstable Emo Writer Boy.

I pick at my fingernails and debate how to do this. Michael probably doesn't want me to sit with him. We have phys ed together and I'm sure that's enough of me for him. It's enough of him for me, but when I look up, he's watching me. My face gets hot, but I go all fake-confidence on him and walk over. He closes the notebook and shoves it aside.

"Can I sit here?"

He doesn't say anything. Doesn't look at me. I decide it's an invitation and sit. I pick my nails while he eats. I don't actually eat lunch in the traditional sense; I dig into my pockets and pull out a pill. Everyone's eyes are on me. I can't imagine what they're thinking. This is Michael—longish, dark brown hair that always hangs into his pale blue eyes. His face is all sharp features, and he's tall, broad shoulders, sort of built. He moved here during ninth grade, when his shrink mother decided to set up a practice in town. He came here quiet—not shy, but removed, above it all. Like he just didn't care about us.

We tried to make him care. It didn't work. So first we told everyone he was a creep. Stay away. We couldn't even give a solid reason why, but because it came from Anna's mouth, that was good enough. He was a freak, and then his mother died in the eleventh grade and Anna was thrilled; she finally had a solid reason.

Michael now: We got everyone to believe his mom's death made him snap, and he's a torturing-small-animals kind of walking anger-management problem, that he's on meds, and his Moleskine holds school-shooting manifestos.

So this is going to be awkward.

I swallow the antacid dry. My throat is tight and it refuses to go down. I try again. The pill begins a slow dissolve over my tongue. I finally dredge up enough spit to force the thing down. The clock on

the wall behind Michael's head tells me there are twenty minutes of lunch period left. I'm not obligated to wait them out here, but a small part of me wants to do it to prove that I can.

Michael steadfastly ignores me, radiating the kind of tension that makes me want to go in on myself and stay there, until he finally looks at me and then past me.

"They're watching you," he says.

"I didn't sleep with him," I say. I don't know why. "Donnie, I mean."

He stares at me like he clearly doesn't give a fuck and wants to know why I think he should. It's the kind of look that makes me feel every inch of my skin in a way that makes me want to claw it all off.

He hates me.

I twist around in my chair. The seven heads turned in my direction go back to their food, whispering. I can just guess what they're saying.

"So how come they're telling everyone you did?"

"I got set up." I say it casually, but I feel every word in my gut, and it causes the kind of upset a pill can't reach. "By someone who I thought was my friend."

Except Kara was never my friend. She was just one of those girls you have to throw a bone to because there's nowhere else for them to go, and you've known them for so long, you can't even remember how you met.

"Kara," I tell him, even though he didn't ask. Saying her name elicits a Pavlovian response from me. My hands twitch, overcome with the urge to strangle her to death.

"I guess that's what you get," he says.

Our eyes meet. He stares at me, and I can only take it for a second before I have to look away.

He looks like his mom.

"She used to be really fat," he says. "Kara."

"Your point?"

He shrugs. I know what he's implying. I don't care. It's no secret.

Everyone knows Kara used to be fat until the second half of tenth grade, when she learned how to stick her fingers down her throat and started popping diet pills. She had to wear a wig in her class photo because she was losing her hair; you can see it if you look really closely. It was the pills or the purging. And those were only suggestions, anyway.

It's not like I told her she *had* to do that to herself.

Michael goes back to his burger. I try not to watch him eat, but I end up watching him eat anyway. It always amazes me how people can relax enough in this place to do that—eat—and not care. He finishes it off with precious minutes of the period to spare. He uses those to study me, and I get that claw-my-skin-off feeling. I know he's trying to make me feel so uncomfortable I won't come back and sit here . . .

Tomorrow.

I have to do this all over again tomorrow.

"I knew your mom," I blurt out.

He blinks, surprised. I've surprised him. And then his eyes light up in the strangest way—like he hasn't heard the word *mom* in a long time. It's not exactly happy, it's sort of curious—like, *Mom. I know that word.*

"How?" he demands.

"We—" For a second my head is full of her office, the way it smelled—sort of like coffee—and the walls were this pale blue. Her voice was soft and kind. "We were friends."

I feel bad for the lie, but it's not like I don't want it to be true. I don't know if his mom ever thought of me as anything but her patient, but I really liked her and I wish we had been friends. It's horrible, but sometimes I'm relieved she died before she could ever find out what I helped do to her son.

"She never mentioned you," he says.

"We were friends," I repeat. He searches my face for the lie. I sweat it out until he concedes and says, "Maybe."

The bell rings.

“Can I sit here with you tomorrow?” I ask. It’s humiliating having to ask permission to sit at the Garbage Table, and when he doesn’t answer me immediately, I pose the question again with the kind of urgency that makes me sound totally pathetic. “Michael, can I sit here with you tomorrow at lunch?”

“What if I said no?” he asks. My mouth goes dry. *You can’t*. The cafeteria is emptying. Ms. Nelson stands by the door, waiting for the last of us to leave, but I can’t leave without this one thing and he knows it. “Regina, I don’t care where you sit.”

He grabs his things, gets up, and makes his way out. I stay, staring at the table until Nelson blows her whistle and tells me to “get out there.”

