

before

Hallowell High:

You're either someone or you're not.

I was someone. I was Regina Afton, Anna Morrison's best friend. These weren't small things, and despite what you may think, at the time they were worth keeping my mouth shut for.

friday

Everyone is wasted.

Anna is wasted. Josh is wasted. Marta is wasted. Jeanette is wasted. Bruce is wasted. Donnie's always wasted. I'm not wasted. I had my turn at the last party, called shotgun in Anna's Benz after it was over. My head was out the window, the world was spinning. I puked my guts out. It wasn't fun, but it's not like there was anything else to do. Tonight, there's even less to do than that. Tonight, I'm the designated driver.

Boring.

"Okay, okay, just—" Josh fumbles into his pocket and pulls out a little baggie of capsules. He tips one, two, three, four into his palm while Charlie Simmons, a fat, cranky sophomore, waits impatiently. "I have to restock." He drops the pills into Charlie's piggy hands. "That's all I can give you right now, man."

Charlie sniffs. Fitting: All that Adderall is going up his nose.

"How much?"

"Oh . . ." Josh's eyes glaze over. "Forget about it. I like you, Chuck."

Charlie grins. "Cool. Thanks."

"Hey, *Chuck*, you're paying," I say, grabbing his arm. Instant scowl. "Bring the money on Monday."

"Bitch," he mutters.

He stalks off. Payment secured. I only strong-arm Josh's clientele

when Josh gives his merchandise away, which is every time he gets this drunk.

“Jesus, Regina.” He somehow manages to trip over his feet, even though he’s just standing there. He wraps an arm around me. “Show a little respect, huh?”

“Fuck Charlie Simmons.”

He laughs, and the ability to remain upright completely abandons him, forcing all his weight on me. I struggle to keep us standing, casting my gaze around the property for help. The lights are on, the music’s loud, and I spot a few people puking in the topiary, but none of them are my friends.

Josh buries his head into my neck. “You look hot tonight.” His blond hair tickles my face, and I push him back. It’s too hot out to be this close. “I mentioned that, right?”

“Let’s go inside,” I tell him.

He laughs again, like *Let’s go inside* is code for something it’s not, but I guess he’s right: I guess I look hot tonight. Anna loaned me a shirt and skirt, and everything she owns is nice. *I want you to look really good for once, Regina.* I’ve spent the last seven hours afraid someone’s going to vomit all over me, because I can’t afford to replace the labels I’m wearing.

I help Josh up the path to his front door. He stops abruptly, opens his arms wide, and shouts, “Is everybody having a good time?”

He’s met with scattered applause and cheers that barely make it over the music. He shakes his head ruefully, listing sideways. I wonder what would happen if I just let him fall this time, but he manages to regain his balance without my help.

“We’re graduating in like, eight months,” he tells me very seriously. “I’m going to *Yale*. Who will supply these poor kids while I’m gone?”

I roll my eyes and right him for the thousandth time, forcing him into the house, where it’s a different kind of party-chaos—quieter, but

just as corrupt. Music filters in from outside, clashing with the music playing inside. Four seniors are toking up at the kitchen table. Drinking games. People making out in the living room. It's boring—it always is—but it's all there is. I just wish I was trashed enough to be able to pretend to enjoy it. I *hate* being designated driver. It was Kara's turn this time, but she's at home, sick.

"Are we going upstairs?" Josh asks when we reach the stairs. Before I can answer, he crumples onto the steps in a heap, too heavy for me to pick up. He rolls onto his back and blinks twice, struggling to focus. "Is this my bedroom?"

"Yes," I lie.

I bend down and kiss his cheek.

The smoke wafting in from the kitchen is giving me a headache, or maybe it's the music—I don't know. I lean against the wall and check my watch. It's officially Too Late, but Anna says the designated driver doesn't get to decide when the party is over; everyone else gets to decide when they're over the party. And Anna—I lost her an hour ago. Her face was as red as her hair, and she was slobbering all over Donnie.

I sigh.

Jeanette lurches up from out of nowhere looking like a guaranteed good time. Strung out. I can never tell when she's over the party; the party's usually all over her.

"I'm leaving," she declares. "With Henry."

"Is Henry sober?"

"Yes, he is," Henry says in my ear, startling me. He grins and points to Josh, sprawled out on the stairs. "You can't just leave him there."

I ignore him and turn to her. "Where's Marta?"

"Waiting in the car." She brushes her hair out of her eyes. "We're dropping her off at her house, and then me and Henry are going back to his place."

"Is Henry sober?"

"I'm right here," Henry says, annoyed. "And you already asked that."

"Do you *really* want to go to his place?" I ask Jeanette. Another of my duties as designated driver. If I can't prevent an undesirable drunken hookup, then why bother being here sober in the first place? Jeanette grins and nods.

"You know, I'm in the circle," Henry points out. "I get an automatic pass."

"But you're kind of an asshole," I tell him.

