



The Next Chapters

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: Gianna Mäkinen has been in love with her best friend Riley Beckett for her entire adult life. She'd long accepted that her place in life was Riley's best friend, and that was okay. It was more than okay.

She never imagined that she would have the opportunity to confess her love to Riley, to marry her, to have a herd of children with her. Riley always knew she'd be building her life with Gianna, but she never knew it would be this kind of life. This all-consuming, passionate, together life.

They learn through the years that the only thing better than finally being on the same page, is being able to go through the next chapters of life with one another.

Total Pages (Source): 43

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:24 pm

Part

One

FIRST COMES LOVE

The Before

AGE: 21

“How’d that date go?” Riley asked, bumping her shoulder into Gianna’s. “With Isla? Was it everything you thought it would be?” She aimed a teasing look at Gianna, wiggling her eyebrows. “Maybe more?”

Gianna felt herself jostle slightly with the ribbing, her lips ticking into a smile at Riley’s playful tone. The smile felt simultaneously both forced and natural, something she’d never be able to really explain. Not even to herself.

“It... went,” she answered, deliberately skirting the details.

Which, obviously, Riley noticed. “Gianna! Come on! You were excited about Isla; you broke out your brand-new heels for the occasion.”

Riley wasn’t wrong. She’d come over to Gianna’s apartment – this year was the first time since their freshman year they weren’t rooming together, since Ellie had graduated a year early from MIT and she and Riley had moved in together – to help Gianna get ready to go out with Isla.

Isla, the beautiful, smart, funny TA in Gianna's merchandising class. Isla, whom Gianna had flirted with nearly all semester, and now that the semester was nearly over, Isla had been the one to ask Gianna out.

And it couldn't have gone worse.

"Yes, but unfortunately the heels couldn't save the date. Marc Jacobs can't fix everything, even though saying those words feels like a betrayal." Gianna attempted to inject some lightness into her tone, mostly for Riley's sake. Then again, it was for hers as well.

The reality was that she was wearing her sunglasses as they walked across the quad during an overcast afternoon to hide her tired eyes from her very observant best friend. Even though Gianna had applied her makeup flawlessly, hiding any hint of bags, she just knew Riley would be able to tell that Gianna hadn't slept well.

The last thing she needed right now was Riley inquiring – so kindly, so concernedly – into what had happened with Isla.

Because what had happened with Isla, the beautiful, brilliant woman that Gianna had convinced herself she was crushing on, had been a disaster.

Everything seemed like it was fine. Typical date – dinner, drinks, a long walk through the newly-strung up holiday lights downtown. But when Isla had reached for Gianna's hand, all she'd been able to think about was how it just didn't feel the same as Riley's did. Riley's hand fit so perfectly in her own, and clasping hands with someone else like this felt so – off. So wrong.

When they'd kissed, after Gianna had walked Isla back to her place, she'd felt a spark of attraction. Blessedly, she'd felt the electric zing, and she'd leaned into it. Tried so desperately to lean into feeling anything for someone that wasn't her straight best

friend.

Only to realize it was Riley that popped into her mind when Isla nipped her teeth into Gianna's bottom lip. Riley always dug her teeth into her bottom lip like that, and the vision was stuck in Gianna's mind.

She'd pulled back from the kiss, shaking her head. "I'm so sorry. I can't do this though." It was the only explanation she'd been able to offer.

The alarming truth Gianna was facing was that Isla was only the most recent casualty in the number of people she'd attempted to date in the last year and a half, ever since reconciling with the fact that she did, indeed, have feelings for Riley.

And what Gianna was coming to learn was that it just wasn't fair to any of these people she was dating. It wasn't fair to them that Riley's name echoed through her thoughts. It wasn't fair to them that her heart skipped a beat when Riley laughed, but not them. It wasn't fair to them that she would rather cancel a date if Riley texted to ask Gianna to hang out instead.

Gianna knew that the smart thing to do – what anyone else in her situation would do – would be to put distance between them. She knew that.

And yet...

Riley reached down, lacing her fingers between Gianna's. She sighed, flexing her hand around Riley's. Yes, this was the right fit.

"If you're blaspheming Marc, it must mean last night was terrible. And I won't bug you to talk about it while you're still processing." Riley tapped her fingers against Gianna's. "What I will do, is come over to your place tonight and make you dinner before we cuddle up and watch tv. And I'll bring you my sweatshirt and let you keep

it for the weekend.”

God, and there it was. The warmth that slid through Gianna at the way Riley promised her all of the things Gianna took comfort in. The way Riley smiled up at her, so wide and unguarded, making Gianna’s heart feel so... full.

She squeezed Riley’s hand in hers.

Because the thing was, if Gianna had to pick between limiting what she and Riley had in order to try to go on more fulfilling dates, she was never going to do it. This mattered so much more than dating.

The First Date

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:24 pm

AGE: 30

Gianna hadn't been on a date in years. Not a real date. In fact, in the last decade, she'd perfected the art of not-dating.

Going on a date with someone meant more than hanging out with someone. On that much, Gianna was very firm. When Gianna was talking – like, talking-talking – to a person she found attractive or interesting, she'd spend time with them before they moved right into the sex portion of their relationship, generally.

Unless it was going to be a true straight-up one-night stand. Then, it was all for fun, no big deal.

But if Gianna was planning on “seeing someone”, for lack of a better term, multiple times, she had to vet them first. She'd made the mistake of not vetting them a few times in her early twenties, of taking people at their word that they could handle a no-strings fling with her without wanting to make it into anything it wasn't. Because all it ever was and ever would be was sex and a potential friendship.

She'd finely honed her observational skills to look for any sign that a man or woman might turn a little messy if they had repeat hookups. Certain lingering looks, any sign of possessiveness, or even someone looking too intent or eager. She knew what questions to slip into casual getting-to-know-you conversations – about past relationships, had they done a friends-with-benefits relationship before – what to look for – any comments involving the future, or seeing where something goes.

And if she didn't fully trust what she saw and heard, she'd honed the self-control to

decidedly not cross any sexual line, even if she'd been looking forward to the hookup.

She'd been caught in the emotional crosshairs – love confessions, crying, anger, jealousy – far too many times over the years to neglect her process in any way.

Despite all of that, Gianna Mäkinen was on a fucking date right now.

And was having the best time of her adult life, while she was at it.

Because that date was with Riley Jane Beckett.

She threw her head back, laughing uncontrollably, as Riley sang horribly off-tune to We are the Champions, only switching it to I am the champion, as they walked home after leaving Duck's.

It was almost eleven, meaning they'd been at Duck's for about four hours. Four hours, a handful of drinks, they'd split several apps and played just about every game there. Gianna's non-dates never lasted this long because... why would they?

Generally, she didn't want to hang out one-on-one with anyone for more than a couple of hours unless that person was Riley.

But she was out with Riley. And that made all the difference.

It was Riley's fingers that were interlaced with her own. Riley's breath misted in the night air along with hers, as the New England March night dropped to freezing.

It was Riley walking, pressed against her side, that made Gianna feel so fucking warm. Like she was glowing from the inside out.

“You beat me in skeeball tonight. Do you know what that makes our lifelong record?” Gianna asked, even though she couldn’t pretend she wasn’t enjoying Riley’s show of celebration.

Riley’s hazel eyes met her own as she flexed her fingers around Gianna’s. “Yes, I am well aware that our lifelong record is approximately Gianna 100 and Riley 4. But I think that really means I should celebrate my victories all the more.”

Gianna took a moment to think over exactly what Riley said before she nodded. “Your terms are acceptable.”

“I need to take the small victories because when it comes to anything involving any athletic ability at all – strength, speed, aim – we all know you’re the winner,” Riley continued, her eyebrows drawing together and doing that cute thing where a little line formed in the middle.

Riley was very much not wrong.

Gianna laughed, tossing the arm that wasn’t pressed against Riley’s out into the night air. “I said I find your terms agreeable! But, if you recall, you are the one who got way more upset at me when I lost on purpose than when I beat you.”

Because, really, in their relationship tenure, Gianna did beat Riley most of the time when it came to anything physical. On the other hand, Riley frequently beat Gianna whenever they played cards or other games. It was a trade.

But, in their senior year of college, when they’d competed in a field day-esque fundraiser on campus, raising money for breast cancer, Gianna had... maybe... let Riley beat her a little. Mostly because she’d wanted to see the excited, victorious glint in Riley’s eyes in the afternoon sun. So, it wasn’t like she was being entirely altruistic.

The second their race had ended, though, Riley had given Gianna a look. A look that said she knew exactly what Gianna had done, and she wasn't happy about it. It was close to the look Riley shot her now as they walked home.

“Because I don't mind when you're better than me at things,” Riley shot back, the same thing she'd said to Gianna back in college. “And I never want you to pretend you aren't just as amazing as you really are; that's the last thing I want.”

Her words were the same, but they took on a softer hint tonight. Something that reflected the soft, sweet look in Riley's eyes as she looked up at Gianna.

“Even when you beat me in a game, we're on the same team in life. We always have been.”

Gianna's heart flip-flopped in her chest, the same as it always did whenever Riley said something like that.

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At this moment, she could do something she had never done back then.

She tugged Riley to a stop, simultaneously bringing her free hand up to cup Riley's jaw as she ducked down and pressed her lips to Riley's. Her eyes fluttered closed of their own accord as she felt the softness of Riley's lips on hers.

But she only lingered for a few moments, not giving in to the urge for more or longer. Not on a sidewalk after dark in freezing temperatures.

Because this was still her first date with Riley, she reminded herself forcefully.

It was easy to get lost in their easy relationship and forget that fact. That important fact.

She pulled back, already grinning softly down at Riley as Riley blinked open her eyes.

Tonight was all about giving Riley the best first-date experience in her fucking life. So far, Gianna thought it was going off without a hitch. Somehow, even though she'd confessed to Riley that she wanted to have her babies.

As they started walking again, Gianna ran through all of the topics that Riley had mentioned to her over the years as important notes to hit on the first date.

"Wait. How was work today?" She asked, feeling like a fucking idiot for not having asked earlier.

Gianna, honestly, felt stricken with how ridiculously stupid and guilty she felt, and she squeezed Riley's hand in hers. "I can't believe I didn't ask until now. I – it's the biggest thing going on in your life, and I... I'm so sorry. Please tell me. You were having a follow-up meeting with the execs, right?"

So much for giving Riley the best first date of her life; Gianna hadn't even lived up to her reputation of being an amazing friend.

But Riley squeezed her hand back hard enough to get Gianna's attention.

"First of all, for the first time in forever, work was the furthest thing from my mind tonight. You are, by far, the biggest thing in my life, especially at present," Riley's voice was so firm that it left no place for Gianna to even try to disagree, and it soothed over all the potential doubts she could have.

And the smile that played over Riley's lips compounded that feeling as she nodded. "I did have the exec meeting today."

That meeting had been on the books since they'd decided on a date for the launch. Review how it had gone, the number of views, the engagement numbers, and decide where to go from there.

"I'm not fired," Riley declared, chuckling a self-deprecating, relieved laugh that echoed through Gianna.

"I knew it! You were amazing!"

Gianna used her hold on Riley's hand to tug them to a pause again, this time to haul Riley against her. She wrapped her arms tightly around Riley's waist, holding her snug against her own body as she rocked back and forth in sheer excitement.

“You did so, so incredibly well on that broadcast, babe. I know you were nervous, but it didn’t matter. You were so passionate, and it showed. You were captivating,” Gianna murmured against Riley’s ear, meaning every word with everything she had inside her.

And not just because she was in love with her, not simply because Riley was her best friend. It was true that Gianna couldn’t be entirely objective when it came to Riley, but it was also true that Gianna knew content. She knew what appealed to audiences enough for them to keep the video playing. Riley had nailed it.

As they drew back, there was an adorable flush on Riley’s cheeks that had nothing to do with the cold. “Thank you. And... yes, they were very pleased with the intro to BostonNow Digital.” Riley pursed her lips, that blush on her cheeks getting darker. “They also, actually, thought it was brilliant to broadcast a live-feelings confession.”

Gianna’s own mouth fell open with a delighted gasp, “No!”

Riley groaned, using the hand that wasn’t holding steadily to Gianna’s to drop her face into. “Yes.”

“I was pretty partial to that part, myself,” Gianna couldn’t help but add, giggling with it.

She knew she'd never forget it even as she made light to the moment. She was certain that she could be in a hospice bed, taking her last breath, and she’d be able to recall with crystal clarity Riley’s words on the mistaken broadcast the night before.

When Riley spoke to Joel, clearly unaware that she was live, she’d said that being with Gianna felt as natural as breathing. That blurring the lines between their friendship and something more had given Riley perfect clarity.

It had felt like living in a dream. A dream Gianna hadn't dared to have in a very, very long time.

“Marika Hendrick thought it was brilliant. I think she really believes it might have been some sort of ratings-grab, but... she liked it. A modern age of news, she'd said,” Riley spoke with a tinge of wonderment in her voice, shaking her head.

Gianna couldn't contain her glee. “Your boss – an executive of your fucking network – thinks that you are a next-level genius and actor who staged a love confession to me for a streaming launch.” Hearing the words aloud gave her pause as she tilted her head... “Huh. You know, it's actually not a bad idea.” She held up her free hand before Riley could say anything, already having predicted the indignant expression on her best friend's face. “Not that you would do that; you, my love, have far too much integrity.”

She only realized what she'd said after the words left her mouth. What she'd called Riley. My love.

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Her heart leaped right into her throat as she darted her eyes at Riley, her nerves tangling together tightly.

But Riley just bumped their shoulders together as they turned onto the street Riley's apartment was on.

“Thank you; I like to think that I wouldn't try to use any pretense to have made the launch successful. And I would never want to cheapen anything between you and me.”

“I know,” she assured, whole-heartedly.

Somehow, it seemed to have gone right over Riley's head. She was sure Riley heard her term of endearment, because Riley didn't ever miss a word Gianna – or anyone, really – said. But that she did not comprehend exactly what Gianna had meant by it because – and Gianna could fully cop to this – she'd called Riley so many terms of endearment over the years.

Babe, carina, baby, honey, bella, gorgeous... the list went on and on.

That was the crazy thing about embarking on this journey with Riley in the last few months. Gianna was so used to living her adult life, completely at ease with Riley, and never nervous when engaging with someone she was sleeping with. Because while her love for Riley ran far deeper than platonic, it didn't change how she treated Riley or how they interacted in their friendship. And she never had anything to hide from her hookups because she was bluntly honest with them.

However, Sleeping with Riley had changed both of those uncomplicated facets of her life.

After starting to have sex with Riley, she suddenly did worry at times about what Riley could see or interpret in Gianna's adoring looks, her turns of affectionate phrase, her constantly tactile touches. She'd been sure, at times, that Riley would start to see the truth. That she'd start to see right through her.

But she hadn't.

She hadn't, to the point that Gianna had realized... maybe the way she'd interacted with Riley was very much un-platonic before. Maybe Riley was the one who'd never noticed, as Gianna had treated her as a life partner sans sex.

"I also know," she said, moving the conversation along before they really got into territory that was decidedly not first-date, "That you would never make that plan because your worst nightmare was being in front of that camera."

She still wanted to wring Owen's fucking neck, but they could discuss that later.

Riley barked out a laugh. "Yeah, and if I never have to do that again, it will be too soon. Oh! We actually have more than a few applicants for the anchor position. People who watched and liked what I'm trying to do and, obviously, heard that Owen no longer had the job. A couple of them even seem decently qualified."

God, Gianna loved that excited lilt in Riley's voice when she talked about her job. Riley was always passionate about her work, always had been. Ever since she practiced those news stories in their dorm room mirror.

But since she'd started developing this project, nearly two years ago at this point, she shined. Gianna could watch and listen to her talk about it for hours and never get

bored.

“And,” Riley’s excitement only seemed to grow, “If the audience and engagement for BostonNow Digital continue on this trajectory – since its launch was literally over double the numbers of what we’d projected – I’ll be able to get a second anchor for even more content within three months.”

“Holy shit!”

Riley nodded quickly, the waves in her hair bouncing with it. “Yes – and...” She rolled her lips to keep herself from blurting out the next statement. Gianna always found that incredibly endearing. “Marika Hendrick herself informed me that she sees me following her path at the network.”

Even though they were only a few feet from the entrance to Riley’s apartment building, Gianna immediately halted, her own joy seeming to burst from the seams. “You’re fucking kidding!”

“I’m absolutely fucking not,” Riley disagreed, giggling as she did so.

The moon in the clear evening sky washed over Riley’s face as Riley smiled so brightly up at her. Gianna knew she’d never seen anything or anyone more radiant than Riley Beckett, smiling up at her like this, even though it was nearly midnight.

“You’re amazing,” she dropped Riley’s hand for the first time since they’d left Duck’s because she needed to use both hands to cup Riley’s jaw.

She needed to shower Riley’s face in kisses. She’d done it since college when something overwhelmingly thrilling happened. Like when her Mummo had written to her. Something so big and so sensational, Gianna quite literally could not keep her happiness inside.

Coincidentally, stuff like this only happened with Riley around her. Or maybe it was because Riley was around her.

Either way. She planted her lips on each of Riley's beaming cheeks, on her forehead, her chin, the bridge of her nose, her eyelids, and then she paused, ready to pull back. Like she always did.

Before – they were on a date – rang through her mind, and she pressed her grinning mouth to Riley's.

Their teeth crashed, making them laugh against each other's mouths, which was so not sexy. So unlike any other kiss, Gianna shared with anyone else; if she had shared something like this with anyone else, she'd have been mortified.

But she wasn't because it was Riley, and Riley was still humming excitedly into Gianna's mouth as they slid their lips together again properly.

She felt Riley's arms wind around her neck, then, as she slid her own down, tracing her fingertips along Riley's torso through her jacket. They landed on Riley's hips, reveling in the feel of her curves even through her layers.

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Only seconds ago, their decidedly unsexy beginning of the kiss had made her laugh. It felt so incongruent with the way heat sparked through her veins now as Riley nipped her teeth into Gianna's bottom lip before soothing it with her tongue.

The tongue she used to trace over the bow of Gianna's top lip, pulling a shudder up from her fucking core before it echoed through her entire body.

Riley wrapped her arms tighter, pulling Gianna even more securely against her so their bodies were flush against one another. She did this, even as she slid one of her hands into Gianna's hair and took a loose fistful, pulling Gianna's head back just enough to break their contact.

Just enough, really, because her lips brushed against Gianna's as she spoke, "It really goes to show you what an amazing night this was because I wasn't even thinking about everything that unfolded at work today. Not when I knew I had this – you – coming for me tonight."

Riley's voice was so low, pitched to the timber Gianna had learned and memorized the very first time they had sex. That throaty, commanding tone sank somewhere right to her core and gripped her.

The insane thing – really, something that had driven Gianna wild whenever her mind dared to think it in the last decade – was that Gianna had always known, in theory, how compatible she and Riley were when it came to sex. For years, it had been torturous information to have.

Now, she got to reap the benefits.

The double entendre of her words was entirely deliberate; Gianna knew it, and she still felt her body react. She still felt herself clench, heat pooling low in her stomach. “Riley,” she breathed, squeezing Riley’s hips under her hands.

“Come on. Let’s go inside,” Riley murmured, her lips still whispering over Gianna’s in a touch that sent shivers rocketing all over her fucking body.

Even as her body was yearning, ready to go, Gianna used every single mental faculty she possessed to reign herself in. “I... can’t.”

The regret she felt twisting through her was apparent in her voice.

“Wait. What?” Riley pulled back a few inches, then, enough so they could actually look one another in the eye. “Do you have an early shoot or something?” Her confusion was palpable, especially because Riley knew Gianna did not, in fact, have anything on her agenda tomorrow morning.

It was good that Riley pulled back, though, even as Gianna also hated it. But it allowed her to breathe in the fresh, freezing night air. The opportunity to recall her mission.

With that in mind, she smoothed her hands up and down Riley’s sides one last time before forcing herself to put her hands back down against her thighs. “I don’t,” she answered honestly, taking in another deep breath. “But – this is our first date,” she reminded Riley.

Reminded both of them, really.

“And, if you recall, on Riley Jane Beckett’s Ideal First Date, your date does not enter your apartment. And you don’t have sex. Even if you both want it,” Gianna murmured, dipping her gaze back to Riley’s pink, wet lips.

Fuck. Yes. She really wanted it.

“Gianna,” exasperation colored Riley’s voice as she dropped her head back. “You know that’s different.”

Blinking, she blew out a shaky breath and looked back into Riley’s eyes. “Nope. Don’t forget I know everything you’ve ever cataloged from your dates. In your ideal first date, your date would bring you back to your apartment.” Gianna gestured at the door to their left. “In this ideal world, you are both attracted to each other. And the night went well, so... you both want one another. And you’d share a simple kiss, letting the want of the night simmer,” she murmured, her voice dipping...

She couldn’t resist going in for another kiss, then. This time, she very carefully kept it light and simple.

When she pulled back, though, Riley groaned low in her throat. “We both know what’s simmering between us already.”

Still, Gianna shook her head. “You only have one shot to really romance the woman of your dreams. And I’m not fucking it up.”