*BITCH.*

Kara drops the note on my desk on her way to the board to do a few math problems for Mr. Brenner, and her wrist action is so subtle, he doesn't even see it and he's looking right at her. And that has everything to do with how short her skirt is.

I crush the note into a neat little ball.

"Well done," Brenner says, as Kara chalks down the answers to the last problem. He's staring at her legs like the skeeve he is.

Bruce waves his hand around.

"Excuse me, sir? I did the problems with Kara, and she got the last one wrong."

The silence is delicious. Kara reddens and Brenner blinks, totally caught.

"Maybe *you* got it wrong, Burton," he suggests, and waits for the rest of the class to laugh, like, *Yeah, maybe.*

We don't.

"I doubt it, sir," Bruce says.

*That's* when we laugh. Brenner tells us to be quiet, and we review the problem as a class, and sure enough, Kara got it wrong, so Brenner has to backtrack. He starts babbling about the "mathematical journey" and how the steps you take are sometimes more important than the destination, until he loses his ridiculous train of thought and sends Kara back to her seat.

I stare at the crumpled note, and when she's close enough, I wind my arm back and whip it at her forehead. She shrieks and Brenner totally sees it, so it's detention for me, shelving returns in the library after school.

There's no such thing as justice.

I'm in the library wedging a copy of *Flowers in the Attic* between two copies of *Persuasion* when Liz Cooper and Charie Andrews come in. Proof positive a bad day can always get worse. I back into the narrow shelves until I'm out of sight and they pass by, talking low, and end up in the stacks directly behind me. Charie is a total no one, but Liz is this faded-out yellow-haired girl-ghost I've gone to elaborate lengths to avoid because being around her makes my stomach ache. I reach into my pocket and force an antacid between my lips, chewing it in hopes that will make it work faster.

They're talking about me, of course. I'd be shocked if they weren't. I get as close to the books as I can and hope they don't see me spying on them through the shelves. I don't even know why I'm eavesdropping. They won't say anything I want to hear.

"Donnie didn't even show today," Charie is saying.

"He's probably out getting wasted," Liz replies, and she's probably right. For Donnie, sobriety is a fate worse than his inevitable death from liver failure.

"Did you see her looking for somewhere to sit at lunch? It was totally hilarious. I kept hoping she'd come over and ask if she could sit with you."

"Why?"

"So you could tell her no." Charie laughs because it's *totally hilarious*. Liz doesn't laugh, but I almost wish she would. It's always

easier when the people you've ruined decide to really hate you—like Michael does—because then your defenses go up and you can't even really feel the bad things you've done.

"She sat with Michael," Liz says.

"He's too nice." Charlie's voice is all disappointment. "I caught up with him in history and asked him if she was really upset, but he said she seemed normal. It has to be a front, though, right? She gets kicked out of her clique and they all hate her and Josh dumped her—" I jerk back. I don't remember that part happening. ". . . She'll be slitting her wrists soon enough."

I swallow. I swallow again. I don't know what feels worse: Josh breaking up with me *without breaking up with me*, Charlie joking about my suicide, or Liz's gentle admonition of it—"Charlie, don't."

"Hey, it could happen," Charlie says. "Anyway, I've got to catch Paul. See you."

"See you."

Charlie flits by my shelves. I wait while Liz rifles through book after book after book after book. After a while, she settles at a table nearby and opens up a paperback. I lean against the shelf and close my eyes. I'm trapped here until she leaves. Facing her is not an option.

"Regina," she says, and my heart stops. I open my eyes and she's staring in my direction. "I know you're there. You can come out."

I step out slowly. She looks me over, starting at my feet and working her way up to my eyes. I have to force myself to hold her gaze. I don't like looking Liz in the eyes. It's stupid, but I'm afraid I'll see her like the last time I really saw her. Totally broken. I mean, I still see that on her—everyone does. It'll be all over her until she graduates.

But I'm afraid I'll see it now like I saw it then.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" I ask her.

"What would I have to say to you?"

"I just thought you'd enjoy this, is all."

"That still doesn't mean I'd have anything to say to you."

The moment should end here, but I'm rooted to the spot. I stare at the literacy poster tacked on the wall behind her head. "Read or die." I feel like I should be saying something important, but the chance for that has passed. A long time ago.

"The locker was impressive," she says. "What do you think they'll do next?"

"I don't know," I say. "Guess you'll have to tune in to find out."

She closes her book. "Well, I'm here every day. But I don't know, it's kind of boring. I've seen this show before. I totally starred in it once. Remember?"

A familiar, horrible tightness knots up my stomach. I want to tell her it wasn't easy for me, either, watching Anna torture her every day until the light in her eyes went out. I want to tell her, but that would be dumb.

"Got any tips?" I try to keep my voice light.

She laughs a little. It's been ages since I heard her laugh and mean it, and even though it's at my expense, for a minute it's so familiar it's like we're in her room, giggling about things that don't mean anything, and it's a really happy moment until her phone rings and she picks it up and it's Anna, looking for me.

"Good luck, Regina," Liz says. "You'll need it."