He smirks and laces his fingers through Jeanette's. They amble through the smoke. He glances back at me once. "Have fun babysitting, Afton."

Josh on the stairs. Marta in the car. Henry taking her home. Henry taking Jeanette back to his place. I don't care about Bruce, so that just leaves Anna and Donnie. I know they're in the den. They always end up in the den if Josh and I don't get there first. The den is off-limits.

But we're in the circle.

I bypass the living-room festivities, open the door to the den, step inside, and close it behind me. The party noises are dull and the room is dim, moonlight slivering in through the curtain drawn over the glass doors that lead to the backyard. I close my eyes briefly, inhaling slowly, letting the semiquiet of it all kill my headache.

When I open my eyes, I spot Anna at one end of the room. She's curled up on the couch, a picture of six shots of Jack chased with one Heineken too many. She drinks too much around Donnie, desperate to keep up with him, like the difference between him staying with her and leaving her is her blood-alcohol level.

"I need a girlfriend who can hold her liquor," he says.

Maybe it is. Donnie's lounging in the chair at the opposite end of the room, looking as half awake as he always does. No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to talk Anna out of him. He has a *convertible*.

She'd kill me if I left her here like this, so I lean over her ear and say her name, loud and sharp: "Anna." She doesn't move. I pull on her arm, tap her face, shake her. Nothing. I make my way over to the pitcher of water sitting on the end table beside Donnie.

"Help me get her to the car," I say.

He stares at me. "Why? Where are you going?"

"Home."

"What about me? I'm in no condition to get myself back to my place."

"I don't care what happens to you. I'm going home and I'm taking Anna with me." I grab the water and pour a glass, cross the room, and try to get her upright enough to take a sip, somehow. "Anna, come on . . ."

She flops back on the couch. I rub my forehead—my headache's returning—and make my way back to Donnie with the glass.

"Would you give me a hand?" He stares at me and then grabs my arm. The water sloshes onto the table. "*Christ*, Donnie."

He keeps his hand on my arm, and I'm suddenly aware of how much skin Anna's shirt isn't covering, but I guess that's the point.

"Why don't you care what happens to me?"

He sounds as pathetic as he looks.

"God, you're drunk." I step back, but he keeps his hand on my arm. "Just crash here," I say. "I'm not driving you home." He digs his nails into my skin. I yank his hand off me. "Don't."

"Don't," he repeats in a soft falsetto, and then he grabs my other arm before I can move, gripping them both so tightly, I know I'll still feel his fingers tomorrow. He uses me to get to his feet, and then he's on his feet and he's close.

Too close.

I turned him down in the ninth grade. Anna likes to say we've been close to hate-fucking ever since, which is too gross for me to even contemplate. It's a gunshot kind of thing for her to say—a warning. The way she says it, it's like she can see it happening, and the way she says it lets me know I better not let it happen.

As if I'd ever let Donnie get that close to me, anyway.

Except now he's that close to me, and I think he's thinking the wrong things.

He is. He presses his mouth against mine, mashing my lips against my teeth. The inevitability of every party: Someone will kiss you and you won't want it. Except this is worse than that. Way, way worse. This is my best friend's boyfriend, and my best friend is passed out on a couch eight feet away, and she will kill me for this, and I really, *really* don't want it. I press my hands against his chest and push him back, trying to force *stop* out of my mouth and past his. He detaches himself and fumbles backward. I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand, trying to get the taste of him out. I need water. I need to spit. He grabs my arm. I try to jerk away, but he holds fast.

"You better not breathe a *word* about this to her—"

"Donnie, fuck off."

He keeps tightening his grip until I can't keep the pain off my face—it hurts—so I bring my foot down on his foot and watch that happen on *his* face. It bursts red and I'm free. I rush to the door, but before I can open it, he's on me, crushing me into place from behind and breathing so hard in my ear, I can't even hear the vague sounds of the music outside or in. What turns a moment into this—me against the door, him against me. He puts his hand on my shoulder and turns me around roughly, and I'm afraid.

I've never been afraid of Donnie Henderson before.

He forces another kiss on me, lips working overtime, trying to get something out of mine. I grab a fistful of his hair and pull. He shoves me, but I stumble past him. The brief space I put between us makes me think it'll be okay, that this is as out of hand as it gets, but it's too close or it's not close enough and he lunges for me and we both go down.

We're on the floor.

He pushes me into the carpet. I glimpse Anna, tangled red hair, eyes closed. *Anna, wake up.* What turns a moment into this—he's on

top of me, panting, and my face is smashed against the rug. I focus on the strands of hair laid gently across her face.

This isn't happening.

But he turns me over and slides his hand up my skirt, and this is really really really really happening.

“No—”

I reach out and grip one of the table legs. His hand up my skirt. One hand up my skirt. Touching me. And the other clumsily feeling every part of me it can. His mouth on my neck. I yank the leg. The table tips and the pitcher rolls off, vomiting water all over us. Wet. Hands all over me.