She very nearly had let the opportunity slip through her fingers. Because of uncertainty and fear and her parents and... everything.

But they were really doing this. So she was going to do it right; she was going to prove to Riley that she was the person who could give her everything she wanted. Who wanted to give it to her.

“Gianna,” Riley murmured again, but this time she simply stared up at her with big, soft eyes.

She couldn't help but dip down again, kissing Riley once more. This time, lingering for another few seconds, just wanting to be able to breathe Riley in.

Intoxicated as she was with the feeling, she pulled back and met Riley's sweet smile with her own.

"Okay. You go inside," Gianna encouraged, nodding at the door. "And I will text you at a very uncool speed for another date."

"Just like a perfect first date would," Riley followed up, shaking her head slightly as she sighed and entered the key code to enter the building. She paused before she went in, though, throwing Gianna a stern look. "You have a car?"

Gianna nodded down to the corner, where her Uber had been idling since they'd turned onto the street. "Called for it just as we left Duck's. Let them know to start the ride even though I'd be a few minutes late."

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“Just when I worry you hadn’t thought of everything,” Riley teased. “Text me when you get home.”

“Always.”

Gianna hardly even remembered the ride home, if she were entirely honest.

Because she was fucking floating.

As she hung her jacket in its proper spot in the coat closet before placing her shoes in their proper spot – by year, then by designer – she dug her phone out of her pocket.

Even though she was chronically on her phone – it was quite literally her job – she’d had no inclination to check any notifications or anything tonight. All she’d done had been to call her car.

She poured herself a glass of water from the pitcher in her fridge before she looked at her texts.

Ellie Beckett – 9:34 PM

I’m sure I will be hearing from Riley soon, but I’d like to know everything from your perspective, too. I hope it’s everything you have ever wished it could be.

Sweet, sweet Ellie.

There was also a text from her Mummo, asking Gianna to call her in the morning

with the details. Obviously.

Pulling up Riley's text thread, a knock on her door gave her pause.

Gianna frowned, tilting her head to the side – could she have... imagined it? She wasn't really in the habit of surprise house guests in the middle of the night.

Nope, not imagining it. There was another knock.

Frowning, Gianna left her water but took her phone with her as she meandered back toward the front door, confused and mildly alarmed.

Quietly, she peered through the peephole. And that confusion and alarm dissipated immediately, replaced by a different kind of confusion laced with anticipation. Excitement.

Undoing both of her locks, she pulled the door open, already speaking, "Riley? What are you doing here? Are you okay?"

Riley was still dressed exactly as she'd been twenty-five minutes ago. Her hair was a little windswept, and her nose was kissed with a slight pink from the windchill.

She felt struck and enamored all over again.

Especially as Riley shook her head, smiling up at her. "No. There's nothing wrong. I just – I need to talk about the date I went on tonight with my best friend."

Oh, there it was.

Everything inside Gianna melted, her grin pulling widely at her mouth as she fully pulled the door open and urged Riley inside. "By all means."

She watched, keeping wanting hands to herself, as Riley shrugged out of her jacket and hung it up in the closet where she always hung her jackets before she took off her shoes and put them in her spot.

“I was just standing in the lobby of my building, you know? Still flying so high from this date, and... it was the best date I’ve ever had. Seriously.”

“Seriously?” Gianna echoed, feeling both thrilled and victorious. Logically, it was one thing to know that she’d pulled off Riley’s best date ever.

But to have it confirmed was even better.

Riley turned to face her, and she took a deep breath as she held Gianna’s gaze. Not that it was going anywhere. “And I realized – I needed to come and see you. Because after every date I have, you’re the person I want to talk to about it. You’re the person I want to see. You’re the person I want whose opinions I want. Good, bad, ugly, and everything in between. You’re the person I trust.”

None of these statements were new information, but Riley had never stated them like this before. It made Gianna’s heart beat faster.

“You want me to get the wine?” She managed to ask, knowing that she couldn’t possibly dim the blinding smile on her face. “You can tell me all about this best date ever.”

Before she could take another step, though, Riley reached out and grabbed her wrist. Her hand slid slowly down, and Gianna opened her fingers automatically as Riley’s laced between hers.

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“Maybe in a minute. But I need to tell you...” Riley licked her lips, stepping even closer to Gianna. “I know it was only the first date, technically, and – Gianna, you know I’m not this kind of person. But. I’m in love.”

Gianna swore her world stopped. Right here, right now. Her world absolutely paused on its axis.

“Really?” Gianna couldn’t keep up the façade anymore. She clutched at Riley’s hands, her heart pounding in her chest now.

“Really,” Riley confirmed, sounding breathless herself. “I heard what you said when we were walking home. And it just hit me when you got in your car. Gianna, I’m in love with you. Whether we’re having the best first date ever or spending the night cuddled on the couch watching reality television. It doesn’t matter.”

She used their interlocked hands to haul Riley up against her, wrapping her arms around her waist and holding tight. “I love you, Riley. I love you, and I am in love with you, and minä rakastan sinua and ti amo. If there was any other language I could use to say it, I would. Because I always have.”

Gianna could feel Riley’s heart beating as they pressed against one another, Riley’s arms around her neck.

Riley turned her head, then, enough so that she could plant kisses on Gianna’s face, and Gianna wanted to laugh and cry, but only in all of the good ways.

“I know you didn’t want to spend the night together as my perfect first date. But, as

my best friend, I need to tell you all about my night with my favorite person. Let's call her... Genuine Gianna."

As her chuckle escaped her, Gianna decided she'd allow Riley to take over the mantle in giving her dates nicknames this one time.

Especially because she fully intended for there to be no others.

Part

Two

THEN COMES MARRIAGE

The Before

AGE: 22

Riley stared desolately down at her ring finger. More aptly, at the spot that had the very light indentation from the engagement ring she'd worn for only a week. But... she'd come to love it.

God, it hurt.

Not her finger. But her feelings. Her heart.

It ached, and she sniffled as she cuddled deeper into Gianna's side.

She rested her head on Gianna's shoulder, which was the perfect height for her. "I'm sorry for crying all over you," she whispered, her throat sore from all of the aforementioned crying.

Gianna shifted her arm, the one that had been wrapped snugly around Riley, to rest it against Riley's head. Gently holding her in place against her shoulder, gently stroking her long fingers through Riley's hair.

The sensation soothed her, making her shiver pleasantly as she took a long, deep inhale, breathing in Gianna's scent, which also comforted her.

"Don't you dare apologize for crying against me, okay? That's why I have shoulders – for you to lean on. If this one gets too water-logged, you can switch to the other one," Gianna's assured her, voice both firm and soft, and lodging exactly where Riley needed it.

She turned even more into Gianna, burying her face against her.

This side of her wasn't something that often rose to the surface. Riley had become a master at self-soothing the summer after her dad had died, and she couldn't believe this was her life right now.

"I'm such a fucking idiot," she muttered, the heat in her tone racing through her body.

But, god, was she angry. Angry at herself for accepting Ashton's proposal in the first place – she was twenty-two! What the hell was she thinking?! Riley wasn't typically someone that leapt into something like this, but she'd... loved the idea of building a life with him.

"Don't." Gianna's hand in her hair tugged just firmly enough to get Riley to look up at her. There was a ferocity in Gianna's blue eyes that stole Riley's breath from her lungs. "Don't you dare get upset with yourself for the fact that Asshole Ashton cheated on you. That is not your fault in any way." Her gaze searched Riley's, and she looked so earnest, no hint of pretense or playfulness. "Riley, you were an amazing partner to him for the last two years. And I saw him with you; he didn't give

any hint that he would turn around and do something like this.”

Riley swallowed hard as she nodded.

Gianna slid her hand down to Riley’s chin before she could look away, as if Gianna could read her mind and knew that Riley had been about to do just that.

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“You need to listen to me, okay? Like, if there was only one thing you’d ever listen to me about, I need it to be this.” Gianna paused, waiting for Riley to agree.

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Riley, if someone was worthy of you? They’d move heaven and earth to be with you.” There was such a fire in Gianna’s tone, such a certainty, that it left no room for argument. “There wouldn’t be any ‘moments of weakness’ because you should be the only woman on their mind like that. Asshole Ashton doesn’t deserve an ounce of forgiveness.”

She resumed stroking Riley’s hair, the softness of her touch such a contrast to the unyielding firmness in her voice.

“You’re right,” she breathed.

“I know. Because you, Riley, are so good. You are too good to let Mr. I’m too good for social media and I only eat granola before noon be your big love.” She kept her eyes on Riley’s, the look in them so insistent, so bright, so... full, it made Riley’s heart skip a beat. Gianna’s long fingers scratched slightly at her head, making her shiver pleasantly. “You will find someone so much better for you. Someone who loves you entirely, every inch of you. You will find someone who loves you so much, the very idea of causing you pain would be unthinkable. I’m one-hundred percent sure of it. You’ll get married to that person, not anyone that gives you anything less.”

The Wedding

AGE: 31

Riley never imagined that she would be the type of person to suggest getting married in a Vegas chapel on what could be referred to as a whim.

That was the main reason she'd kept her mouth tightly closed against that thought for the last few days, ever since they'd walked past the wedding chapel inside The Fox and Hyde Hotel.

We should get married.

The first time the thought made itself known in Riley's mind was the very first night they'd all arrived in Vegas, two days ago. She, Gianna, Ellie, Mia, and Joel had been taking an informal tour of the vast grounds of the resort casino and had happened across the chapel.

Which should have been entirely insignificant to Riley.

Only, it hadn't been.

She'd glanced at it but had then been struck by the clear vision of herself and Gianna. And it was so, so clear. She could see them sliding rings onto each other's fingers. She could practically hear the I do.

She'd blinked out of the image as their group continued walking.

Last night, the thought had struck again as she'd stood next to Gianna at the roulette table. Gianna had bet an obscene amount of money – thousands – and won against the odds.

When she'd turned to Riley, her blue eyes slight with victory as she'd leaned down to

kiss her, Riley had sighed into that kiss. And, as she closed her eyes, the image appeared all over again, bringing this strong, intense want with it.

Again, she'd pushed it away. Because it was the logical thing to do, right?

She'd only technically been in a relationship with Gianna for six months – though if they counted the start from their first kiss, that became eight months... which was still technically not that long.

While she and Gianna lived together now, that development had only happened three months ago. Again – fairly quick.

Riley knew without a shadow of a doubt that if she were in a relationship with anyone else on the planet, this wouldn't be a thought she'd have been mildly entertaining. It would have been something she'd have laughed at. If someone she was dating for less than a fucking year brought up marriage – let alone the idea of elopement – she'd probably have dumped them right then and there.

So, she'd kept that thought private then, too. Though, admittedly, she knew Gianna definitely wouldn't dump her for voicing it.

The thought – which had now shifted into an actual desire – settled inside her yet again, though, as they sat at one of the trendy restaurants, finishing their dinner. The restaurant that happened to be located across from the chapel.

The sound of metal clinking against glass pulled her back to the moment and saw Gianna responsible for the start of a toast. Her eyes were on Riley, though, and the second they locked eyes and Gianna arched an eyebrow at her, Riley could read the unspoken question. What's on your mind?

Feeling her lips tug into a somewhat nervous smile, she subtly shook her head.

Nothing important.

Gianna quirked her lips slightly to the side, telling Riley she wasn't entirely convinced.

Still, Gianna turned to address Ellie, Mia, and Joel.

“Before the group splits into separate ways tonight, I want to propose a toast,” Gianna announced, lifting her wine glass a few inches off the table already.

“To my favorite pair of twins on the planet – happy birthday. Ellie, you brilliant human, you continue to change the world on a macro scale and, on a micro scale, you change all of ours, too.”

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Ellie smiled, her cheeks flushing slightly as everyone leaned in and lightly clinked their glasses against hers, with Mia turning and pressing her lips against Ellie's cheek.

Gianna's smile widened, her eyes gleaming as she winked, "Macro, micro... I hope you appreciate the scientific terms I used just for you."

"Very scientific," Ellie agreed, her mouth pulling into a smile as she held Gianna's gaze and nodded in that serious way she had.

"Last but never, ever least..." Gianna turned, gazing at Riley from the seat next to hers. And, as always, the adoration in it swept through her. "Riley, you deserve all of the good things in the world; I am merely thrilled to have the privilege to continue to be by your side for them."

She felt that all-encompassing feeling wash through her very veins as she leaned in and pressed her lips to Gianna's, unable to stop herself.

At this time last year, she would have never imagined where her life would be. How could she have?!

And yet, this time last year, she'd been celebrating her birthday much the same way – with Gianna by her side, making her feel like she was the most important person on earth.

Bolstered on by that feeling, she lifted her glass again before everyone could set theirs down.

“I’m also proposing a toast.” She arched an eyebrow at Gianna, whose blue eyes never strayed from Riley’s face. “To Gianna. For organizing this trip to Vegas for all of us and turning it into a birthday celebration for Ellie and me when in reality,” she stressed, deliberately tapping her glass lightly against her girlfriend’s, “The entire reason this trip was happening in the first place is because of her brilliant work with Worthy.”

The little smile that played on the corners of Gianna’s lips was as sheepish as Gianna would ever wear, as she held Riley’s gaze inches away.

And god damn it if Riley didn’t find it absolutely charming.

How did Gianna do it? She vaguely wondered, as she often did. How did she wear self-deprecating with as much charm and beauty as she did when she was glowingly self-possessed? How was she so unquestionably, unfathomably arresting, no matter what?

This had been something Riley had thought about since long before they’d ever been romantic, but now, she felt a wonderment along with it. A brand-new appreciation.

When Gianna slowly lifted her eyebrows, and Joel cleared his throat questioningly, Riley realized she’d paused a little too long to be normal, getting caught up in those thoughts.

She might have been embarrassed if she had been seated with anyone else in the world. But for Gianna, Ellie, Joel, and Mia to catch her admiring Gianna, Riley didn’t have anything to be embarrassed about.

Clearing her throat, she continued, “In true Gianna fashion, she took her own success and made it something for all of us to share and celebrate.”

“To Gianna,” Mia gamely, warmly toasted, lifting her glass again.

As they finished up at the restaurant, Riley sat back and observed everyone, letting her thoughts meander again.

Gianna had ended up getting some meetings set up with the execs of a large lingerie retail distributor, and as soon as the date had been set for late August, she’d excitedly informed the entire group that she finagled a weekend for them in Vegas.

She’d then arranged little lists of activities for all of them that they’d be interested in since Ellie, Mia, and Joel weren’t interested in gambling. Different shows and events, little things they’d all enjoy.

As they left the restaurant, they were all breaking off into little groups to enjoy their final evening here. Gianna had gotten Joel tickets to some sort of lights show that he was ecstatic about, and Ellie and Mia were going to the last show in a physics expo at the convention center attached to the hotel.

And Gianna was responsible for it all, Riley thought, as she watched their group disperse, leaving her and Gianna alone at the exit.

Gianna sighed exaggeratedly, a small smile on her lips as they watched them go. “Babies, all of them. I feel like I’m watching my children toddle off into the bright Vegas lights.”

Riley couldn’t help but laugh, leaning her shoulder into Gianna’s. “And what amazing parents we would be in that respect.”

“Do you remember our first trip to Vegas?” Gianna asked thoughtfully as she looked around.

She craned her head to be able to give Gianna the incredulous look that question deserved. “Do I remember? Do I remember coming here on the Fourth of July for your twenty-fourth birthday, getting caught up in an accidental parade, you winning ten thousand dollars in roulette, and then watching the most insane fireworks show from our top-floor hotel balcony.... Hmm.” Riley tapped her fingers against her chin as she screwed up her face in faux contemplation. “I’m not quite sure.”

Gianna laughed loudly and exuberantly – a sound of sheer joy – even as she lightly pinched at Riley. “No need to get sassy.”

“I think it’s very fair to get sassy when you ask me if I remember our first trip here.” She shot Gianna a look. “I remember every trip we’ve ever taken.”

After all, every big travel experience Riley had taken since college had been with Gianna. From visiting Mummo in Finland and then traveling to the rest of the Nordic countries to taking the train through the majority of the rest of Europe, to the countless islands they’d visited on relaxing resorts. Even in the states – she and Gianna had gone to the Grand Canyon together, to the Outer Banks, Napa Valley, skiing in Aspen.

“You may travel quite a bit for work without me, but all of my excursions are with you,” Riley reminded her.

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Gianna's gaze was so warm as it landed on her. "I suppose you're right." She arched a look down at Riley, then, "Even though this is technically a work trip for me, this trip is just as much for you as it is for me." As she spoke, Gianna slid her arm over Riley's shoulders and tugged her close as they walked.

It was wild, Riley still thought, that she fit so well against Gianna like this. It was crazy that while she'd always known how they'd fit together, how it could still feel so new, exciting, familiar, and comfortable all at once.

"Gianna, love," she used as stern a voice as she could, as she corrected, "We're here because you just signed a deal to have Worthy sold in boutiques across the fucking country. It just happened that they wanted to fly you out and meet with you the day after my birthday."

Gianna frowned at her, pausing their already slow pace so she could look directly at Riley. "What, I'm going to come to Las Vegas during your literal birthday and not bring you? Absurd. It'll never catch on."

Riley laughed, wrapping her own arm tightly around Gianna's waist and tugging her against her as closely as she could. Instinctively, she turned into Gianna's light touch as her girlfriend reached up to cup her jaw, lightly stroking her thumb over Riley's cheek.

And even though she'd been joking only moments ago, Riley could see the very serious look in her eyes as she murmured, "Plus, it's not just about this being your birthday, carina. You've been so stressed with work in the last few weeks, working that story, helping Caterina and Maren... you needed a little getaway. Hence, you

needed this.”

Gianna wasn't wrong.

Riley, as she'd combed through all of her information leads for stories earlier this month, had come across the plight of Caterina. Whose long-term partner, Maren, had gotten into a car accident, subsequently falling into a coma. By the time Caterina had been notified, she then hadn't been allowed in Maren's ICU room, as it had been denoted as family only.

Even though they lived together, even though they'd been together for over four years, their lack of legality and a seriously homophobic hospital administrator had made a traumatic situation even worse.

It hadn't reached any large stations, but Caterina had made a plea for help on social media, and Riley's attention had been snagged. As had her empathy.

She'd worked with Caterina, gaining viral attention on their GoFundMe and calling out the hospital. And though Maren's story did have a tentatively happy ending, working on that ongoing story, going on that journey with Caterina, had taken a serious toll on Riley's mental and emotional energy.

“I love how much you care and want to make things right for people,” Gianna continued, her voice so soft. Just as soft as the slide of her thumb against Riley's cheekbone. “But I also know that it's my job to make sure things are right with you. No matter what's going on with my work stuff.”

God. Riley's heart thudded in her chest, and she didn't think it was possible to fall more in love with Gianna, but somehow, she was.

She felt that way all of the time.

Before their relationship had turned romantic, Riley wouldn't have thought she'd be able to love Gianna even more than she did. Then she'd fallen in love with her.

She wouldn't have thought she'd be able to spend more time with Gianna because they'd already spent at least half of their free time together. But within the first couple months of officially being together, she found that she'd essentially moved into Gianna's house without either of them even realizing that she was practically living there.

Every day that went by, she swore that she felt more for this woman who had already been by her side for over ten years.

It was something she had never felt with anyone. Honestly, it was a phenomenon she hadn't even known could exist.

And the thought slid into her mind all over again – or maybe it never even left. This time, Riley didn't have any control to hold it back. She just couldn't. She didn't want to.

“I want to marry you.”

Gianna's smile softened, the teasing glint falling away from her gaze, leaving only pure warmth. “I want that, too. As I told you on our first date, like a crazy person.”

“No,” Riley shook her head, not even laughing at the reminder of Gianna's first-date ramble. She swallowed hard as she felt her heart leaping in her chest. “Like... I want to marry you, and I don't want to wait.”

Gianna's smile slowly faded entirely, the look in her eyes turning incredibly serious. “Are you telling me that you want to get married here? In Vegas? Like, now?”

When repeated back to her like that, Riley felt like it should have sounded crazy. But it did. It really didn't. It sounded right, and she found herself nodding.

Gianna closed her eyes tightly before opening them and leveling Riley with a look, sliding her arm off of Riley's shoulders so she could face her head-on. "Don't mess with me here."

"I'm not messing with you," she insisted, feeling the truth of that pulse through her veins, and she reached for Gianna's hands. She'd gotten so used to feeling them on her own. "I know this might make me sound like the crazy person, but – it's been something that's been in the back of my mind ever since Caterina and Maren's story. I want to get the phone call. If something happens to you, I need to get the phone call. I need to be in the room. Legally, indisputably. The world is terrifying, and anything could happen at any time. I want to be in the room. And I want you to be in my room."

"I do, too," Gianna assured her, squeezing her hand around Riley's with the strength in her voice. "God fucking help anyone who tried to keep me away."

"And if we do it more traditionally, it's going to become a whole thing," she vaguely gestured with her free hand. "Where parents are going to get involved, with guest lists and caterers and venues and headaches and publicity." The more Riley spoke, the more convinced she became. "I don't want stress or complications or the craziness. I just want... you."

"You know, you don't have to convince me," Gianna said, eyes searching Riley's, her lips pulling into the widest, brightest smile. "I'd marry you any day, any time. I just want to make sure it's what you want."

"I've never been more sure of wanting someone in my life."

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“It’s also nice because I have the crazy-person rights reserved for our first date, and now you have the crazy ramble rights for our engagement.” Gianna laughed softly, seeming to absolutely glow.

And Riley didn’t refute her, as she used their hands to tug Gianna down and capture her lips with her own.

Riley didn’t need to have shared a womb with Ellie to see the doubt in her eyes an hour later as they stood in one of the clothing stores in the shopping complex of the hotel.

Before answering her sister, she frowned thoughtfully in the mirror at her reflection.

While she was about to get married, unplanned, in a chapel in Vegas, there were some traditions Riley wanted to uphold. And wearing a white dress was one of them.

“Can you just – can you just run me through everything again?” Ellie asked, from where she sat on one of the chairs in the dressing room.

Riley paused from appraising this particular dress – sweetheart neckline, sheer lace long sleeves, stopping just above her knee... it was a big contender – and moved to sit in the chair next to her sister.

Allaying Ellie’s anxieties was something she could do, especially since this was something she very much wanted Ellie to celebrate and enjoy along with her.

“Gianna and I want to get married while we’re here. We decided we wanted to do it

quick and easy and with only our favorite people.” She smiled, reaching out and placing her hand on her twin’s knee, rubbing lightly. “You, Mia, and Joel are the people we need for this, and we’re all here. It’s kind of... perfect.”

The line between Ellie’s eyebrows did not dissipate.

Riley nodded and kept going, “The clerk’s office here in Vegas is open until midnight, so we went down and filed for our same-day license. On the way back is when we asked all of you to meet us in the lobby.”

Ellie slowly nodded, signifying that she was following along despite not saying a word.

“We are planning on doing a bigger ceremony later in the year so that Mom and Gianna’s grandmother can come, as well as everyone else. And that’s where we’re going to start wearing wedding rings.”

Really, as soon as they decided they would get married, the rest of these details had become crystal clear to both of them. If Riley had needed any other sign that this was right, there it was.

“Then why did we just go to the jeweler?” Ellie asked, gesturing at the small, simple white bag that contained the engagement ring Riley had purchased for Gianna.

And just the thought of the ring made her stomach flutter in anticipation all over again.

“Because we’re going to exchange those rings tonight. Gianna is getting my ring and her dress now, and we’re going to meet in the chapel in...” She checked the time on her phone. “An hour.”

That part of the plan had also been easy to figure out. They wanted to surprise one another with the rings, and they both wanted to pick out the ring they felt suited to each other. They both wanted to surprise one another with their dress choices.

It had made sense for them to separate, then, after informing their companions of their plan for the evening.

Riley had taken Ellie with her, both wanting the company and knowing that Ellie would have many questions. Gianna was going to take Joel, who had been thrilled. Mia had also gone with Gianna and Joel, graciously inferring that she was going to run interference between Joel and Gianna so that Joel's excitement didn't impede Gianna's ability to get everything done.

God. She was going to marry Gianna Mäkinen in an hour.

The rush that gave her was so heady that it stole her breath.

"And you didn't have any trouble booking a time at the chapel?"

Riley sent her sister an exasperated look. "El. It's Gianna. Getting a timeslot for tonight was maybe the easiest part of the entire plan for her."

Which was no exaggeration. Gianna's name, her charm, and her influence opened many doors. And she was not above using them in times like these.

And Riley would be lying if she said that watching Gianna talk their way into getting married at one of the busiest chapels in Vegas at the last minute hadn't been... appealing.

Bearing witness to Gianna's charismatic and quick-talking abilities had always been a sight to behold. Being incredibly attracted to Gianna had turned the heat up on that

admiration.

Swallowing at the thought, she cleared her throat and pushed herself back into the moment.

Ellie's frown had lessened slightly, but she was still twisting her engagement ring back and forth. "I mean... it's just – it's quick." She seemed to make herself say the words, glancing at Riley after with a wince. "I don't mean that you shouldn't do it. I only mean that... you weren't planning on doing this before we came? And now – and you and Gianna have only been together for a short time, so..."

She trailed off, nodding at her own words.

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And Riley's affection for her sister settled warmly inside of her as she met Ellie's comments with her own accepting nod. "You wouldn't be Ellie Beckett if you weren't thinking about that," she acknowledged, and she wasn't upset in the least for Ellie actually voicing it because she knew very well that Ellie said it from a place of love for both her and Gianna.

Still, after a beat, Riley shook her head and quietly said, "But I don't think quick is the right word here. It's impulsive, maybe, but it's not quick."

As if summoned by those words, snapshots of her relationship with Gianna flashed through her mind. From that first day, they'd met, on this literal day thirteen years ago, through being roommates for years, to the traditions they'd built, into the turns their relationship had taken in the last year.

Her heart felt full with them, and the emotion swept through her as she said, "Gianna has been the most important person to me for over ten years. I know literally everything there is to know about her, and she knows the same for me. So... maybe we have only been in a romantic relationship for a relatively short time, but it doesn't change the fact that Gianna and I are closer and more embedded in each other's lives than a lot of couples who have been together for three times longer than we have."

She held Ellie's unwavering gaze so that she could see just how real this was for her. How this wasn't some flight of fancy she was swept up in.

"We don't have to get married right here, right now. But even if we waited another year or for five more years, there is nothing that I could learn about Gianna that I don't already know," she asserted, confidently. "I'm more sure about that than I am

of anything else in the entire world.”

The more she spoke, the more that concerned crinkle between Ellie’s eyebrows disappeared, and by the time she was done, Ellie wasn’t frowning anymore. She studied Riley’s face carefully, and Riley knew she was contemplating what she’d said.

“Let me ask you – and I want you to be brutally honest.” Riley licked her lips, not sure if she’d ever been more serious in her life, as she waited for Ellie’s go-ahead to continue. “Do you think that my relationship with Gianna is going to end in any other way but this? Speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

Slowly, Ellie’s hand landed on the one Riley still had resting on her knee. “No,” she answered several seconds later, her voice quiet. “I really don’t.”

And even though Riley had believed that would be the answer, even though she knew that to be true, hearing Ellie’s agreement – her approval – felt like Riley had gotten the final thing checked off of her list.

She turned to look at the mirror in front of them.

Technically, she supposed, this dress would be the final thing.

Riley had wondered, occasionally, what she would feel the day she got married – if it turned out that she would ever get married.

And even though she’d imagined she’d feel excited, she never knew it would feel like this.

This feeling like she was about to float out of the building, this giddy anticipation coursing through her.

She was getting married to Gianna.

She and Joel were now waiting with the officiant, as Gianna had texted her that she would come down a minute later for “the full wedding aisle effect.”

God, she loved her.

Riley pulled her expectant gaze away from the end of the aisle when she heard Joel snuffle.

Then did a double take, confused. “Are you crying? Are you okay?”

He nodded, swiping his hand hastily over his eyes. “I’m great, I just – you and Gianna are so meant to be. You’re going to be so happy together, and it’s so rare to have what you two have, and I’ve been able to see the entire journey... I just...” He cleared his throat and took in a deep breath. “I’m good.”

Affection washed over her as she reached out and gently squeezed his wrist. “I get it.”

With all of the feelings coursing through her, she wouldn’t be shocked if she started crying soon, either. She –

She had no thoughts when Gianna appeared at the end of the aisle.

Wearing a long, backless white silk dress – somehow both classic and modern – and her hair curled, the sight of her made Riley choke on the breath she’d taken in.

Gianna never failed to be the most beautiful person in any room. And she was going to marry Riley in mere minutes.

“Are you okay?” Joel leaned in and whispered.

Riley couldn’t find the words to answer aloud. They didn’t exist.

Riley wasn’t sure of anything other than Gianna existed in the following minutes. All she could feel was amazement, wonder, and love twisting inside her.

She only touched back down in reality, nearing the end of the ceremony, when Gianna spoke, “I know we didn’t discuss it, given that we only decided to do this a few hours ago.” She smiled brightly at their officiant before settling her gaze on Riley. “But I do have vows I want to make.” She squeezed Riley’s hands, which fit so perfectly in hers. “You don’t have to say anything; I know you don’t like public speaking, and—”

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“I have vows, too,” she cut in, feeling absolutely, utterly certain. “And I want to say them.”

No, she didn’t have anything pre-planned. And no, she did not like public speaking.

But, at this moment, none of that mattered.

“Gianna No-Middle-Name Mäkinen,” Riley began, feeling her heart flutter in her chest. Not from nerves but excitement. “I don’t need to spend days or weeks or even hours trying to figure out my feelings for you or how to say them. That’s never been the issue between us.”

She paused, taking a second to look at Gianna. To take in this moment.

“At the beginning of our... journey... last year,” she referenced, feeling a small bubble of laughter climb out of her throat. “You told me that I should never be less picky, in relationships. I should only be with someone I want to talk to after a long day, not just someone I want to want.”

For some reason, even though she hadn’t at all pictured Gianna romantically at that time, Riley could hear those words as clear as day.

“No one fits that description more than you, and I hope you know it. I know you’ve been with me through every twist and turn in relationships throughout our adult lives, and you always – always – implored that I–” Riley cut herself off, shaking her head with another laugh. “Sorry, not implored. You always demanded that I never settle for anyone who makes me feel any less than the best thing that’s ever happened to

them.”

“Damn right,” Gianna whispered, a sexy, self-satisfied smirk on her lips.

Riley found herself smiling back, waiting a few seconds before she seriously confessed, “Your words were something I wanted to believe I could find but didn’t actually think was possible. I’m just... an ordinary person. Somewhat of a workaholic. Maybe too interested in reality dating shows. And, if past relationships were anything to go by, a little too honest about my thoughts and expectations.”

Her blood rushed through her ears as all semblance of laughter fell away, and she was left with this whole-body love for the woman in front of her.

“You are the person I needed. And every day, I’m so glad that I could finally open my eyes and see it. To see you. See you as not only my best friend who has a beautiful heart and my favorite sense of humor, with whom I align so perfectly, but as the partner I didn’t think was a reality.”

The power of that, how strongly she felt those words, almost made her weak in the knees. Like all the blood in her circulation was concentrated so strongly in her heart, as if it got bigger every second she stood at the altar.

And she could see it reflected in Gianna’s eyes. In those beautiful, deep blue eyes that were slightly watery after Riley finished speaking.

“Riley Jane Beckett,” Gianna started, and her smile dimmed. It didn’t disappear, but that blinding, charismatic aspect she often wore around most people – even their friends – melted away, leaving only the small, sweet, genuine smile. One she wore during their laundry nights or when they drank their coffee together in the morning.

Riley felt it right down to her toes.

“Sometimes, I don’t know what I could say to you about how I feel about you that I haven’t said already. But, then, every day, I find more words to express how much I love you.” She stroked her thumbs softly over Riley’s knuckles. “And it brings me back to when we became really close, so long ago. I’d never had a friend like you in my life. Never had a person like you in my life. Someone who just wanted to... spend time with me.”

The vulnerability that edged into Gianna’s tone tugged at something deep inside of Riley, and she was the one who squeezed Gianna’s hands then. She needed to make sure she knew Riley was here, at this moment, as her anchor.

“Sometimes, back then, I’d think – is today going to be the day that Riley and I don’t have anything to talk about anymore? It’s not like we were doing things all of the time, you know? Most of those days were just us... living life,” Gianna’s voice got quiet, thoughtful, as she looked down at their feet for a moment. When she looked back up, her blue eyes were so clear and so deep as they intently captured Riley’s. “But we never ran out of things to talk about. Doing laundry with you, watching television with you, having late-night talks... going out, staying in – I realized that it didn’t matter what we did. That we could do absolutely nothing, but as long as I was doing it with you, it was what I wanted to be doing.”

Riley didn’t know when the tears sprung into her eyes, but she had to blink them back. She didn’t know when her heart started pounding so hard in her chest.

Somehow, she hadn’t realized that it would feel like a big deal when she'd suggested they get married. Conceptually, sure, marriage was “a big deal.”

But it hadn’t felt like it earlier. Getting married to Gianna had simply felt like the easy, no-brainer next step.

And it was.

But right now, as she grasped tightly at Gianna's hands in her own, she felt the gravity of it all.

“And I've known it every day since. Living life with you has been my dream. I just never knew it would get to come true like this. A literal dream come true,” Gianna finished with a murmur, her eyes searching Riley's.

The raw honesty in them reached somewhere deep inside Riley, grabbed, and held tightly. She didn't think that hold would ever loosen.

And she didn't want it to.

Part

Three

THEN COMES BABY

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The Before

AGE: 24

Gianna sighed, blissfully, as she rolled onto her stomach.

She was spread out over her towel on the white sand beach of the resort she and Riley were staying at in Aruba. The sun was out, she was relaxed, Riley had rubbed sunscreen over her back...

All right, that hadn't actually been relaxing for her, so much as incredibly arousing.

But Gianna was now several years along in her deep, unyielding love and desire for Riley Beckett, and she was really great at re-directing her mind and re-focusing her body's natural impulses. She'd been able to tamp down the sheer lust at Riley's touch after a minute and just... enjoy the connection.

"Do you want kids?" Riley's voice broke into her thoughts.

Gianna blinked her eyes open, lifting her head to peer over at Riley, both baffled and amused. "What did you just say?"

Riley was laid out next to her, only – unlike Gianna – spread out on her back. The bathing suit she wore was a classic one-piece, with a halter top that dipped scandalously low between her breasts.

So low that Gianna had nearly swallowed her tongue on sight, and she'd noted

several other very appreciative spectators throughout the day so far as well.

“Did you seriously just ask me, while we’re taking our first official grown-up vacation together, if I want to have children?” She couldn’t help but laugh as she pushed herself up on her elbows, wanting to get a better look at Riley.

Who was looking at her thoughtfully as she vaguely gestured down to the water in front of them. Gianna didn’t have to look to hear the kids that were splashing around in the surf. “I just realized that we talk about basically everything, but I don’t think we’ve ever talked about that.”

Gianna studied Riley, realizing that she was right; they hadn’t ever talked about this. “Do you? You’ve never seemed all that interested in bringing new life into the world.”

She delivered the words jokingly, but she realized that she was increasingly interested in Riley’s answer.

Riley slowly moved her gaze back down to the water, her eyebrows furrowed. “I don’t think so,” she slowly answered. “I mean... I think literally raising a kid wouldn’t be something I’m against. But I just don’t think I’d ever want to be pregnant.” As soon as she spoke, she frowned – adorably – as she shook her head. “Yeah, no. Even saying that aloud made me feel all kinds of wrong.”

Gianna laughed, resting her head against her palm, feeling utterly enamored at Riley’s expression. “But you’d want them if you weren’t the one carrying them?”

Again, Riley slowly nodded with that thoughtful expression. “Yeah, maybe.”

This really wasn’t something Gianna had ever thought about, before. Hell, what did Gianna know about being a parent? She’d had the worst two examples in the world.

And yet... she felt this strange, new tug around her heart as she thought of the pictures she'd seen of Riley and Ellie when they were little. Staring at Riley, she saw such a clear mental picture of mini-Rileys running around on this beach, laughing.

The warmth that gripped her was so unfamiliar, she didn't quite know what to make of it.

All she knew was that she needed to turn her face away from Riley and face forward, before she let the offer to carry Riley's babies slip out.

The Discussion

AGE: 32

It was kind of crazy to Gianna, in all honesty, how very little some aspects of life changed between when she and Riley had been best friends to where they were now, after being married for a year.

The thought occurred to her, as it occasionally did, as she called out to Riley, "Do you need anything from the kitchen?" while on the way to the laundry room.

They still slotted in time to do their laundry together. They still planned to watch their favorite reality shows afterward. They still cuddled on the couch while doing so.

"No, I'm good!" Riley called back.

The simple answer thrilled Gianna, though, because it meant she could go see Riley for the first time all freaking day without needing to waste any more time.

She paused – entirely unintentionally – in the doorway to the laundry room, though, as she felt her heart flutter in her chest at the sight of Riley.

Whose back was to her, her hair still pulled up in the style she'd tamed it into this morning before she'd gone to the station. Wisps of that honey blonde hair had escaped, curling cutely at the nape of her neck.

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She was wearing a pair of sweatpants that she'd changed into once arriving home paired with the button-down she'd worn to work, with the sleeves unevenly folded up just over her elbows. This wasn't an uncommon combination for Riley to change into after coming home for the day. But something about it always gave Gianna an extra sense of affection.

Mostly because she could remember this being how Riley would dress years ago, all the way back in college. When she returned home, she'd dress for comfort. Just like she'd tried to persuade Gianna into doing.

This love, this attraction that welled up inside of her, and even their literal routine – none of this was new. Their domesticity was unparalleled, even when they'd been friends.

Riley turned around, winging an eyebrow up at Gianna. "Just gonna stand there and watch me take care of the home, like some sort of housewife?" She smartly asked while dangling one of Gianna's fresh-from-the-dryer tank tops from her fingers.

Her lips curled into the cutest smile, giving away her sardonic tone.

Of course, many things had changed from when they'd been only friends, too.

Namely...

Gianna stepped forward, cocking her head. "Listen, I've offered you the life of a kept woman over and over – is it my fault that you didn't want to wait until I got home before you started the laundry?"

“Is it my fault that your meetings ran over schedule?” Riley shot back, giving the tank top still hanging from her fingers a little spin.

Gianna grabbed it from her and dropped it onto the counter. She used her other arm to wrap around Riley’s waist, pulling her right up against her. She reveled in the audible intake of breath Riley let out before she dipped down and slid her lips against Riley’s.

Immediately, she felt Riley melt against her and swallowed the hum that Riley breathed into her mouth.

Yes, this was different.

And even though it was far from new for them now, Gianna still felt the electricity dance down her spine at the contact. She could feel her blood buzzing through her veins as Riley deepened the kiss, brushing her tongue against Gianna’s, as she curled her fingers into Gianna’s hair.

After several minutes, she felt Riley gently pull back. Even after she broke their kiss, she leaned back in to brush her soft, plush lips against Gianna’s once more. Like she couldn’t get enough.

As always, it made Gianna’s stomach flutter, and her mouth tugged into a bright smile as she looked down at Riley. “Hello, love.”

“Hello to you, too,” Riley parroted, the grin on her face mirroring Gianna’s. “I take it your meetings went well?”

Gianna nodded. “Incredibly. I’ll tell you about it when we have dinner.”

As of the last year, since Worthy had been picked up for commercial lingerie outlets, her work pursuing her true passion in design had increased ten-fold. At this point, she

worked more for Worthy than she did on anything for social media most days.

“First, I’d like you to tell me about your day,” she insisted. She slid out one of the stools and took a seat. She started folding the laundry Riley had already pulled out of the dryer.

She loved that Riley knew her well enough that she needed a little bit of decompression time from the long day of meetings before rehashing it all without needing to say it directly.

Riley nodded, taking in a breath as she launched into telling Gianna the most recent of her work escapades.

And even though Riley wasn’t in the midst of any upheaval or dramas at work, and this story was just a run-of-the-mill daily life update, Gianna found herself totally lost in Riley’s words.

Again, this was nothing new. She always found everything about Riley’s life worth giving her attention to.

But the vivid vision that formed in her mind’s eye as she listened... was relatively new. The vision of them coming home to each other at the end of every day, of doing their laundry together, listening to every mundane story – with another member of their family added.

The picture of herself bouncing a baby – their baby – on her lap as she sat here in this stool, while they both listened to the calming, soft cadence of Riley’s voice.

This vision had started about a month ago in various ways. It always started, though, in moments like this. Moments where she and Riley were living their normal, everyday life.

Then, so easily, she could see those moments transform. She could see having their child sitting at the counter while they cooked. She could hear multiple children running around in the living room while she and Riley snuck away for a make-out session in this very laundry room.

She could imagine the way the hallway shoe rack would look. Admittedly, they would likely need a new shoe rack dedicated to their children's shoes, because theirs was already completely full. But she could see that, too.

And every time she had these images in her mind, they gripped her in a way so intense that it stole her breath away. It stole her focus, entirely.

“Do you remember how I wanted to have a whole herd?” She found herself saying, wincing, when she realized that she'd unthinkingly cut Riley off. “Sorry. For interrupting. I just.” She licked her lips, feeling her heart start beating double-time in her chest as she held Riley's gaze with her own. “Do you remember?”

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Riley paused while folding their shared sweatshirt, her surprise at Gianna's question obvious. "Excuse me?"

Still entirely too aware of the beating of her heart, she elaborated, "A herd. Of children. Yours, specifically."

"You mean, on our first date? When you told me you wanted to have my babies?" A teasing smile tugged at Riley's mouth. "Yes, I think I vaguely recall it."

"Okay, wise guy." But even Gianna found herself grinning at the memory, even as she felt her cheeks heat ever so slightly.

Riley sobered as Gianna insistently held her gaze, her hazel eyes searching Gianna's. "Why do you ask?"