I grab the pitcher and bring it up and then down on him. It's hardly a hit, but he feels it. I raise it up again and he dodges me and I'm crawling away. Last shot, Regina. *Get out.* I grab the chair and pull myself to my feet while he tries to stand, but the last of his coordination is gone on his hand up my skirt. Anna's skirt.

“Anna!” I turn to her. “Anna, help!”

But she just lays there, and Donnie's blocking my path to the door, swearing, trying to stand, and my heart is trying to race me out of this room before that happens. I stumble over to the sliding glass door and yank it open. I step outside, into the heat, into the party, the last of the party, but the music is as loud as it was at the start of the night.

I need to tell someone, but everyone is wasted.

I walk fast. I walk forever, blind, numb. I wrap my arms around myself. I need to tell someone. I lick my lips and taste salt: I'm crying. How long have I been—

Kara.

I'm standing in front of Kara's house. My feet walked me here. Kara. Kara is someone. The walk to her door sets off the motion sensor, soaking me in artificial too-bright light. I knock and wait, fighting the urge to throw up. I wipe my eyes and pull at Anna's skirt. It's torn.

A minute later, the door opens. Kara's there, a fevered doll with blond curls hanging in front of her flushed face. She crinkles her snotty nose.

"Jesus, Regina. What part of 'designated driver' don't you understand?"

The contempt in her voice almost tricks me into feeling normal. For a second. And then she looks closer and I remember the skirt—Anna's skirt—and his hand up Anna's skirt. And I'm still crying.

"What happened to you?" she asks.

A million words fight their way up my throat, all lobbying to be first out of my mouth. They pile up, stuck. Only one manages its way out: "Help."

She lets me inside, and the rest of the words come, falling from my lips, a stupid, stuttering truth. By the time I collapse in a chair at the kitchen table, she knows what he did to me. And then it gets really quiet while I wait for her to tell me what to do.

I need someone to tell me what to do.

Anna always tells me what to do.

"God," Kara murmurs, pressing her fingers against the angry spots on my arm where he grabbed me. The skin is tender and marked, but by Monday it will be splotchy purples, browns, and yellows.

"The police?" I ask. My voice cracks. "Do you think? Do I go to the police?"

Kara stares at me, and then she stands and goes into the fridge and gets a bottle of water. I can't read her expression.

"You really want to put yourself through that?"

"I could put Donnie through that." I rub my forehead. But I don't really want to go through that. I don't want to talk to the police about his hand up my skirt. And then—my parents. It's not like you can do that and not tell your parents, and I don't want them to know. I don't want them to think of me on the floor, with Donnie's hands there. Kara sets the water in front of me. "Maybe Anna—"

"You're going to tell Anna?"

“She has to know—” I swallow. “That’s her boyfriend. She won’t let him get away with it.” She’ll take care of him. Me. She takes care of everything.

“If she believes you.”

I open my mouth and nothing comes out. *If she believes you.* I should’ve known Kara would do this. There’s a reason we hate each other. *If she believes you.*

“Look, I believe you,” Kara says, reading my mind. “I know you hate Donnie, and I can see him doing something like this, but . . . Anna’s always thought . . .”

*You’re like, this close to hate-fucking.*

I pick at the hem of Anna’s skirt. The jagged rip in it finally hits me. She’ll kill me. She will kill me for ruining her skirt. “Shit.” I stand and try to force the ragged sides together, like that’s how you fix these things. “I need to—I told her I’d be careful—”

“Regina—”

“I told Anna I wouldn’t—”

“Regina.” She snaps her fingers twice. I let the skirt go and sink back into the chair. I need to get it together. Kara stares at me, concerned. I never thought I’d live a moment that could exist outside our hate for each other. I could go my whole life without one. But this feels . . . safe.

“What do you—so what do I do, Kara? What . . . ?”

She sits across from me, quiet, for a long time. My stomach knots itself up while I wait for her to speak. If I have to live with this, I don’t want it to be hard.

“Donnie’s not going to tell Anna,” she finally says. “And Anna’s not going to believe Donnie would do that to you. She’d think you were screwing around behind her back. It’s not fair, but that’s Anna.”

My best friend.

“I mean . . .” She taps her fingers along the table. “He was really wasted, right? It’s not like he does that all the time. . . .” I don’t say anything. “And I feel really bad for you, Regina . . . but there are some things worth keeping your mouth shut for.”

“She’s my best friend.” A tear manages its way down my cheek. I wipe at my eyes, and there are more. “I mean—”

“But you know what she’d do to you if she found out, right?”

I nod slowly. I know. And then I nod again: *I know, I know, I know.*

“And I’m totally here for you,” she says. Kara. Totally here. Nothing makes sense anymore. “I’m not going to say anything.”

“Thanks,” I whisper.

Kara presses her fingers against my arm again.

Her touch is cool and strange.