This wasn't how Gianna had intended to approach the conversation. If pressed, she really hadn't known how she'd have intended to approach this conversation, but it would have involved more flair than blurting it out in the middle of a laundry night, catching Riley entirely off-guard.

But they were here, and she had brought it up, and she could feel in her veins how very much she wanted to keep the conversation going. Holding onto that, she continued, "Because I think it's time that we maybe get serious about it."

If Gianna hadn't already been aware that she'd caught Riley by surprise, she'd have known by the way Riley essentially dropped heavily into her seat, continuing to stare at Gianna as her eyebrows furrowed. Deeply.

“I just...” Riley’s fingers toyed subconsciously at the neck of their sweatshirt. “Wow. Okay. I guess I just didn’t expect this.”

“In fairness, I did tell you I wanted kids on our first date. As you vaguely recall,” she joked, deliberately bumping her knees against Riley’s, needing to establish some connection. Especially with the nerves in her stomach acting up the way they were.

Riley stared at her, dropping her warm hand to Gianna’s knee. “You absolutely did.”

“And, as it stands, I’m thirty-two. So, it’s probably a good time to start coming up with some sort of plan,” she added, landing her hand on top of Riley’s, taking comfort in the familiar touch.

God, she didn’t know why she was feeling so nervous about this. This was just Riley.

Bolstering herself with that thought, she squeezed Riley’s hand. “If you’re not ready for this conversation—”

But Riley shook her head, silently cutting Gianna off. “No, that’s not—” She cut herself off, taking a deep breath once more, seemingly needing to settle herself. “I think I need to do some research? Before we talk about it.”

Something was going on there, in the storm behind Riley’s eyes. Something that Gianna couldn’t quite put her finger on, which was the most confusing part about this entire interaction.

Not being able to read Riley like a book was among Gianna’s least favorite things.

She nodded, though. After all, she’d had time to think about this subject for weeks; it was only fair to give Riley the same time.

“Deal.”

She leaned in, brushing her lips briefly, softly against Riley’s. Sealed with a kiss.

As they sat in the kitchen for the meeting Riley had put on their shared calendar entitled On the Subject of Children, Gianna wasn’t surprised in the least as Riley pulled out a literal file, filled with printed pages, annotated with notes. You can take the woman out of the shared womb with Ellie, but the imprint of Ellie remained.

However, she was curious and leaned over to try and steal a look. “What are those?”

Riley playfully lifted the tops of the pages to keep Gianna from seeing everything she’d prepared, softly kicking her socked foot out at Gianna’s. “No peeking.”

She acquiesced, leaning back in her seat. Since the day after she’d brought up the conversation six days ago in the laundry room, Riley had seemingly returned to her normal self. Which was a total relief to Gianna.

Save for the handful of times in which Riley seemed very contemplative and lost in her thoughts in ways she typically wasn’t. That was what led Gianna to this gnawing concern in the pit of her stomach.

That feeling led her to start their conversation with, “Before we even get into this – do you really want to have kids?” She searched Riley’s gaze with her own, needing to voice the question that had taken root in her mind.

“I’ve realized it’s not something we’ve ever truly discussed in our relationship, given that we’d discussed it a handful of times prior to being together, and it was always something you said you were interested in.”

She’d gone down this avenue of thought in the last few days. The realization that

she'd just... assumed this was their next step. But Riley saying that she would hypothetically want children with a hypothetical partner in the future wasn't the same as wanting them here and now with Gianna.

After all, Riley had always thought that partner would be a man! So, she'd clearly never pictured this.

That little crinkle between Riley's eyebrows appeared as she slowly nodded. "I do." She nodded more firmly after a second, in a move that screamed of certainty. "I do," she repeated.

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Relieved and satisfied in equal measure, Gianna let out a breath. “Great. I’m glad we have that out of the way.”

Riley laughed quietly, and the sound of it settled inside of her before Riley urged, “Yes, now that we have that out of the way – you start.” She gestured to Gianna’s tablet. “Because it looks like you brought your own research.”

Gianna shot Riley a winning smile as she tapped on the screen of her tablet and brought it to life. “You may be shocked to know that I, indeed, did.”

“I’ve learned a very long time ago that I should never underestimate you.” The sincerity in Riley’s tone warmed everything inside of Gianna, as it often did.

“First things first – I think IUI is the right way to go. I’m young and healthy. I have a long torso–”

Riley’s peel of baffled laughter cut her off, and Gianna found herself smiling in amusement as well, even before Riley asked, “What?”

“According to several accounts in my research,” she smartly tapped on her screen, “A long torso can help in reducing the risk of pre-term births!”

Riley’s laughter abated, though she gazed at Gianna with so much warmth – that amusement and love comingling – as she nodded. “Excuse my laughter. Please, go on.”

“I was merely stating that I believe IUI would be very effective. Especially...” She

paused to triumphantly pull out the printed-out lab report she had. “As, according to Doctor Ngo, my womb is practically begging to be impregnated.”

“I’m sure that’s the technical term she used,” Riley murmured as she snatched the lab report away from her, running her eyes over it. When she lifted her gaze to Gianna afterward, her gaze was confused. “When did you get this done?”

Gianna felt herself flush. “Last month, when you drove me to my gynecology appointment.”

Riley had driven Gianna to all of her doctor’s appointments for more than ten years, given that Gianna had never felt the need to learn how to drive. She’d always lived in a city and had access to calling a car if the need arose. When she’d asked Riley for a favor to drive her for her annual physical their junior year, Riley had made it a point to put Gianna’s appointments in her calendar just as she put her own in. As if taking care of Gianna and her needs was as simple as that.

Then again, for Riley, it was. It always had been.

And damn it if it wasn’t one of the things Gianna loved so deeply about her. One of the things that made Gianna feel so sure about expanding their family.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Riley asked, a line forming between her eyebrows. Her tone was far from accusatory – if anything, it was a little hurt.

Gianna quickly shook her head, wanting to do anything to stop any of those hurt feelings. “I honestly wasn’t planning on it. Seriously,” she swore, reaching out to quickly squeeze her hands over Riley’s in assurance. “I didn’t even think about it until I was in the appointment.”

In truth, seeing some of the information in the office regarding pregnancy had

prompted Gianna and had gotten this train of thought moving.

“Ever since that day, it’s been on my mind more and more,” she confessed. “And by that, I mean – I think about it every day.”

Riley settled her hand palm-down against the lab report in front of her as she studied Gianna closely. And while Gianna had no idea what Riley was looking for, she stared back, vulnerable and unafraid. Riley could see everything she had to offer.

Finally, Riley spoke softly. “I guess I’m still a little... I know you said you wanted to have children with me. And I know you meant it. But whenever the subject of having a baby has come up, you’ve never expressed any sort of serious interest in it, so – all I’m saying is that I want to make sure we dot all of the i’s and cross all of the t’s before we move forward with anything.”

“Do you remember that whole thing about how I didn’t want to be in a relationship if it wasn’t with you?” Gianna asked, her heart still skipping a beat at how intense that conversation had been. How terrified she’d been – even though she’d literally heard Riley confess to having feelings for her earlier that very night – to reveal her truth after having hidden it for so long.

A sweet smile took over Riley’s face. “I’m pretty sure I could forget everything else that has ever happened to me, and I would still remember that.”

Gianna reached out and took Riley’s hands in hers, this time keeping their fingers intertwined, glancing down at their matching wedding rings. “The same is true about having children. I would never have imagined myself on this path if this path hadn’t been walked with you. You are the only person I want a family with.”

That was the simple truth of it. Perhaps it wasn’t really all that simple – it was layered and emotional, and she’d spent so much of her adult life not believing it was possible.

“Riley, babe, I really didn’t know that you and I were a possibility until a couple of years ago,” she explained, not for the first time. She could still hear her own wonder, even as the honesty spilled from the very depths of her. “And now that we’re real and together and married, there are so many doors available to me that I just – I never would have wanted to open them with someone else.”

She swallowed thickly, the truth of the words coursing heavily through her.

“But with you, I want to open every door. I want every possibility with you. I want every chance at happiness. I want to take in everything life has to offer. And I don’t want to wait any longer than we have to.” She shrugged, feeling like a weight had been lifted.

All of her logistical research could be damned, this was the most important thing for her.

“And if you aren’t ready yet, then – that’s fine. If you don’t really want this for yourself and us, and you’re trying to... to get on-board because you want to do this for me, we won’t do it. Those are all of my cards on the table,” she finished, taking in a deep breath and staring at Riley for several beats.

“Gianna, I do. I’m not telling you that I want a family with you to try to placate you or anything; do you possibly think that’s something I would do?” She asked, looking at Gianna as if the very thought was ludicrous.

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She couldn't help the incredulous laugh that slipped out because Riley had her on that one. Honest-to-a-fault Riley had never placated Gianna in their entire lives. "No," she allowed before sobering and falling into Riley's wide-eyed expression. "But... I believe that you love me enough to try to explore every avenue if it would make me happy."

Riley's eyes went so soft as she stroked her thumbs over Gianna's hands. "I would," she admitted. "Because I do love you so much."

She took a deep breath, tremulously blowing it out as she dropped her gaze and took a moment.

And Gianna waited, subconsciously holding her breath because she had no idea what Riley was thinking. "But?" She gently prompted, her heart starting to race.

Riley looked back up at her, eyes searching Gianna's. "It's not a but. Not really. It doesn't negate wanting to have a baby with you, I swear. But I'd be lying if I said that talking about this doesn't make me think about my dad."

Gianna nearly reeled back from the surprise that trampled through her. She certainly blinked at it, trying to wrap her mind around Riley's statement.

Maybe that was foolish of her, but...

Riley mentioned her dad so rarely. Gianna was sure Riley thought about him more frequently than she verbalized, and she knew that Riley had loved her father deeply. Every year on the anniversary of his death, Riley was more withdrawn and hovered

over Ellie incessantly. At this point, Gianna even believed Riley's hovering on that date was more for Riley's comfort than Ellie's.

But other than that, and the errant comments about "Oh, my dad loved this song," or "Yeah, this was my dad's recipe," Riley didn't bring him up.

Gianna never pushed for more. Especially because it seemed that Riley – while clearly affected by losing her father in more ways than one – seemed to know how to cope without Gianna's help. She'd been doing it since she'd ever met Gianna, after all.

When Riley didn't explain further in the minute that followed, Gianna gently spoke, "Carina, I'm so sorry, but... I don't understand?"

She hated that she couldn't connect these dots alone, but she was at a loss.

Riley swallowed hard, her eyebrows furrowing tightly together as she started, "I just – you know my mom."

... unfortunately, that didn't shed the light Gianna was desperately needing.

Still, she slowly nodded. Yes, she knew Eliza Beckett, though she wouldn't say she knew her incredibly well. While she was certainly more of a presence in Riley and Ellie's lives, far more than Gianna's parents were active in her life, Gianna wouldn't necessarily classify her as an active parent. "As well as I can know her, I guess."

Riley looked sharply up at her words, posture snapping straight as if Gianna had just unlocked something. "Exactly! After nearly fifteen years of being the most important person in my life, over a year of being my wife, you know my mom as well as you can possibly know her. Because who she is after my dad died is not the person she was when I was growing up."

My dad's dead, and he took the soft part of my mom with him. Gianna acutely remembered when Riley had emotionally spoken those words to her, even though it had been over a decade ago. Because seeing Riley so upset and raw was such an anomalous moment for her. The majority of their emotional ups and downs were all caused by Gianna – a fact that held true for most of their relationship, even now.

Riley was the epitome of stability. She was steadfast and durable; she weathered every storm without blinking an eye. Not just for Gianna, either. But for Ellie. For Joel. For everyone in their lives – Riley was the one who would show up and hold you up when the world seemed too difficult a place.

In this moment, as Riley had an undeniable anxiety etched into her expression, Gianna had a moment of panic. Had she missed this part of Riley all along? This part of her, that seemed like such a raw nerve?

She raised one of her hands, smoothing Riley's hair back, then sliding down to cup her jaw. "Riley, love, I didn't know this was something on your mind so often. Something that bothered you."

Riley shook her head but lifted her hand up to press against the back of Gianna's – effectively making sure Gianna didn't lose contact with her even with her movement. "That's the thing – it's not. My relationship with my mom is... it's not something I agonize over. I used to." She admitted, with a small, sad smile. "The year after my dad died and Ellie went to college, it was just my mom and I living in our house. And our house went from a four-person home, filled with conversation and pancake Sundays, to a two-person house, where we co-existed. And it was awful."

Those tears that glossed over her eyes started to fall, and Gianna felt her heart crack open with them.

God, she had no idea how Riley managed to comfort her about her own parental

situation. Because this moment made Gianna feel like she, herself, was dying inside. She hastily disengaged the hand she'd still had holding onto Riley's and pulled down the sleeve of her sweater so she could carefully wipe Riley's cheeks.

"Honestly, Gianna, moving to college and meeting you was the best thing that ever could have happened to me." Riley nuzzled her face closer into Gianna's hand, still cupping her jaw, a tremulous smile sliding over her lips. "I've known that for a very long time, given that you're my favorite person and the love of my life."

Her words made Gianna smile, although she was still confused and aching for her wife.

"Even more than that, though..." Riley rolled her lips as she clearly thought over her words. "I never really thought about it until we started this conversation. But I've done a lot of thinking in the last week, and I've realized that you brought color back into my life. Living with you made me feel like life became normal again."

"Even when I was a bitch?" Gianna took the chance to joke, tentatively smiling. Desperate, really, to do anything to get Riley to smile.

Which, thankfully, she did. A tearful smile spread over her lips as she nodded. "I've never called you that and won't stand for you to call yourself that, either. But. Yes. Even from the very beginning."

Gianna felt very accomplished as she did another careful swipe under Riley's eyes, making sure to leave no fallen tears behind.

She also felt a surge of honor at having been that person for Riley. Riley had been – always would be – the person who changed Gianna's life trajectory. And while she firmly believed that Riley would have always found her way in life, Gianna – even back before she'd grown – having helped Riley find her footing in life... it meant the

world to her.

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She basked in that for a few seconds before remembering the topic of conversation they were having. Her confusion leeches back in. “You have no idea how much that means to me, babe, and if you want to take a break in the whole having kids conversation, we can. But I just still don’t quite get it?”

Riley sniffled, bringing her free hand up to wipe over her eyes more rigorously than Gianna had. “No, we should talk about it. Because that’s the point.”

Gianna’s eyebrows pulled down, trying to figure out where Riley was going. It was so incredibly rare that she couldn’t even follow Riley’s train of thought that this was entirely too disconcerting for her.

“The thing I’ve realized is that... I kind of understand my mom, Gianna. Losing my dad made her lose a part of herself. The brightest part of her. The softest part of her. I know she loves Ellie and me, but I also know that there’s a permanent disconnect between us. And while I’ve long gotten used to it, I’ve never understood it. But I think I do, now.” Riley’s eyes searched her own before she confessed, “Because the truth is that if something ever happened to you, like it happened to my dad, I think I would become her.”

Her back snapped straight up with Riley’s words, her hand falling from Riley’s face and landing on the table with a thunk, as shock raced through her. Quickly followed by rejection, and she firmly shook her head with it. “No. No, you wouldn’t.”

Riley nodded, though, her expression gravely serious. “Yes, I would.”

“You wouldn’t,” she insisted with absolute certainty. “Riley, you’re – you’re Riley.”

You have such a sense of self; you could never lose it. With or without me.”

“I might have a sense of self,” Riley acknowledged, “But you are everything that lights up my world, Gianna. I love my work, and I love our found family, but... you are what I revolve around. You’re my sun. It’s crazy that we didn’t get together long before we actually did because that’s been my truth for my entire adult life. And while I can use logic to talk myself out of being terrified every single day that something might happen to you, like it happened to my dad, I’ve realized in the last week that I can’t use that logic to quiet my brain around having a baby with you.”

Riley drew in a deep breath, closing her eyes with it. “I’m just so terrified that I could lose you, especially because I know I would lose myself, too. And with children in the mix... god, it would be...” She shuddered as she shook her head.

“Bella, I literally can’t even imagine a world without you in it.” Gianna wouldn’t have imagined that world because even the hypothetical statement made her veins thread with ice. “But – is this fear enough to stop you from doing this?”

In all honesty, that wasn’t a dealbreaker for Gianna. Until just two years ago, until being with Riley had become a real possibility, she’d believed she would be contentedly child-free forever.

But she’d be lying if she said that the idea of having a bigger family – something she’d yearned for since longer than she cared to admit – with this woman didn’t fill her with a longing she couldn’t deny. She didn’t want to.

She was finally at a place with Riley where she didn’t have to deny what she wanted.

“It’s not,” Riley finally said, shaking her head. “But I’m really worried that I’m going to become the person who puts you two in a bubble whenever we leave the house.”

Gianna laughed at that, amazed at the lightness that had returned to her now that she felt like they were getting back on the same page. “Well, consider yourself moving into that bubble with us. Because I would be lost without you, too.”

Riley closed her eyes and breathed, the tension in her shoulders loosening with it. “I guess I just didn’t expect for this to bring up so many feelings like this.”

“It’s a really big thing,” Gianna reasoned, unable to stop herself from leaning in and pressing her lips to Riley’s cheek. She just wanted to be close enough to inhale her, to feel her soft skin against her mouth. “I think it makes perfect sense.”

Riley wordlessly nodded, turning her head ever so slightly so she could kiss Gianna’s cheek.

As Gianna leaned back, Riley arched her a look. “So, you might have to be patient with me. And you will definitely have to deal with me hovering and needing to take care of you and Potential Baby.”

Gianna sent her a look right back. “I waited a decade for you, Riley Beckett. I think I know a thing or two about being patient where you’re concerned.”

Part

Four

WHAT FAMILY MEANS

The Before

AGE: 25

Decorations – check

Guests starting to arrive – check

DJ – check

Gianna's favorite foods – check

Special letter from Mummo – check

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Plane tickets for both herself and Gianna to fly to Finland in two months for a long weekend to visit Mummo – check

Riley was filled with satisfaction as she stared down at her list as they prepared her apartment for Gianna’s birthday party. Everything was going according to plan at Gianna’s surprise 24th birthday party.

Typically, Gianna threw her own birthday bashes. Her birthday being the Fourth of July and Gianna not being American, she viewed it as a perfect opportunity to celebrate her own birthday with pool parties and delicious cocktails.

Riley didn’t disagree, necessarily, but it made trying to plan Gianna a surprise party – something Gianna had made many off-handed comments about wanting to experience – difficult.

This year, though, was the first time since Riley had known her that she wasn’t planning something for herself. Riley had wasted no time in planning, because she wasn’t going to miss her chance.

And it had all worked out perfectly, if she said so herself!

When Gianna had walked into the apartment an hour ago, she’d looked genuinely surprised before her expression had quickly morphed into the picture of giddiness. A giddiness that Riley was responsible for, and she took so much pride in that.

“My hour of celebrating is up, and I wished Gianna a happy birthday and gave her my gift. I’m going to the lab,” Ellie informed her as she walked by Riley, slinging her

backpack over her shoulder.

She squeezed her sister's hand in thanks. Mostly, she was glad Ellie had agreed to the hour of socializing, because she'd been doggedly staying at the lab for nearly twenty hours a day in the last few weeks.

"Thanks for hanging out for a bit. Hey, have you seen Gianna?" Riley asked, given Ellie's mentioning of her name.

Riley had danced a bit with her best friend, but then Gianna had been swarmed by so many other birthday well-wishers, Riley had decided to take it as a sign to go and make sure everything was running smoothly. But now, as she scanned her eyes over the people in her apartment, she couldn't see Gianna anywhere.

And Gianna, with her statuesque height, platinum hair and musical laugh, was very hard to miss, even in a crowd.

"Uh, yeah. She was getting a phone call after we talked, so I think she went to your room to take it," Ellie called over her shoulder as she walked to the front door.

Huh. Riley turned in the direction of her bedroom. The door was as she'd left it, firmly closed. But Gianna knew she was allowed in there at any time, so...

"Birthday girl?" she quietly asked, opening the door and peeking in.

There Gianna was, sitting on the edge of Riley's bed. No longer on the phone, which was on the bed next to her, she sat still with her hands in her lap. The look in her eyes was nearly blank – very, very different from what it had been when Riley had last seen Gianna twenty minutes ago.

Her stomach sank even before Gianna said anything, because she knew.

Quietly, she closed the door. “Hey, you,” she spoke softly as she walked toward Gianna, sitting on the bed next to her.

Gianna tightly closed her eyes, shaking her head softly. “Hey.” Her voice was thick. “Sorry. I’m going to get back to the party in a minute. I’m fine.”

Riley shook her head, reaching out to tuck a lock of soft hair behind Gianna’s ear. “There’s no rush to get back. It’s your day; we’ll do whatever you want.”

She slid her hand down into Gianna’s lap, so she could gently intertwine their fingers.

Gianna drew in a deep breath. “I got a call from Guilia.”

Riley had already known that by the look on Gianna’s face. Still, she squeezed Gianna’s hand in hers. “We don’t have to talk about it.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Gianna muttered, pushing out a mirthless laugh. “She called because she heard I got a new sponsorship deal with a designer she wants to work with. I don’t know how it’s possible to forget when you gave birth, but I think she did. Because she seemed to have no clue what today is.”

Gianna’s voice was thick and raspy with emotion, and Riley felt like her own heart was being squeezed painfully. She used her free hand to wrap around Gianna’s waist, pulling her closer, so their sides were flush together.

“Do you want me to kick everyone out?” Riley offered, keeping her voice quiet. Wanting, so badly, to give Gianna anything that could make this better.

Gianna took in a deep, slow breath, shaking her head on the exhale. “No. I just... I need to sit in here for a little bit. Then I’ll be fine.” She turned to look at Riley, her voice hoarse and vulnerable, as she asked, “Will you stay with me?”

“I was never going anywhere else,” Riley whispered, squeezing Gianna’s hand in hers.

She wished she could – just for once – tell Giulia just what she thought. She wished she could force her to look into reality and see what an incredible person she put on this earth.

But in this moment, Riley only did what she could do. Let Gianna lean heavily into her, holding her up.

The Confrontation

AGE: 33

Riley had always been concerned with taking care of the people in her life.

When she'd been growing up, her parents used to joke that she'd come out of the womb cuddling her sister.

She hadn't quite understood just how acute that facet of her personality would become when Gianna was pregnant with their baby until they were living it.

Starting from the very beginning, when Gianna had insisted that she'd wanted to use Riley's egg –

“Are you against it?” Gianna had asked, concerned, when Riley had balked. She'd reached out so easily and twirled some of Riley's hair around her finger. “If you're nervous or you don't want to undergo a procedure—”

Riley had quickly shaken her head to dispel that idea from her wife's mind. “No, that's not it; it's not about me. I'm worried about you. And our potential baby. After all of our reading – isn't it a little safer the less invasive we go?”

Gianna's blue eyes had gone so soft as she'd used that same hand to gently swipe Riley's hair behind her ear. “Yes,” she conceded before shaking her head. “But, Riley, carina... I want to have your baby.” Her eyes had searched Riley's, only inches away, as her voice went so soft. “I want curly hair and hazel eyes. I want more

of you in the world.” She’d made her eyes as big and wide as possible, as she’d implored, “You wouldn’t want to deny your soon-to-be-pregnant wife of her biggest desire, right?”

Riley’s mouth had fallen open in offense at the tactic, even as laughter had climbed out of her throat. “Oh my god, I can’t believe you would do that to me.” As she sobered seconds later, she’d wrapped her arms tightly around Gianna’s waist and – as she usually always did – succumbed.

– to when they’d found out that their first round of IVF had worked –

Riley had led Gianna out to their car, squeezing her hand as they went, feeling dazed.

They were pregnant.

Right then, at that very moment, Gianna Mäkinen Beckett was pregnant with her baby. Their baby.

She’d quickly crossed in front of Gianna to open the passenger side door for her, helping her get in.

Gianna had taken her hand and situated herself in the seat, laughing up at Riley as she did so. “How chivalrous of you.”

Her expression was so warm as she smiled up at Riley, and Riley felt it echo throughout her. She’d slid her gaze down to Gianna’s abdomen before she’d reached out and placed her hand over it.

Of course, Gianna had been several months away from showing – they didn’t know it at the time, but Gianna wouldn’t even be visibly pregnant until nearly six months – but that hadn’t mattered to her.

Riley swore it at that moment and maintained to this very day, she felt it. As she'd stroked her thumb over Gianna's abdomen, she'd stared at her wife and promised, "I'm going to take care of you. Both of you."

"You already do," Gianna murmured, covering Riley's hand with her own. "You always have."

Riley had driven them home ten miles under the speed limit –

– and that had extended throughout Gianna's entire pregnancy.

Gianna had pointed out, "Riley, babe. You already do all of the cooking and most of the cleaning, other than the laundry. What, are you going to start taking over every responsibility here?" When Riley had insisted on carrying Gianna's camera tripod up the stairs for her.

"Yes," she'd answered point-blank. "Yes, I am."

Gianna's pregnancy with their daughter had passed both far too quickly and had seemed to take far too long at the same time. And though her labor had been considered short, at only five hours, Riley didn't think she could have handled a longer labor.

She meaning herself, of course, because Gianna had handled the birthing process like a queen.

It did not come as a shock to Riley that Gianna had managed through her pain like a fucking professional birth-giver. If that was a thing. But Gianna had always been the strongest person she knew, mentally and physically, even if Gianna didn't always recognize that in herself.

Riley had no idea how expectant parents managed long labors because she'd felt like if it had gone any longer, she may have had a heart attack.

They'd been surrounded by the best doctors and nurses in the state – scratch that; in the country, at Massachusetts Memorial Hospital. And Riley had still felt like she'd been ready to climb out of her skin.

“Babe,” Gianna had said to her when she'd been obsessively studying the oxygen/blood pressure monitor Gianna was hooked up to. “Riley Jane Beckett,” Gianna had used a sterner tone to get her attention.

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Which had worked, and Riley had given Gianna her full focus. She worriedly ran her eyes over her wife as she sat in the hospital bed. A light sheen of sweat was on her brow, but other than that, she looked totally normal. Not like she'd been in labor for three hours.

“Are you okay? Do you want any more ice chips? What the hell are the ice chips supposed to do, anyway?” She muttered, casting the last cup of ice chips she'd fetched a dirty look. Only for a second, though, before she returned her gaze to Gianna, gently smoothing back her hair.

“I'm sure Ellie would be happy to tell us the reasoning behind the ice chips later,” Gianna had reasoned with a laugh. She'd shaken her head, though. “I'm totally fine. Honestly, I'm worried about you.”

“Me?” Riley reared back, staring at her wife, baffled.

“Yes, you.” Gianna had rested her head against the pillow of the hospital bed. The back of the bed was elevated, propping Gianna up in her sitting position, and she aimed a beseeching look at Riley. “Baby Girl and I are looking for the level-headed Riley right now. Okay?”

Riley had stared into Gianna's eyes – deciding at that moment that though she knew Gianna was hoping their daughter would have her eyes, she hoped that their daughter would keep the blue eyes that belonged to the donor they'd picked; a tall, blonde man with blue eyes – trying to ground herself in them. “Okay.”

Anya Mäkinen Beckett had come into the world shortly after, and Riley's life had

been fundamentally altered.

She knew she was biased, but she was pretty sure she and Gianna had created the most perfect small human in the world. Ellie and Mia frequently agreed, as well... then again, she felt they were both extremely biased as well.

For over a decade, Riley's world had been centered around Gianna. She'd been her solid constant. And now, Riley had two.

She stared down at Anya as her daughter napped in the crib Riley had built.

She'd never been particularly into woodwork or furniture building, but she'd gotten very into it during Gianna's pregnancy, much to her wife's amusement. As Gianna had sat in the rocking chair Ellie and Mia had gifted them, she'd lovingly and laughingly watched Riley painstakingly put together Anya's top-of-the-line crib. "We can pay someone to do that for us."

Riley had huffed a breath out, blowing her hair away from where it fell into her eyes as she aimed a pouting look at her wife. "We absolutely will not be doing that."

Her dad had built and assembled the cribs she and Ellie had slept in, as well as many other pieces of furniture around their childhood home. Riley remembered feeling so... safe, knowing that. Safe and loved. Her dad knew how to put furniture together and do all of their simple home repairs.

So, when Riley wasn't running around trying to make sure Gianna didn't need to lift a finger or wasn't busy reading as many parenting books as she could – Ellie had given them a great selection, all of which she'd read and vetted, herself – she'd spent weeks upon weeks reading how-to manuals and watching YouTube videos about electricity and plumbing.

She appreciated Gianna watching her do so with only mild teasing. “I think this is your version of nesting,” she’d commented one day.

Riley didn’t disagree.

But... she lightly traced a finger of the dark stained wood of the crib. It made her feel proud to know that their daughter was sleeping safely and soundly in the bed she’d built.

“My maternity leave may be over in a few days, but I’ll always be taking care of you,” she promised in a whisper, though she knew she didn’t need to.

Anya slept deeply and soundly. So soundly, that they’d been concerned something was wrong and had her doctors run a plethora of tests.

Nothing, it seemed, was wrong with their girl. She was simply perfect.

The idea of her maternity leave coming to an end made everything inside of Riley want to rebel. She’d taken three months completely and totally off and then dipped her toes back into work by answering emails and giving feedback on content for the last eight weeks.

For as much as Riley did, in fact, love her job and occasionally had panic-stricken moments that everything was going to fall apart without her, she was now dreading every bit of news she’d be missing here at home.

Given her dual professions, Gianna’s maternity leave had been far less conventional. Content creation and president/founder of a lingerie line didn’t follow the same guidelines that Riley’s new station did. At this very moment, Gianna was at an in-person meeting with Cora for the first time since she’d given birth.

At the sound of their doorbell, Riley snapped her head to face the door, frowning.

Quickly, she darted her eyes back down at Anya. True to form, her daughter fussed around for only a moment at the loud, jarring sound before she settled right back into her nap.

Riley reached down and lightly ran her finger over her daughter's nose before she grabbed the baby monitor and headed down the stairs.

As far as she knew, they weren't expecting any deliveries. And other than delivery drop-offs, no one had rung their doorbell in months... because everyone they talked to and could potentially have invited over was well aware that they had a newborn in the house and took care not to ring the doorbell.

She hooked the top-of-the-line monitor into her belt loop with eased practice as she reached the bottom of the steps.

The doorbell rang again, and Riley sighed in irritated confusion, hurrying her pace. What in the world was so urgent someone needed to ring their doorbell multiple times when they had a sleeping baby?!

"I'm coming!" She called out as she jogged down the front hall, hoping to cut off whoever was out there before they decided to ring for a third time.

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It had to be some sort of delivery or drop-off, she'd decided. She opened the door with that in mind, already speaking, "Sorry for shouting just there, but we have—" She abruptly cut herself off, blinking as she found herself face-to-face with, "Giulia?"

She voiced her name as if it were a question, but there was no denying who this woman was. She'd only met Giulia Gallo three times in the nearly fifteen years since she'd known Gianna – which was insane. Or, it should be insane, given how close she and Gianna had been for over a decade and: oh yeah, they were now married. With a child.

But that was Giulia.

Though Gianna's blonde hair, blue eyes, and height had come from her father, there was still an undeniable resemblance to her mother. Their tan skin tones, high and sharp cheekbones, the literal shape of their bodies.

For the millionth time since knowing Gianna, Riley couldn't help but marvel at the genetic lottery Gianna had won.

Unfortunately, that physical lottery had come at quite an emotional cost. And that reminder set Riley immediately on edge as she narrowed her eyes.

"Can I help you?"

"Raleigh?" Giulia asked, and it took Riley a moment to realize she was saying her name. And that, no, the pronunciation had absolutely nothing to do with Giulia's slight-yet-present Italian accent.

Riley blinked at Giulia, a disbelieving laugh falling from her lips. “I – wow. It’s Riley, actually.”

Sometimes, when Riley thought about her own mother’s emotional detachment from her life, she would be confronted with thoughts about Gianna’s parents. At the very least, her mom undoubtedly knew Gianna’s fucking name.

“Perdonami, Riley,” Giulia annunciated, very clearly not sorry.

She slid her sunglasses up to rest on the top of her head, pushing back her perfectly professionally dyed glossy dark curls. And then stared, expectantly, at Riley.

Who stared back, her arms crossed over her chest. “Can I help you?” She repeated slowly, punctuating every word.

“I’d like to speak to my daughter,” Giulia answered smartly, her own hand coming up to rest on her hip as she peered over Riley’s shoulder and into her house. As if she could summon Gianna’s presence and bypass Riley, as she so clearly wanted to.

“Well, Gianna isn’t home.” Riley was so glad that was the truth because she would have wanted to send Giulia packing even if Gianna was inside. “And, furthermore, I don’t think she knew you were coming. Does she?”

She deliberately framed it as a question because Riley knew damn well Gianna had no idea about this visit. If she had, she would have told Riley.

Giulia deciding to drop into Gianna’s life was never good, and an unexpected drop-in was even worse. Riley was both suspicious and defensive.

Giulia’s dark eyes narrowed at Riley, even though she kept an icy smile affixed to her mouth. “It was an unplanned visit. Since I’m in town, I thought I should stop by.”

“And... you didn’t think you should plan to stop by at any time during Gianna’s pregnancy? Or when she gave birth? Or in the months since?”

God, the reminder of Giulia’s negligence toward Gianna made Riley’s blood boil.

Though Gianna hadn’t expected anything from her parents – she’d voiced as much to Riley many times – Riley knew that it still upset her on a deep level that her parents hadn’t reached out to even congratulate her on their pregnancy or Anya’s birth.

It took everything she had not to slam the door in this woman’s fucking face right here and now.

Giulia’s smile slipped into a disdainful look as if Riley were echelons beneath her. “Gianna knows how busy I am. I suppose, since I’m here, I can meet the baby.”

Riley wouldn’t have stopped the incredulous scoff even if she’d been able to. “No, you won’t be meeting our baby.”

“Ah, yes. Your baby,” Giulia’s voice absolutely dripped with disdain. “Gianna chooses to have a baby with your genetics, she changes her name, and then gives the baby she birthed your name as well. Dio santo. We send her to one of the best schools in the world, and she continues to make these stupid choices.”

Riley didn’t know what shocked her more – the fact that Giulia knew and retained any of these facts or that she seemed to... care?

But she wasn’t shocked enough to miss, “Stupid choices? Excuse you?”

Gianna’s decision to take Riley’s last name several months post-marriage had been a surprise to her but a very welcome one. Of course she’d love to share her name with Gianna, but Riley would have never suggested it. Even when Riley believed she’d

marry a man, she'd always imagined keeping her own last name. She, quite simply, was Riley Beckett. So, it would have felt very hypocritical if she'd ever expected Gianna to give up her own name.

But Gianna had – in true, perfect Gianna fashion – gone to city hall to file for a name change on her own accord, simply saying, “I want to be your family in every way.”

She'd also told Riley while she'd been pregnant, “I want us both to have the same last name as our children. And I'm not a monster; we would never saddle our children with a hyphenated last name that includes Mäkinen.”

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Riley had to agree that Mäkinen-Beckett or Beckett-Mäkinen would be the makings of a nightmare for any child.

She'd pushed for Mäkinen to be their daughter's middle name, though, always holding a deep affection for Gianna's name.

"All of that was terrible enough. But now, today, I truly see her throwing her life away for..." she eyed Riley with open disdain. "This. Enough is enough. Eventually, she will be in ruins, with no one to turn to." She drew in a deep breath, aiming a glare at Riley. "When will she be home? I suppose, if it's soon, I can move around my schedule."

Riley didn't know what it was exactly. Maybe it was because this was the only time she'd ever been with Giulia one-on-one – she'd never before had an opportunity to speak her honest mind.

Maybe it was because this was the first time she'd seen Gianna's mother since they'd gotten together – Riley had always hated seeing Gianna upset, but after their relationship progressed, Riley felt all of Gianna's feelings as if they were her own.

Maybe it was because Riley was now a parent, and she couldn't imagine treating her daughter the way Giulia treated Gianna. Maybe it was because Giulia was Anya's grandmother, and the thought of Giulia ever getting close enough to Anya to make her feel any of the pain she caused Gianna made Riley feel like she was prepared to commit homicide.

Most likely, it was a combination of all of those things.

And she found she could stop herself from saying, “I’m not telling you when Gianna’s going to be home, Giulia because you don’t deserve to even lay eyes on your daughter. And believe me, I say that with the loosest definition of that word.”

In Riley’s opinion, neither of Gianna’s parents should have the right to refer to themselves as her mom or dad. Not when they’d never done any of the work to raise her.

Giulia snapped back as if Riley had physically slapped her, her eyes narrowing to angry slits. “You have no right to speak to me that way—”

“Actually, I have every right. Because between the two of us, I actually love Gianna. I’m the one who celebrates all of her birthdays, holds her when she’s upset and cares about her triumphs and failures.” Riley gripped the doorknob tightly, keeping herself grounded – mostly keeping herself from shouting because Anya was still sleeping.

“Gianna is my best friend, my wife, and the mother of my child.” Riley couldn’t even tell which one of those things was the most important. Gianna was truly... everything to her. “I have spent over a decade watching you flit around, hurting her at every turn. I have no idea how you and Antero produced someone with such a big heart, but I’m so sick of seeing you bruise it constantly. Gianna is who she is despite you.”

Fucking hell, it felt good to unleash these words.

“If it were up to me, you wouldn’t be allowed to even have Gianna’s fucking phone number anymore. You wouldn’t be allowed to lay eyes on her, even from fifty feet away. You wouldn’t be able to follow her on social media.”

The reality was that if Riley had the power to put Gianna in a protective bubble, she absolutely would.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes with it as she tried to cool the seething anger flowing through her. “Seeing as how it’s not up to me, though, I’ll simply tell you this: I won’t ever let you into our home unless Gianna expressly tells me to. And I won’t give you her schedule unless she informs me that she wants you to have it. Since that hasn’t happened today, all I can say to you is what I’ve already said: Gianna isn’t home, and you need to go.”

Without waiting for a response, she shut and locked the door.

By the time Gianna arrived home nearly two hours later, Riley had enough time to calm down. And in that time, also had enough time to feel slightly stressed.

Not about anything she’d said or how she’d said it, but sheerly about the fact that... well, Gianna had never said those things to her mother, though she’d had plenty of opportunities to. Though Riley truly didn’t believe Giulia’s neglect of Gianna could be worse, she’d worked herself up into a little bit of a stressful state, wondering – was she wrong? Could it be worse?

In Riley’s opinion, Giulia truly cutting ties with Gianna rather than continuing to reach out occasionally to remind Gianna that she was still around, even if she wasn’t around, would be a good thing.

She just hoped Gianna agreed.

She heard Gianna enter their house as she sat in the kitchen, bouncing Anya on her lap. Holding her child, Riley had discovered, was the best way to alleviate stress.

“Hello, my two perfect loves,” Gianna greeted as she came swooping in. She first ducked down to press a kiss to Anya’s chubby cheek before she cupped Riley’s jaw and tilted her head to press a sweet, brief kiss to her lips.

As always, Riley easily moved with the motion, humming softly against her wife's mouth.

She watched as Gianna plunked her large designer purse down on the counter, stomach still twisting with nerves. If Gianna knew what had happened, she didn't look mad.

Still...

Riley cleared her throat, leaning down to put Anya in her bouncer. "I need to tell you about something that happened today."

Gianna turned to face her, silken blonde strands tossed over her shoulder as she aimed a look at Riley. "You know what I love about you? I was home for less than a minute, and a full confession was about to pop right out."

Riley flushed, even as she furrowed her eyebrows. "So, you already know?"

"Do I know... that you told my mother off in a major kind of way this afternoon? Told her that she is a terrible person and an even worse parent and that you wanted to get a restraining order against her?" Gianna propped her hand on her hip, staring expectantly at Riley.

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Who squirmed slightly in her chair, coughing as she answered, “I didn’t say those things... exactly.”

However, the sentiment was definitely there.

Riley stared earnestly up at Gianna, hoping she could see where Riley had been coming from. “I’m sorry if you felt like I was overstepping or—”

Anything else she was preparing to say fell right back down her throat as Gianna took two quick steps toward her before throwing one of her long legs over Riley’s lap. She gripped the back of the chair behind Riley’s head as she settled down, straddling her.

Surprised but very pleased, Riley’s eyebrows lifted even as she reached up to settle her hands on Gianna’s hips. “Huh. This seems like a good response?”

Any time where Riley could be surrounded by Gianna like this, her hair curtaining one side of their faces, her intoxicating scent all over her, Gianna pressed right against her – that was a good response.

“You are never overstepping, carina,” Gianna murmured, bringing one of her hands to Riley’s chin, tilting her head so she could look straight into Gianna’s eyes. “It would be impossible for you to overstep in my life because you are my life.”

Relief pushed through her, and with it, she tightened her grip on Gianna’s waist and pulled her in, their torsos pressing tightly against one another as she connected their lips.

“I feel the same way,” she breathed against Gianna.

She didn’t know why she’d been concerned, really. Gianna would absolutely tear someone to pieces if they treated Riley poorly, and she’d have no doubts about it afterward.

She felt Gianna sigh into her mouth before she pulled back, peppering Riley’s bottom lip with a few more short, sweet kisses.

Gianna settled back again, her weight on Riley’s thighs as she toyed with the ends of Riley’s hair. “I love that you said those things to her. The things I always think about, but never find the right way to say when we’re face-to-face. It doesn’t come as any sort of surprise to me that you, Riley Jane Beckett, were my defender.”

Riley shook her head slightly. “I just couldn’t help it. I couldn’t stand here, in our house, and let her say that you’re making mistakes and throwing your life away. Does she even know you? Everything you do is a success.”

Pausing, Riley’s memory of Giulia’s words snagged on one particular part. Something she hadn’t really given much attention to earlier because she’d been so worked up.

Forehead crinkling in confusion, Riley asked, “When she was here, she said that, especially today, you were making a mistake or something? What is that about?”

She knew the second she’d asked the question that there was something Gianna hadn’t yet told her. Just from the slight widening of her eyes.

“What’s going on?”

“Well...” Gianna slid her tongue over her bottom lip, before she cleared her throat

and sat up straight. “My meeting with Cora today was to work out the next steps of quitting.”

“Quitting?” Riley echoed, feeling ridiculously slow but unable to connect with whatever Gianna was telling her. “Quitting what? A certain brand?”

“All of the brands,” Gianna succinctly told her, her voice falling soft. Earnest. “My reign as a social media titan is coming to an end, within the next six months.”

Riley’s hands went totally slack against Gianna as she stared, utterly dumbfounded. “You – what? What? Why?”

“I started thinking about it a few months ago. Before Anya was born. And the why is... I don’t want it anymore,” she said, simply, quietly. “I built up my influencer profile when that was all I had. I had you as my best friend, and I had followers on the internet. But now we have Anya.”

She smiled, that luminous, perfect smile, as she looked down at their daughter in her bouncer next to them.

“And during my pregnancy, I received so many comments about becoming a mommy blogger,” she shuddered.

Riley laughed, flexing her hands. “You don’t have to be a mommy blogger to still do what you do if that’s what you want. You haven’t even shown Anya’s face on your socials.”

It had been a quick and easy agreement between them – Anya and any future children would not be a part of Gianna’s online life.

“No, I know. But even without showing her on socials, I still get so many comments

about followers excited to be going on this journey with us, and..." Gianna frowned deeply as she slowly shook her head. "I don't want that. I don't want to be one of those parents whose kids' life was famous on socials, even if we don't show her face. I want us to start to have privacy. To just be... us."

Riley could only stare, trying to grasp all of the information thrown at her.

"So, you're done on social media?"

"Well, my public ones, as soon as my current sponsorship contracts run out, which will be within three months. I posted a little video implying what's coming... I'm sure that's what my mother saw earlier."

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To neither of their surprise, Giulia would never want Gianna to stop something that gave her so much social clout. She'd made it no secret over the years that Gianna's social media following was the aspect of Gianna she was most proud of.

"But the accounts I have that you follow, my real ones, I'll still use," Gianna continued. "Where else am I going to post my disgustingly sappy posts about you on our anniversary?"

Riley smiled back, though she still studied Gianna closely. "But – is that what you want?"

"The dream was never to be a social media queen forever, Riley. You know that," Gianna gently reminded her.

And yes, Riley did know that. She'd been there for the creation of those accounts, for Gianna's rise to superfame on the internet.

But over the years, as Gianna had grown more popular, gained more followers, made more money, garnered a bigger following and more sponsorship offers than she could agree to – well, Riley had assumed that would be the new plan, she supposed.

"You just never expressed that it wasn't the long-term plan in the last few years, is all."

"Worthy is the way forward," Gianna informed her, re-situating herself in Riley's lap. "I have a great deal now, and with my savings and investments from the last ten years, we wouldn't have to work a day in our lives, even without Worthy's success."

“I’m not worried about the money,” Riley assured her, pinching Gianna’s hip lightly. “I just want to make sure you’re going to be happy.”

Gianna’s happiness had always been her primary concern, and that fact had only gotten more intense as the last few years had passed.

“Riley. I am married to my best friend, whom I have been in love with for my entire adult life. We have the first of hopefully many babies. And my lingerie line is officially carried nationwide,” Gianna deadpanned. “I’m fairly certain that life truly doesn’t get better than that.”

Riley was inclined to agree.

Part

Five

THAT GREEN-EYED MONSTER

The Before

AGE: 26

Gianna walked into the living room with two glasses of wine that were a little fuller than was appropriate in polite society. But she and Riley weren’t in polite society; they were together, just the two of them, and it was a Saturday night.

“I have some sustenance,” she announced, before stumbling to a stop at the sight of Riley.

Sprawled out on Gianna’s couch, her hair splayed out under her like a halo. Her

leggings and classic B.U. sweatshirt made her look cozy and cute and just so damn good.

Gianna only paused for a second to stare before she shook herself out of it like the seasoned professional at being in love with Riley that she was.

She cleared her throat, walking closer to the couch. “Now, fill me in one why I am graced with your impeccable company tonight when you had a date with Eager Eric.” She twisted her lips to the side in thought, sipping on her wine, before she clarified, “The sex date, if I’m not mistaken.”

She knew, in fact, that she was not mistaken. There was no way she could possibly be mistaken when it came to Riley talking about sex and how she’d discussed that she and Eric were likely going to get down tonight.

Riley blew out a disappointed sigh. “I think, unfortunately, we’re going to have to rename him to Egotistical Eric.”

Gianna had put her years of jealousy behind her. Really.

Riley had been telling her for years about her dates and her sexcapades, and Gianna did her due diligence as Riley’s best friend with no problem. Mostly because she wanted to hear every detail!

She supposed that was the double-edged sword of being in love with her best friend. Sure, sometimes hearing every detail of Riley’s search for love made her ache inside. Just a little. But she also genuinely wanted to know everything.

It was fine that Riley wasn’t queer, that Gianna had no chance at being the person that brought Riley romantic fulfilment or sexual satisfaction. She couldn’t fault Riley for her sexuality any more than she could fault herself for having fallen for Riley.

But Gianna would be damned if she didn't hold Riley's prospective love interests to a high standard.

So, her outrage was entirely genuine as her mouth fell open, indignant. "What did he do?!"

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Riley groaned as she lifted her legs up to let Gianna sit down before she lowered them back down so her thighs rested over Gianna's. "You know, it was our fourth date. And it was going really well."

Gianna nodded. "Right. He took you to that amazing wine bar last week and he was a good kisser – all signs pointed to yes."

Riley pointed at Gianna. "Yes! Thank you! So... the sex."

Her tone was so dismal, it made Gianna snort with laughter before she grimaced. "How bad was it?" she asked, rubbing gently at Riley's thigh in support.

"Oh my god, it was awful. All about him. Seriously, every second. I was naked in front of him, and he was more into his own body?" Riley's face screwed up adorably in confusion. "I don't get it. And that was before we even got started. But it really sums up the entire theme of the short-lived time together tonight. He was finished while I was only halfway there – and when I say he was finished? He was finished."

"Hence why you're ending the night here," Gianna surmised, gesturing around them at her apartment.

Riley let out a sweet little sigh, pushing her up onto her elbow so she could take a hearty sip of her own wine that she'd been holding balanced on her stomach since Gianna had handed it to her.

"Look, I don't care how long someone can last. I just care that you aren't selfish after. Am I asking for too much?" Riley asked, turning her hazel eyes to Gianna,

incredulous.

Oh, there it was. That little, tiny burning seed of jealousy.

Gianna had a good hold on her jealousy, truly. It would be impossible to have a healthy friendship with Riley, otherwise. But moments like this...

“No, babe, you are asking for the bare minimum,” she affirmed. “Egotistical Eric it is. And he sucks.”

Gianna could be a reasonable human about Riley having sex; she was an adult woman with a healthy – glorious – sex drive, and Gianna understood and supported that. The jealousy didn’t come for her over sex.

The jealousy reared its ugly head at the fact that there were people like Eric that had the opportunity to have sex with Riley, to make Riley come, to send her into the pinnacle of pleasure... and then didn’t.

Like, how dare he?! Didn’t he know what he had?

“He really, really sucks,” Gianna repeated darkly.

The Reunion

AGE: 38

“You seem... nervous?” Riley murmured as she carefully brought Gianna’s nametag just above her right breast. “Is it because I’m putting a metal pin through your Hélène Pierce cocktail dress?” She glanced up at Gianna through her lashes. “As I said a minute ago – I really don’t think you need a nametag, babe.”

Riley paused, her hands resting on Gianna's chest ever-so-lightly – just above the breast, nothing inappropriate for public consumption – as she shook her hair back to look Gianna in the eye. There was that quietly teasing smile on her face that Gianna fucking adored. “After all, you are Gianna Mäkinen, of Worthy designs, available at retailers internationally.”

Gianna felt a pleased warmth emanate through her entire freaking body. Worthy's success had soared in the five years since she'd officially left the world of influencing to focus on her family and her business – in that order, thank you very much.

Which had been a slight concern, when she'd jumped into her lingerie brand with both feet. Financially, she had enough money to fall back on, plus Riley's promotion to director at the station last year had ensured they could more than take care of their family.

Still, though.

She arched a challenging eyebrow at Riley. “What if no one in there,” she tilted her jaw in the direction of the large room they were standing outside of, “Has heard of my lingerie designs? Or don't know it's me behind it?”

Riley lightly stroked her fingers against Gianna's bare skin, right above the neckline of her dress. The touch made her shiver, even as Riley nailed her with a skeptical look. “Even if I could buy into that ridiculousness, you are still you. And I would bet Emmi's stuffed bear that no one we went to college with has forgotten you.”

Gianna reeled back, affixing the proper look of horror to her face at Riley's statement. “You would bet Kalevala? Do you understand how much suffering losing that bear would cause our daughter? And – more than that – how much suffering her cries would cause our ears?”

When Riley's hazel eyes locked onto hers, they laughed, even as they shuddered at the thought.

Emmi, their soon-to-be three-year-old, never went anywhere without Kalevala, her beloved stuffed animal that Gianna's Mummo had given her when she'd been born. And Emmi wasn't shy about voicing her displeasure about anything.

"Okay, fine, I'll give in," Gianna admitted, "I'm not shaking because I'm nervous. Or because you are stabbing Hélène with the nametag. Though, I don't love the thought of it," she added, thoughtfully.

Which was entirely true.

"All right then," Riley said softly as she properly affixed the nametag into Gianna's dress. Still, though, she didn't move to go into the room. "Then why are your hands shaking ever so slightly? And your face is a little flushed?"

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“Damn you for knowing me so well.” Gianna lifted her hand up to gently sweep some of Riley’s honey-blond hair behind her ear. Then she let her hand linger there, her fingers tunneling into the soft locks.

“But,” she continued, keeping herself on track with a nod, “I am not nervous. I’m excited, actually.”

Now, Riley did draw back enough to put a few inches of distance between them. She frowned up at Gianna, her bafflement obvious. “You’re excited for our twenty-year college reunion? Apparently, I don’t know you well because I would have never guessed that.”

Gianna’s lips curled into a little smile as she dipped to press a light kiss to Riley’s lips. Very brief, though, because she couldn’t let herself get sucked in.

Not yet, anyway.

She had a plan for the evening, and getting lost in Riley happened a little later.

“I, personally, think it’s beautiful that we can still keep the mystery alive, even after knowing each other for twenty years, being together for eight, and having four children.” Gianna couldn’t resist pressing her lips to Riley’s again before swiftly pulling back and reaching down to take Riley’s hand in hers.

Their fingers slotted together automatically as Gianna led them into the room.

Their twenty-year college reunion took place in their old student hub, decked out with

photos and memorabilia from twenty years ago, when they'd all started here as freshmen.

Even though there had certainly been updates to the building, it was so familiar that Gianna instantly felt like she was transported back in time.

The feeling sliding through her had her grasping tighter to Riley's hand. God, she remembered so clearly what it was like to walk through this building – cutting through to get to a class in a nearby building, meeting Riley in the attached lounge where they'd liked to hang out.

And true to her word, Gianna was excited.

She had been looking forward to this day for a long time.

Honestly, she'd been looking forward to this day since she and Riley had officially gotten together, on some level. She'd taken Riley to one of their college haunts on their first real date! Clearly, this thought was in her mind somewhere.

Even if it had been subconscious – which it had been. Because she hadn't registered this plan until their invite to the reunion had come across their emails a couple of months ago. But as soon as her eyes had landed on the words, she'd been able to picture herself and Riley attending so clearly.

She wanted it. She wanted to walk through the place in which she had fallen in love with Riley, this time wearing her wedding ring.

“Gianna and Riley, here together. Why am I not surprised?” Heather Griffin, who'd lived in the dorm room across from them sophomore year, exclaimed as she approached them. She leaned in to hug them both, before leaning back and eyeing them appraisingly.

“You shouldn’t be,” Gianna agreed as she slung her arm over Riley’s shoulder, deliberately letting her ring glint in the light. “Because we’re married.”

It had been over five years since they’d gotten married, and it still thrilled her. She still loved simply saying it.

Heather’s eyes widened in genuine surprise, which didn’t shock Gianna. While her influencer status had garnered many eyes on her, she still wasn’t a celebrity. Her personal business wasn’t written up in online tabloids – anyone who didn’t follow her likely didn’t know about her and Riley.

And she wanted everyone to be aware.

“Oh my god!” Heather exclaimed, bouncing on her heels. “That is so – so sweet. You two were so close; that must be so perfect.”

“It really is,” Gianna agreed, smiling widely with the truth of it.

Riley’s hand came up to intertwine with the one Gianna had over her shoulder as she shot Gianna an amused look before turning to face Heather herself. “Unsurprisingly, marrying your best friend is as great as you could imagine.”

Gianna hadn’t known it was possible, but her smile grew impossibly bigger. There were fewer rushes as heady as hearing how sincere Riley was when she made statements like that. When Riley affirmed aloud that she felt so much for Gianna, the way Gianna did for her.

In fairness, Riley did many unspoken things that made Gianna feel that way, as well. The way she would comb her fingers softly through Gianna’s hair or stroke her thumbs over Gianna’s cheeks. The way she made a point of stealing private moments with Gianna whenever they could – which wasn’t easy, with four daughters under the

age of ten.

Gianna wasn't sure that there would ever come a point, though, where the knowledge that Riley was in love with her didn't amaze her on some level. She wasn't sure it was possible, not when she'd harbored these feelings for so long, unrequited.

"Shut up; I didn't believe you two would actually come! I can't believe you're here!" A voice exclaimed to their right, and all three turned to see Misty Brown, with whom Gianna had shared several courses, rushing toward them.

As Gianna would have expected, she was dressed fashionably, with a Gucci bag slung over her shoulder.

Much like her keen fashion sense, her personality seemed to have remained intact as well. The second she was close enough, words bubbled out of her at a volume that made her impossible to ignore.

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“I still am not over you abandoning all of your socials! But, anyway,” she waved her hands in front of her, “Enough of that – for now. What I’ve been waiting for years for is to say – that confession?! Riley! How you two were sleeping together, and then you had feelings...” She halted, arching a severe look toward Riley, “Was that some sort of ratings gimmick for your news station? I mean, no judgment if it was, I suppose, because it was the most interesting thing I’ve heard on the news in my life. But I have wondered for so long!”

Riley’s lips ticked up into a small smile, her cheeks pinking slightly at the reminder of that ill-fated – or wonderfully fated, depending on how you looked at it – broadcast nearly ten years ago. “Hi, Misty. Really nice to see you again. And no, it was very much not intentional.”

Misty’s mouth fell open as she darted her eyes between the two of them. “Well, that’s quite a mistake, huh?!”

“I never said it was a mistake,” Riley quickly interjected. She was still wearing a smile, but there was no room for debate in her firmly correcting tone. “I said it was unintentional.”

Misty pouted her lips as she made a soft aww sound before snapping back to attention as she waved several people from behind Gianna and Riley over. “Before you say more – the women from my B.U. chat are going to want to hear everything.”

And so the next hour passed –

Running into old acquaintances and either informing them of their life update of

being married or receiving comments from those who already knew they were together as they'd followed along with Gianna's life updates over the years.

They excused themselves from being in the middle of the fanfare, Gianna pressing her hand lightly to the small of Riley's back as they headed for the refreshment table.

"I think it's so fascinating how many people seem equally surprised about the fact that we got together and surprised at how long it took for us to get together," Riley commented, laughter sparking in her hazel eyes.

Gianna grinned back down at her, shrugging as she reached out and first handed Riley a flute of champagne before taking one for herself. "Let's be honest – most people found our friendship to be a little intense, even before we were together."

Riley hummed as she took a sip. "You aren't wrong."

She stared intently at Gianna over the rim of her glass, sipping again, before she commented, "Also, you holding court for the last hour has tipped me off about what you were so excited about for tonight."

Both amused and unsurprised, Gianna arched a look at Riley, reaching out to wrap a lock of that honey-colored hair. In the last year, Riley had started getting a little more lax about her salon appointments.

She still got her hair straightened, but there were weeks – sometimes over a month – where her curls started to return. When Gianna asked Riley if she was making a new stylistic choice, Riley had simply tossed all that luscious, thick hair into a manageable ponytail and shrugged, "Love, between the twins being born, Anya starting first grade, and Emmi being... Emmi – as well as the craziness at work, and trying to still fit in time with my gorgeous wife? The hair appointment is the first thing on my calendar that can wait a while."

Riley seemed content with managing her waves turning into curls, and Gianna, frankly, loved them.

She pulled her focus away from her wife's captivating hair and sent Riley an expectant look. "All right, carina. I'm waiting for you to give the exposé on my excitement for tonight."

Even though she sounded like she was teasing, she really wasn't. Because she knew that Riley knew her well enough to have put together the truth.

"You want everyone that used to know us to know that we're together now," Riley mused, swaying closer to Gianna. She tipped her glass up at Gianna, playfully challenging her to deny it. "You like that eeeveryone here, who knew us as platonic Riley-and-Gianna are seeing that we are now married Riley-and-Gianna." She wore the cutest conspiratorial smile as she shook her hair back, tilting her head up at Gianna.

They were standing close enough now that their chests brushed, that Riley's warm breath washed over Gianna's jaw, as Riley murmured, "I'm onto you, Mäkinen. I've got your number."

"It's Beckett, actually," she corrected, tilting her head down at Riley so they were mere inches apart.

And she didn't care if anyone was staring or what anyone was saying.

Because, "And, you caught me," she confirmed unashamedly. "I love it. I love that anyone here who knew the us back then sees who we are now. That we not only made it as best friends but that we're more."

Gianna was reasonably certain that most people they went to school with hadn't

known about her feelings for Riley. Other than a single drunken cry she'd had in a bathroom at a house party a few months into dealing with her feelings for her best friend, she'd never mentioned it to anyone. And Riley had been the only person she'd truly been close to who could read her like a book.

But if there had been anyone here – like Anthony, the guy Gianna had mistakenly attempted to set Riley up with that one time. The guy who may have turned out to have been a huge asshole, but who'd set Gianna's entire worldview on fire by being the person that had given her perspective on her feelings for Riley – that may have suspected anything, she loved knowing that they now saw that it worked. That she and Riley had gotten here in the end.

She bit her lip, hesitating for a moment, before she confessed, "I also really wanted to do this for College Gianna."

That little wrinkle formed between Riley's eyebrows as she took in Gianna's words.

Wanting everyone to know that they were together was a bold feeling inside of Gianna. But this part of the truth made her feel vulnerable.

Still, she felt safe showing all of her vulnerabilities to Riley, so she elaborated, "I just... College Gianna spent so much time here – literally here – wanting you. Wanting to be with you. And I wanted to be here with you," she lifted her hand, lightly pressing her thumb to that perfectly plush center of Riley's bottom lip. That place she'd always loved. "For College Gianna."

Riley's eyes were wide and understanding, and the look in them was so sweet.

Before she could say anything, though, a man's voice came from their left.

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“Riley! I thought that was you.”

Both Gianna and Riley froze where they stood, as that particular voice was familiar for both of them.

Unpleasantly so. Very, very unpleasantly.

She could feel Riley’s posture straighten, tight against her, as they turned in unison, coming face-to-face with Ashton.

AKA Asshole Ashton.

AKA a man that Gianna had deemed her arch nemesis the day he broke Riley’s heart.

In fairness, she hadn’t been his biggest fan even when he’d been dating Riley – especially not when he’d proposed right after graduation. Like, Gianna’s personal feelings aside, Riley had a whole life ahead of her! What was wrong with this guy?!

Then, when he’d cheated on her, Gianna had felt so... torn. Because – again, personal feelings aside – it meant Riley would be able to focus on carving out the career in journalism that she’d been so doggedly intent on since they’d literally met rather than throwing her lot in with this asshole. But it had also left Riley devastated. And, again, what the fuck was wrong with this guy?!

He’d had Riley, and he’d thrown her away.

No matter what, that was enough to make Gianna know for certain this man was a

fucking moron.

Somewhat annoyingly, he'd aged very well. He looked distinguished, starting to gray at his temples, still clearly fit under his well-cut Armani suit.

Gianna's eyes narrowed as her grip on Riley's waist tightened.

She took a visceral satisfaction, though, knowing that even if he looked good, she and Riley looked better. If she did say so herself.

And she did.

Riley looked like she'd attempted to smile, but it froze in place still as a grimace. "Ashton. Wow. I didn't expect you to be here."

He shrugged, a wide smile on his face. As if he had the right to smile at Riley!

Gianna didn't give a shit that it had been over fifteen years since he'd cheated on Riley; she didn't care if it had been fifty years – he shouldn't even have the nerve to look in her direction.

"Yeah, I know. My company moved from L.A.-based to Manhattan-based last year, though, so I figured – hey, I'm local-ish. Might as well swing by and see how everyone is doing."

The hand Gianna had wrapped around Riley's waist tightened, and she could feel that she was glowering at him. Riley sent her a quick, concerned look before she cleared her throat. "Uh, sure."

Seemingly undeterred by her short, unengaged response, Ashton slipped his hands casually into his pockets. As if settling in for a chat. "Yeah, so I just got here. Walked

in and clocked you immediately.” The smile on his face was clearly designed to be charming.

It made Gianna want to scratch it off of his face.

“I mean, you look... wow. You look really, really great, Riley.”

“She really, really does,” Gianna interjected, biting at the inside of her cheek.

He turned to look at her, giving her his attention for the first time in the evening. That was typical of Ashton, though. In college, it had made Gianna foolishly think maybe he was good enough for Riley; she seemed to be the only person his gaze focused on. Pfft.

“Ah, Gianna. Good to see you, too,” he offered, far more politely.

Perhaps it was because the last time they’d communicated, Gianna had threatened to castrate him. And she’d meant every word.

“Wish I could say the same.”

He cleared his throat. “About that...” He reached up, running a hand over the back of his head, sliding his gaze back to Riley. “You know, it’s been so long, and I was a stupid kid back then. We both were, really, to get engaged back then, right? But, regardless, I’ve never forgotten the way I treated you. It’s – it’s one of the only things I look back on and really wish I’d never done.”

“We were stupid back then,” Riley agreed, her placid tone making Gianna double-take. But that grimace she’d had upon Ashton’s arrival was gone, replaced with a look of sheer... calm.

Relief filtered over his face. “Yeah. Yes. I’m – hey, you want to grab another drink and catch up, then?”

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A real smile tugged at Riley's lips, then as she shook her head. "Sorry. No. I'm actually here with my spouse."

A thick, heady satisfaction started sliding through Gianna then.

Ashton's eyebrows winged up high on his forehead, obvious surprise mixed with disappointment. "Ah. I didn't realize your husband was here."

"She didn't say a husband," Gianna asserted, unable to stop herself as she felt Riley's hand land on top of the one Gianna had curled so possessively around her waist. "It's a wife, actually."

He was such an easy read, as confusion slid over his expression before he dipped his gaze down to their hands, resting on the perfect curve of Riley's hip. He stared there for several long seconds, as if unable to compute what he was seeing. Gianna deliberately traced her finger slowly along Riley's.

Finally, it appeared to dawn on him as he zeroed in on their rings, his mouth falling open as his gaze whipped back up to theirs.

This time, he split his focus between her and Riley. "I – you – the two of you? Married?"

"With four kids," Gianna added with a dark glee.

She wasn't surprised that he didn't know.

After all, even back in college, he had taken oh-so-much pride in not having any social medias. She could only imagine that hadn't changed into adulthood, as it made him seem so authentic.

"Four – you – all right. Huh." He reached up and rubbed his hand over the back of his head again, shaking it before dropping his hand heavily back to his thigh. "Well, then. I guess that's... maybe it's not surprising."

"It shouldn't be," Riley agreed, squeezing her hand over Gianna's. "So, really, you can let go of feeling bad about the past. I ended up exactly where I was supposed to be."

God, that feeling that settled inside Gianna at the certainty in Riley's voice was so strong, possessive, and thrilling – it made her lightheaded.

"With someone who would never cheat on her," Gianna couldn't help but slip in the barb because even if Riley had made peace with what Ashton did to her, Gianna hadn't. She never would.

Anyone that broke Riley's heart was on her permanent shitlist. Til death would she part with it.

Ashton winced appropriately as he sucked in a breath. "Right. So... congratulations, I guess?"

"Thanks."

"If you'll excuse us, Assho – Ashton," Gianna deliberately slipped up with the moniker he'd held in her mind for over a decade. Just so he knew. "We have somewhere to be."

“By all means,” he muttered, turning away from them, clearly still reeling from the informational download.

Gianna slid her hand over Riley’s lower back, tantalizingly close to her perfect ass, before using it to grip Riley’s hand with her own and leading them away. Heading right back for the entrance.

Riley easily kept pace with her, squeezing her hand in Gianna’s a few times. “That was interesting.”

“Seeing Asshole Ashton?” Gianna asked, curiously shooting Riley a look, even though her walking didn’t slow.

“I suppose, yes. But mostly, it was interesting that you seemed... jealous. Gianna Mäkinen Beckett, jealous. Never thought I’d see the day,” Riley’s tone was light, the teasing note of it clearly intended to soothe any part of Gianna that may still be experiencing a dark jealousy.

Oh, but that feeling of jealousy remained. Hot and greedy, taking up space inside of her as she led them through the doors and back into the main lobby.

“I’ve been jealous,” she informed Riley. Again, because she could tell Riley anything. Even this fact that she’d never shared with anyone.

“When!” Riley demanded to know, shock and fascination coloring her voice. Still, though, she diligently and unquestioningly followed Gianna as she turned and led them down an adjoining hallway. “You’ve spent our entire adult lives proudly proclaiming to be free of the green-eyed monster.”

“I suppose it’s only a fib if you count our college years as our adult lives,” Gianna admitted.

And it was a bit of a fib on her part throughout the years. Because her schtick about not experiencing jealousy had started in college.

For the most part, it was true; she'd never had any feelings of jealousy over anyone she was sleeping with, which was what people generally assumed she was talking about. Even Riley had.

Gianna pushed open one of the double doors to where she could so clearly picture in her mind. Back in the day, these doors had always been left open. She supposed they likely still were when this area of the building wasn't reserved for an event.

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Finally, they were here. In the student lounge they'd spent so much time in.

This lounge, now, was somewhat dated. Even with the lights off now, she could see that the couches were the same style they'd had back when they'd attended university. The layout of the room was precisely the same.

The newer main lounge had been updated in a different building, where Gianna believed the majority of college kids spent their time these days. She always got the updates in her alumni emails, given that she was a fairly large donor to their alma mater.

This was the institution that had led her to Riley, after all. The least she could do was give back financially.

She continued to lead Riley along through some of the bookshelves toward the back of the room. Toward the area they'd often met up in back in the day.

"You know you have literally no one on earth to be jealous of, right?" Riley asked, all traces of confusion and teasing gone. Now, she was left with a beautiful sincerity as she stroked her thumb along Gianna's.

"I'm not jealous now," Gianna responded, finally stopping them precisely where she'd aimed to be. Right in front of the couch they'd congregated on. Sitting here during afternoons of homework or late nights after going out dancing and partying, gathering their snacks here as it was the halfway point between some of their most popular haunts and their dorm.

She spun Riley to face her before not-so-gently pushing on Riley's shoulders, so her knees hit the cushion, and she fell with a slight yelp onto the couch.

Gianna wasted no time in straddling her, hitching up her dress without a second thought as she braced her hands on Riley's shoulders. "I was jealous then. So, so jealous."

She descended her lips to Riley's, eager, wanting, and hungry.

Riley met her beat-for-beat, her hands coming to land on the backs of Gianna's knees before slowly, sensually, sliding up the backs of her thighs.

She keened into Riley's mouth at her touch, arching into her as she slid her tongue against Riley's.

That was the heart of it. She'd felt the hit of jealousy tonight, as seeing Ashton. Especially at seeing how keenly he'd eyed Riley. As if he truly thought they could talk in private. As if a part of him – any part of him – thought they could somehow reunite.

This may be a reunion, but it wasn't that kind of reunion.

But this jealousy rearing up inside her wasn't rooted in the present.

In the present, she knew she had no one to be jealous of. She knew how deeply Riley loved her, wanted her, desired her. How dedicated she was to their family.

No, this jealousy that ate her up from the inside out, that had her hands streaking into Riley's hair and taking fistfuls of it just to possess it, to be able to feel her fingernails scratching against the back of Riley's neck, was entirely rooted in the past.

This was a bone-deep jealousy College Gianna had been forced to endure. And even though it had long faded, it clearly had never fully been forgotten.

With that in mind, she used the grip she had on Riley's hair to tug her head back, exposing her throat. Riley willingly moved with her, giving Gianna access to everything she wanted.

She nipped her teeth into the base of Riley's throat, right where her collarbone met the hollow, relishing in the quiet keen Riley let out.

"I couldn't have cared less about who the people I've let share my bed fantasized about. About who they'd been in love with, who they yearned for. In fact," she corrected, dipping her tongue into the hollow of Riley's throat, feeling her groan. "I was glad every time they didn't want me like that. I was the opposite of jealous."

She used the tip of her tongue to lick up the column of Riley's throat, feeling her swallow so hard. "It made things easier for me. Because as long as they didn't want me for anything more, I didn't have to ever feel guilty that I would never want them."

It had been so simple to never be jealous of her lovers over the years because of that simple fact.

She kept her fist in Riley's hair tight as she lifted her gaze and stared at her for several seconds. Until her wife's hazel eyes blinked open, dark and needy, up at her.

"You are mine, Riley Jane Beckett. Mine. And we're here tonight to give that fulfillment to College Gianna. God knows she needed it."

With that, she scratched her nails down Riley's neck and leaned back down, sucking Riley's plush bottom lip between her own.

Riley was hers. Just as she was Riley's. The last time they'd sat in this very lounge, sixteen years ago, she'd been Riley's, and didn't imagine this was a whisper of a possibility for her future.

She moaned, long and loud, into Riley's mouth when Riley slid her hands up and cupped her ass. Then she whimpered as Riley dug her nails in, just enough to make Gianna feel the bite of it.

Exactly what Gianna fucking loved.

Her hips started rocking into Riley's, searching –

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Only for the lights in the room to flip on.

Riley's hands stilled against her as Gianna pulled away from their kiss, panting, as she looked around.

They were in the back of the room, hidden behind several bookshelves as they sat on their couch. But there were definitely voices at the entrance.

“Yeah, let's start the setup in here, now. We'll start to migrate over for the later crowd – the coffee and baked goods in here, the alcohol and louder music over in the main hub.” Someone – undoubtedly one of the organizers – said to someone else.

As Gianna caught her breath and looked around, she saw that, indeed, there were several of the blown-up photos and decorations in the lounge. Things she'd overlooked because she'd been a little focused on her goal.

Balancing with her hands on Riley's shoulders, she smiled down at her.

The needy, possessive feeling was far more muted now as she stroked her thumbs over the soft skin of Riley's exposed shoulders. Especially as Riley smiled up at her, cheeks flushed, pupils blown.

Gianna returned her smile. “It seems our private party is going to be cut a little short due to the much larger party heading our way.”

Riley's hands slid from her ass down her thighs again, the firmness of her touch making Gianna shiver. “We could leave if you feel you've successfully given College

Gianna everything she would have wanted.”

Gianna couldn’t help but rock down against Riley once more, the bolt of pleasure shooting right through her, making her dig her teeth into her lip to keep quiet.

“I’m not sure College Gianna is entirely... sated just yet. Which is entirely unfortunate.”

Riley arched an eyebrow up at her. “I think our imaginations are plenty powerful enough to carry out your past sexual fantasies at home. After all, we shared a room in college, and we share one now. Shouldn’t be too difficult.”

The grin she shot Gianna was sharp and wanting, and it deepened Gianna’s arousal even more.

“I’ve always loved the way you think.”

Part

Six

LET’S GET PHYSICAL

The Before

AGE: 26

Riley breathed out an appreciative laugh at the ire in Gianna’s tone.

“All right,” she heaved out, pushing herself up with one hand, keeping her wine glass carefully held in the other.

After her sex date had gone miserably awry and Eric had left – so, so disappointingly early. Riley had pre-made them a late-night post-sex charcuterie and everything! – she'd laid in her bed, staring at the ceiling, debating if she should just... stay in.

Sure, it was a Saturday night and it was only eight-thirty, but Riley felt like it would still be a good time to wallow. Wallow in the fact that she'd been anticipating having sex for the first time in months and it had been so unsatisfying. Wallow in the fact that Eric had been the best potential relationship she'd had in over a year, and now that was totally not happening.

But then Gianna had texted her – (I know you're busy, so this is just for you to look at later) – along with a link to a new designer shoe collection coming out, complete with excited !!!!!

Of course, Gianna – who rarely ever initiated texts when she knew Riley was on dates – would take exception to the rule for fashion. The text had made Riley laugh, perking her up enough to realize: why should she wallow at home, alone?

She'd texted Gianna back –

SOS – are you busy?

Gianna – 8:34PM

Not especially. Debated going to check out that new wine bar, but haven't started my going out makeup yet. Aren't YOU busy???

Riley – 8:34PM

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Not especially :/

Gianna – 8:35PM

Then I'm not either. Who needs the wine bar when I can have wine at home with you. Want to come here or me to come to you?

Riley had looked around her bedroom, grimacing at the fact that she now had to wash her sheets and it was all for nothing.

Riley – 8:35PM

I'm coming over

Once she arrived, she'd promptly handed Gianna the charcuterie board before letting herself fall down onto Gianna's couch.

Now though, Riley shook her head, trying to shake herself out of wallowing too much. It was easy when she leaned into Gianna, who was staring back at her, expectantly.

“Want me to blast him on socials? I totally will,” Gianna offered, sounding entirely too excited about it.

Riley laughed, bumping Gianna's shoulder with hers. “No. I want to forget about my experience with him and try to remember what good sex is like.”

Gianna leaned her head back against the couch, letting out a long, guttural sigh. The column on her throat was on display, and Riley stared at it. Thinking, not for the first time, about the physical beauty that was Gianna Mäkinen. Her silky blonde hair lay like a curtain over the back of the couch, her skin had almost a glow emanating from it. Riley had often wondered if it was due to the impeccable skin care regimen Gianna implemented or if it was genetics. Probably a combination.

“I was thinking earlier about how I could really use some good sex, myself.”

“Tell me about it,” Riley murmured, laying her head back next to Gianna’s.

Her best friend took Riley’s off-handed agreement quite literally. “I could really, really do with going down on a woman. I just – I have so much energy lately, and I want to burn it off with sex so badly. There’s really nothing like it, when you feel a woman so wet for you, desperate for you. And then after, I want to be fucked. Like. God, do I want to be fucked. Just... deep and hard, until I’m begging for a release.”

Riley was very familiar with these sort of comments from Gianna. Very familiar with the graphic, frank descriptions of sex, of pleasure, of what she liked or was in the mood for.

What she was unfamiliar with was how she felt her body respond to Gianna’s words.

Because she did. She felt the answering tug deep in her core, the heat spark through her, landing heavily between her thighs.

Surprised, her breath caught in her throat, making her sit straight up as she coughed.

Thankfully, Gianna took that as her cue to not elaborate any more as she turned to look in alarm at Riley. Those blue eyes seemed so luminous in the room that was lit mostly by candles, a Gianna specialty.

“Are you okay?” She reached out, sliding her hand down Riley’s back, rubbing.

Riley nodded even as her eyes watered, still trying to regulate her breathing. “Fine,” she wheezed out, “I’m fine.”

Gianna’s expression was dubious, and she reached forward to grab Riley’s wine glass from the table. “Here, drink this.”

“I think people are usually supposed to drink water in moments like this,” Riley managed, taking the wine glass anyway.

“Well, I’m not Jesus and this is what I have on hand.” Gianna smartly tapped on the glass. “Drink.”

Riley did, and she felt a little calmer once she was able to really catch her breath. She wiped her hand over her eyes, gathering her bearings.

It was because she was worked up. After all, she’d had very unsatisfying sex tonight, had essentially been halfway to having an orgasm given to her by another person for the first time in months, and her body was still primed.

Yes. That was it.

The After Party

AGE: 38

Riley knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she was the luckiest woman on the planet.

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It was a thought she'd had often over the last eight years of being with Gianna, and it echoed so strongly in her mind right now as Gianna's mouth was on hers as they stumbled into their bedroom, the door slamming into the wall behind it.

"Good thing the girls are staying with Ellie and Mia tonight," Gianna murmured into Riley's mouth.

She laughed against Gianna's lips, breathless with the neediness that surged through her. The hunger that had taken hold inside of her when they'd been at their reunion.

It wasn't like she wanted Gianna to be jealous because – as Riley had said – she really had nothing to be jealous of. Gianna was all Riley could see.

But she would call anyone under the sun a liar if the knowledge that Gianna wanted them and only them, with a burning and undying intensity, didn't instantly arouse them.

With that thought, she pulled her lips from Gianna's, trailing them over her perfectly defined jaw, following the sharp definition there.

"What did you want?" She rasped into Gianna's ear, nipping her teeth against her earlobe as she felt Gianna's fingernails dig into her back through her dress.

"I want you," Gianna breathed, trying to follow Riley's lips and kiss her.

She pulled away with no small amount of regret.

But right now, on the heels of their reunion, that wasn't what this was about.

"No." Riley's voice was so throaty, she could hear her own want reflected in it.

She waited for Gianna to blink her eyes open, looking at her with those blue eyes so dark and wanting it made Riley throb.

Granted, she'd been wet and aching since Gianna had pushed her down on the couch and straddled her at their amla mater an hour ago.

"What did you want?" She asked, stressing the tense. "I want to know what you wanted from me in college."

Gianna's lips parted on the sexiest sigh, tying Riley up inside.

She slid her hands down, stroking the soft, exposed skin of Gianna's thighs as she spoke, "I know how much you'd thought about me in college. I know that you wanted me."

Over the years, Gianna had clearly expressed those desires to her. How long she'd wanted her, the many thoughts she'd had. Mostly revolving around going down on Riley, as that was what Riley most often said was her favorite thing.

And Gianna had gotten to act on that desire many, many times. All of the time.

"This – right now – isn't about what you'd fantasized about doing to me." She slid her hands under the sinfully short hem of Gianna's dress, so she could squeeze her perfect ass, biting her lip at the feel in her hand. At the way Gianna's ragged exhale turned up the heat inside of her.

"I want to know what, exactly, you'd wanted me to do to you." She stared up at her

wife, both of them breathing unevenly, as Riley felt like they were standing on a precipice.

One small step, and she'd be pushed completely over. But she was holding on.

"I wanted you to take me," Gianna breathed, dark eyes staring into Riley's. Intense and needy, and Riley shuddered at the look alone. "I wanted to know what it was like to be completely and totally owned by you. I wanted to feel you everywhere, to feel the echoes of your touch for days."

Riley couldn't bite back the whimper that escaped her. She trailed her fingers up Gianna's back, taking hold of the zipper and tugging it down. Gianna's stare remained on her, needy and intense, and Riley didn't even think her wife was aware of Riley undoing her dress.

Something about that made the flames she felt burn even brighter.

"I wanted your tongue on me, your fingers inside of me. I wanted you to fuck me with a strap-on, so I could feel you so deeply inside of me," Gianna continued, flexing her hands where they remained on Riley's shoulders. Her fingernails bit into her skin, and Riley arched closer.

"I just wanted you to be so consumed by wanting me, the way I had been consumed by wanting you. I wanted you to feel the same fire. I wanted to feel like you were driven so completely mad from the desire to have me out of my mind with pleasure, the way I felt that for you." There was a moan in Gianna's voice as she finished, as if she could barely speak comprehensively about what she wanted.

The thing was, Riley did feel that way. She felt it right now, building inside of her with every word Gianna had spoken.

She mirrored Gianna's position from earlier when Gianna had pushed her down against the couch. With her hands on Gianna's hips, she led Gianna backward until her knees hit the bed, and she fell backward. Gracefully, the way Gianna did everything. As if she'd intended to fall the entire time, her hands propping herself up as she tipped her head up at Riley. Expectant.

"Take your clothes off," Riley commanded, her voice rasping out of her throat. "And lay back against the pillows."

"Your wish is my command," Gianna breathed back, sliding up onto the bed, shedding her dress easily as she went.

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For several moments, Riley could only stare at Gianna, that heat inside of her building as she could see Gianna's hands trembling. Trembling from excitement from her past-self's sexual dream coming true, trembling from how turned on Riley imagined Gianna still was from earlier, when they'd been making out on the couch. She didn't know which, but it didn't matter.

Riley, herself, was still wet and wanting. She knew that if no one had walked in, they would have done far more than grind against each other right then and there.

Using all her self-control, she turned away from Gianna and shed her dress as she strode toward their walk-in closet.

She easily found her favorite harness in one of the top drawers and put it on before pulling out the drawer next to it and grabbing Gianna's favorite toy for Riley to use when fucking her with their strap-on.

Yes. Her own hands were already trembling from how fucking ready she was for this.

She walked back into their bedroom, only to come to an immediate stop as soon as she laid eyes on Gianna, who – true to exactly what Riley had said – was lying on her back against the pillows, completely naked.

It didn't matter that they'd been married for years, together for even longer. It didn't matter that they had multiple perfect children. It didn't matter that she'd seen Gianna in some state of undress daily.

Gianna was glorious. Her skin soft and flawless, her breasts already heaving with the

deep breaths she took as she stared at Riley with dark, hungry eyes. Her nipples were already so hard, and she parted her thighs as Riley stared so she could see how wet she already was.

And Riley could see it.

God, she could see everything and the desire pulsed through her.

“You wanted me to be driven insane by how much I wanted you?” Riley asked, walking slowly toward the bed.

Gianna nodded up at her. “So much.”

“You wanted me to walk into our dorm room one day and see you there. Maybe in the middle of changing, as completely, gorgeously naked as you are right now, and be struck by the need to touch you. To make you come so I could know every sound you made.”

Gianna swore, her gaze searching Riley’s as she jerkily nodded. “Yes. Because that’s what I wanted to do to you. I wanted it so badly.”

Riley settled on the bed, straddling Gianna’s hips and leaning down to press Gianna’s wrists down against the pillow. “Every time I saw you back then when we were changing or getting ready together, I marveled at you. Even if I didn’t recognize all of the ways I wanted you, I couldn’t believe it was possible for a human being on this earth to look the way you look.”

Which was the absolute truth. Riley hadn’t been able to comprehend, sometimes, how gorgeous Gianna looked. How beautiful, how sexy, how effortlessly stunning she was.

“Yeah?” Gianna panted up at her, flexing her wrists under Riley’s hands.

“Sometimes, I couldn’t even believe it was possible for your face to be so flawless, for your body to be so perfect. And I was never even envious,” Riley murmured, tracing her eyes over Gianna’s face and her body now. Laid out under her, all hers for the taking.

She licked her lips; god, she wanted to take.

“Maybe that should have tipped me off. That I was living with physical perfection, and I was never jealous. I felt... I loved existing by your side.”

Riley kissed Gianna, then slid her thigh between Gianna’s and pressed herself firmly against Gianna’s core. She groaned, the cry ripping from the back of her throat at feeling just how soaked Gianna was.

Feeling how Gianna jerkily moved her hips against Riley, trying to find friction that she wasn’t getting. She slid along the smooth skin of Riley’s thigh, groaning with both pleasure and disappointment.

“You need a lot more than this,” Riley breathed against Gianna’s mouth as she slid down the bed.

Gianna nodded quickly and intently, her hair spread out over the pillow like a goddess.

Riley slid her hands under the backs of Gianna’s thighs, gripping as she settled on her knees between them.

“You wanted my tongue on you. You wanted to feel my mouth on your clit. You wanted to come in my mouth.” She recited Gianna’s desires back at her, digging her

nails in slightly to the pliant, warm skin under her.

Gianna's legs jerked slightly in her grasp, spreading herself wider. Begging for Riley without verbally asking for anything for long moments before she gasped out, "Yes. Yes, babe, that's exactly what I wanted. What I want."

Riley slid down, settling onto her stomach as she leaned in and dragged the flat of her tongue up Gianna's slit. God, she was so wet, coating Riley's chin and lips before she'd even buried herself against her.

The choked groan that left Gianna's mouth echoed in Riley's ears, ratcheting up her hunger as she arched a look at Gianna from between her legs.

"Me, too," she rasped before she dove in.

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If Gianna wanted to feel how much Riley wanted her and the extent to which she drove Riley crazy, she was more than happy to show her.

Using one of her hands to push down Gianna's hips, keeping her right where Riley wanted her, she used the other to dip down and brushed her fingertips over her wife. She didn't push inside; just felt Gianna.

In an instant, her fingers were drenched, and Gianna's unadulteratedly loud cries echoed off of their vaulted ceiling. The sound of them, the feeling of Gianna's hands reaching down to grasp Riley's hair, had her moaning against Gianna's clit.

She pressed her tongue against Gianna more firmly, moving quicker. This wasn't about making slow, tender love but about making Gianna come. This was about Gianna feeling how far they'd come. This was for her wife to feel how desperately Riley wanted her, to know that this wanting she'd felt for so long was entirely reciprocated.

And it was. Whimpers left the back of Riley's throat, both hungry for Gianna's release as well as her own. She could feel herself dripping, and she rocked her hips against the bed. Knowing she couldn't come from it but needing to feel something.

"Ri-Rile-y!" Gianna's breathless cry was muffled as Riley registered it because her thighs tightened around Riley's head. A delicious pressure that Riley craved more of; Gianna wasn't the only one who took a visceral satisfaction in this carnal wanting.

"Inside. P-please. I want you – fuck," Gianna broke off her request as Riley wrapped her lips around her clit and used the tip of her tongue to tap against her.

She wasn't going to go inside; that wasn't part of the plan. Not yet. Not when she knew Gianna would be able to come – and come hard – just like this.

And she wanted it. She wanted everything because she had a vision. And that vision entailed Gianna being soaked and relaxed from her first orgasm.

She felt one of Gianna's thighs start that tell-tale tremble against her cheek, and she slid both of her hands down, digging her fingers into Gianna's ass to hold her against Riley's face. Needing to be as close as possible as Gianna came into her mouth.

"I'm – yesss," Gianna moaned, long and low, as her fingers wound tightly into Riley's hair, holding her tightly as she jerked against Riley's face.

As if Riley would have moved away while she could still feel Gianna's clit pulsing against her tongue.

When she did pull away, several long moments later, she wasn't satiated. Not yet.

If anything, as her breathing raggedly escaped her throat and she stared down at her wife, she felt even more wanton, wilder than she'd felt before.

Gianna was still catching her breath, her arms splayed on either side of her, as her thighs fell to the side, totally lax. She stared up at Riley, her lips pulled into a wide, lazy smile.

Riley felt none of that sated relaxation. Which wasn't to say that she didn't take satisfaction from making Gianna come; she did. It gave her even more satisfaction than coming herself.

But right now, in this moment, she needed more.

“You wanted me to feel so hungry for you like I could never get enough?” Riley asked, running her tongue over her lips to taste Gianna there. Her eyes fluttered briefly closed from it before she forced them open again.

In perfect time to see Gianna’s smile and the easy, relaxed look fall away as she swallowed hard, her hands absently gripping at the comforter. “So much.”

Riley reached for the toy she’d placed on the bedside table, easily adjusting it into place in her harness. The dark glint in Gianna’s blue eyes as she watched Riley only served to notch up Riley’s own heat. Her breath caught in her throat as Gianna licked her lips.

“Turn around,” she ordered, her voice low in her throat. “And get on your knees.”

Gianna eagerly complied, a broken whimper escaping her as she did so, swiftly turning onto her hands and knees as she presented her ass to Riley.

Riley had to take a second just to stare. There really was something other-worldly about Gianna, about her effect. Digging her teeth into her bottom lip, she commanded herself to stay focused.

Which wasn’t difficult, not really. Not when she had Gianna exactly the way she wanted her.

Staying up on her knees, she moved forward to press herself against Gianna. Her thighs pressed against the backs of Gianna’s, the length of the strap-on pressed against Gianna’s slit, as she slowly traced her fingers over her wife’s perfectly shaped butt.

At her touch, Gianna inhaled audibly, rocking back into Riley. Her movement made the strap-on brush against her clit, and Gianna shivered, moaning, as she rolled her

hips again.

Riley groaned low in her throat, sliding her hands down to grip Gianna's waist and holding her still. "You were begging me to be inside of you before. Do you still want that?"

As she spoke, she slid her hand down between them, taking hold of the toy as she slowly drew it back, then pressed forward again. Covering the silicone in Gianna's wetness, preparing herself.

Gianna's hands fisted in the covers, her knuckles turning white. "Yes. Obviously. Always."

Every word Gianna breathed was intent, and she turned her head to aim a look at Riley over her shoulder. "You know I love the way you feel inside of me. All of the fucking time."

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Riley arched an eyebrow down at her as she swiftly positioned herself at Gianna's entrance and pushed inside. Just a couple of inches, but enough for Gianna to really feel her.

They both moaned.

Gianna shuddered, turning back to face their headboard as she dropped her head down to rest on her fists. Riley dug her fingers into Gianna's hips, forcing both of them to stay still.

"I know you wanted me to feel this way for you back in college," she murmured, slowly pushing herself deeper into Gianna, pausing after another couple of inches.

Gianna didn't say anything, only nodding her head. She tried to rock her hips back again, only to be stopped once more as Riley held her in place. "I'll be inside of you completely in a second. Have some patience, babe."

The words left her easily, but fuck if she didn't want exactly what Gianna wanted right now.

Taking a deep breath to center herself, she slid one of her hands from Gianna's hips down her spine, following the perfect column all the way down to her neck.

"I didn't know back then what this could be like," she rasped out, finally giving Gianna what she wanted and pushing all the way inside.

Her hips flush against Gianna's ass, she held there as Gianna's groaned, long and

low. She felt that groan; it shuddered through Riley's body and landed heavily in the throbbing between her own legs.

"I didn't—" Riley broke off on a whimper of her own as Gianna pressed herself back as if there was even more for her to take. Instead, she pressed the base of the strap into Riley, brushing against her own clit.

Her head dropped back briefly as she subconsciously thrust forward.

Jesus.

Trying to get a grip, she shook her head and looked back down at Gianna. "I didn't know how good this would feel. How fucking incredible it would feel to be inside of you. But if I did—"

She moved with slow, deliberate movements as she pulled back, the strap nearly leaving Gianna.

Before she thrust completely back inside, her hips slapping against Gianna's ass. "Then you can bet your life that I would have felt this way back then."

"Riley," Gianna breathed her name out with a broken moan, and the desperate sound of it snapped whatever tether of control she'd been able to hold onto.

Maneuvering her hand to grip a fistful of Gianna's silky hair, she started to move.

Hard, exacting thrusts, exactly the way she knew Gianna loved. She was proving it now as Riley fucked her, letting out breathless cries and incoherent words. The only coherent ones in the bunch were her name and occasional swears.

And Riley fucking loved it, too.

She hadn't been lying. No, she hadn't felt this all-encompassing burning, aching desire for Gianna in college, but she just hadn't understood then. She'd had no idea how arousing, how powerful, how earth-shattering this would be.

How it would feel to be able to taste Gianna's delicious wetness on her lips as she stared down and saw that same wetness on Riley's strap every time she pulled out. How much she'd crave the way Gianna desperately pressed her ass back against Riley every time Riley thrust against her as if her body was begging her to return, to fill her up.

The hunger was consuming, and Riley felt it eating her up inside as she snapped her hips harder, faster into Gianna, little cries leaving the back of her throat.

"You – so good," Gianna managed, arching her back so her torso was pressed against the bed while her hips remained in the air.

Riley's knees burned, and she was so wet, she was dripping down her thighs, and she'd never ached with need so badly before. Maybe she had; she didn't really know. Every time she took Gianna like this, she felt it.

She pushed forward, pressing herself against Gianna's back, wanting to feel her wife against her. She needed to feel Gianna's entire body shuddering when she came.

Pulling out more than a few inches like this was impossible, but neither of them cared. In fact, it made the sounds escaping Gianna's mouth even louder.

"Yes," Gianna breathed, starting to tremble under her. "Riley!"

Her head started to nod quickly against the pillow, soft blonde hair rubbing against Riley's cheek with the movement. "Yes, ye–"

She broke off as Riley managed to reach down, working her hand between them, and touched her clit.

She drew quick, small circles, slid deeply inside Gianna, and stayed there, still. Knowing Gianna loved to come while feeling Riley as deep as she could possibly be.

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Only seconds later, Gianna's mouth dropped open in a silent scream as she jerked and shuddered under Riley.

She came long and hard, and Riley slowly worked her through it. Keeping that steady, deliberate touch on her clit as long as she felt Gianna working through the aftershocks.

When Gianna stilled, going completely lax under her, Riley stopped touching her.

Only for one of Gianna's hands to slide down, shakily grabbing onto Riley's wrist. She pulled Riley's hand to her mouth, wrapping her plush, soft lips around the two fingers Riley had used on her clit.

They both moaned; Gianna's born from satiation, Riley's broken and viciously needy.

When Gianna pulled Riley's hand back with a soft pop, Riley pushed herself up on trembling arms, mindful to keep her movements slow as she pulled her hips back.

Gianna sighed as the strap exited her, and Riley locked onto the dripping wetness coating the toy. Fuck.

Her hands shook as the need to come burned through her, and she fumbled to take off the harness and toss it to the side.

She collapsed onto the bed next to Gianna, feeling unable to catch her breath. She felt like she'd run a marathon but wasn't sated in the least. Working Gianna through her

orgasms only deepened Riley's own ache.

Before she could even coherently think about how to relieve her own wanting, she heard Gianna open and close a drawer in their bedside table. She knew that sound, and she knew what it meant, even without looking.

Yes, god, she – she was so ready.

Gianna was at her side in seconds, pressing herself completely against Riley as she hooked her leg around Riley's and pulled her legs apart.

"That was exactly what I wanted," Gianna breathed against her ear, her breath hot and wet and Riley's clit pulsed.

"And what else I wanted?" Gianna leaned in, nipping her teeth at the soft skin of Riley's neck, and she arched against her.

Her eyes opened as soon as she heard the buzzing of their vibrator, anticipation rolling through her...

The groan that escaped her was gravely, torn from somewhere deep inside of her as Gianna pressed the vibrator against her clit.

She eagerly rolled her hips against it, needing relief so fucking badly. After making Gianna come like that, so hard, so loud, so wanton – she needed this.

"I wanted this." Gianna's lips brushed against her neck as she spoke, and Riley shuddered at the sensations overtaking her body.

"There was that one night during sophomore year when you'd thought I was asleep, and I heard you." There was a moan in Gianna's own words at her reveal.

And Riley gasped at it.

“You whispered my name, asking if I was awake. I’d been just on the cusp of falling asleep, so I didn’t answer. And you took out your vibrator, and it was so quiet, and you didn’t make a sound.” Gianna moaned for real then, long and needy, right in Riley’s ear.

She could barely fucking breathe. She turned to look at Gianna, reaching down to wrap a hand around Gianna’s wrist, holding the vibrator so firmly against herself. Giving herself the perfect pressure and making sure Gianna didn’t stop, because if she stopped, Riley was pretty sure she would die.

“I didn’t – I–” she didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know Gianna had been awake? She was sorry? She – god, she was so close.

“I wondered if you were always that quiet. I wondered what you were thinking about. Fuck, Riley. I tried, so hard, to hold back... but after I was sure you were asleep, I came, too,” Gianna admitted, a raw desperation in her tone. “Even after that, I’d dream about it. About what you would have done if I got up and came into your bed that night.”

Riley’s breath was coming in gasps, and – she didn’t know. She didn’t know what she would have done if Gianna had done that.

All she knew was that right now, in this moment, she was going to fucking come with that thought in her mind.

She reached up with her free hand and buried it in Gianna’s hair, pulling her down to connect their mouths. She wanted to feel Gianna everywhere. Wanted this feral, messy kiss as she slid her tongue against Gianna’s and swallowed Gianna’s whimpers.

She cried out against her wife's lips as her body tensed, and she came.

Riley shuddered, pressing herself down against the vibrator as the orgasm wracked through her.

Gianna gently broke their kiss and planted soft kisses all over her face.

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And she reveled in that feeling. Coming down from a world-shattering orgasm that blurred her vision, her heart pounding against her ribs, feeling completely safe and adored.

When she tapped weakly against Gianna's wrist, her wife stopped, pulling the vibrator away and turning it off.

Riley sank back into their soft bed, feeling utterly boneless.

"It's a good thing you didn't want me in college like that." Gianna's voice was thoughtful as she returned to Riley's side, stroking her hand lightly over Riley's cheek.

She lifted her head, arching a questioning look at her wife. "I thought that was your dream?"

"Oh, it was," Gianna agreed, a smile tugging at her lips. "But College Gianna didn't know it was possible to feel like this, for the sex to be so good. I don't think she was ready. I would have died before we could make it here." She gestured around them, in their large bedroom, before dropping her hand down to rest on Riley's stomach.

She stared thoughtfully up at Gianna.

Her golden hair was mussed, her cheeks flushed, and she was beaming down at Riley like she was her entire world.

Yeah, it was a good thing they didn't discover this in college; they would have never

gone to a class again.

Part

Seven

HOME

The Before

AGE: 28

Gianna held her hands over Riley's eyes, walking closely behind her as she directed Riley through her new home.

"I'm not going to lie, I am a little confused as to why I need to have my eyes covered for this one area when I already walked through the entire house with you without so much fanfare?" Riley's amusement was clear in her tone.

"Just let me have this moment," Gianna gently chastised, feeling her excitement start to bubble over.

Only a few more steps before...

"Ta-da!" She lifted her hands away from Riley's face as soon as they were in the doorway of the laundry room.

Her custom designed laundry room, made specifically for the two of them.

"No more laundromat for us, babe!"

In truth, this was Gianna's favorite part of her new home. Yes, she really liked the rest of the house; she wouldn't have bought it otherwise. But while it was a beautiful house, Gianna had been in many beautiful places.

The laundry room was theirs. Something for her and Riley, and she looked at Riley expectantly.

Riley's eyes were wide as took it all in, the edges of her lips curling into a smile that made Gianna feel ridiculously proud. "You really went all out in here; it's amazing."

"Thank you very much."

"Honestly, Gianna, this whole place is amazing. I know I already did the walk-through with you, but..." Riley turned to her, searching her gaze. "I'm so proud of you. Everything you've accomplished, everything you're going to accomplish?"

She reached down, taking Gianna's hands in her own. Gianna sighed at the feeling, at how well their fingers slotted together.

"I'm just honored to be by your side." Riley's voice was soft, as was the look in her eyes, and Gianna's heart skipped a beat.

"Well, I wouldn't have been able to do it without you."

Riley scoffed. "Yes, you would have."

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Gianna merely shook her head. Because she knew the truth.

She could remember, clear as day, when her life had changed. The first place she'd been able to solidly call home, and it was that small dorm room. Walking in the door, seeing and approving of the décor choices her mysterious roommate had made. Riley the Roommate had changed her.

And Gianna would always hold that close to her heart.

The Happily Ever After

AGE: 40

Home had been a very elusive concept to Gianna for most of her life.

When she'd been very little, in her earliest memories, she had flashes of being with her parents. Little snippets here and there; her first – and vaguest – memory was of toddling after her mother backstage at a fashion show. Before her nanny had scooped her up, anyway.

The idea of home had become a bit clearer in the next stage of her life. When her parents finally reached the decision that she'd become too old to have them trotting after them as they followed their ambitions, they arranged for her to move in with Mummo.

She'd struggled a bit, though, even then. Though she spoke Suomi, courtesy of her father, she'd been far more familiar with Italian, having been born there. Though

she'd known, conceptually, who her grandmother was, she hadn't spent very much time with her. But it was there, with her mummo, that she'd been given the first glimpses of what home should feel like. Like warm hugs, sweet cuddles, and a person who loved you – really loved you – looking over your shoulder.

By the time she'd acclimated to that life, she'd had it taken from her. Sent to live in America, to a place she'd never been. A sad and angry twelve-year-old, desperately lonely, largely surrounded by other lonely adolescents. Home there hadn't been a comfort so much as a survival instinct.

The sharpest, brightest, prettiest rose to the front of the pack, and she'd become responsible for watching her own back.

When she'd met Riley... things changed. Though her physical home had been in a dorm, that loneliness that had nestled inside Gianna, demanding a residence inside her, started to fade.

It was after she and Riley had no longer lived together, after Gianna had purchased the house that she and Riley were currently standing in, she'd realized what home really was.

"I'm going to miss this place," Riley sighed, planting her hands on her hips as she looked around the empty living room.

Gianna pushed herself off from the doorway she'd been leaning against, watching as her wife paced through their soon-to-be ex-house. "Oh yeah? The part where we only have three bedrooms, and Anya complains constantly that Emmi is stealing her toys and won't stay on her side? Or the part where we don't have enough room at the dining table for all the girls to sit, now that Pippa and Annabelle aren't in highchairs?"

Riley turned to her, sharply raising an eyebrow. “You forgot the part where the entryway is too small for a bench big enough for all of the girls to sit on, so we have to watch them like hawks to make sure there’s no shoving when they’re running to get a seat, and put their shoes on every time we leave the house.”

Gianna snapped her fingers in mock disappointment as she slowly walked toward Riley. “Damn, babe, you’re right. I can’t believe I forgot that one.”

“I know, it’s one of your favorite times of the day,” Riley shot back, that teasing glint in her hazel eyes.

Gianna hummed under her breath. “Yes, it’s tied for the part of the day when we come home from school, and the girls all crowd into the hallway in an effort to be first.”

She let out a soft sigh as she finally reached Riley, languidly wrapping her arms over Riley’s shoulders and pulling her closer through the embrace. Close enough so their breasts brushed, and she could feel Riley’s stomach press into her own as she took a deep, settling breath.

Riley wrapped her own arms around Gianna’s waist before slowly sliding her hands down to tuck them in the back pockets of Gianna’s jeans. “I know we’ve outgrown this place; I’m not arguing with that.” Riley’s eyebrows lifted on her forehead as she glanced around the room. “I just... I love it. That’s all.”

Riley was right about her phrasing – as she so often was. They had well and truly outgrown this house.

Now that Anya was eight, Emmi was six, and the twins were nearly four, this house that Gianna had purchased over ten years ago as a single woman no longer fit the needs of their family.

“I know, carina,” she murmured, carding her finger through Riley’s thick hair. “But with how cramped we’re getting here already, where would we put Mummo?”

“Pippa and Annabelle have already offered their room,” Riley promptly answered, returning her gaze to Gianna’s. There was laughter, bright and beautiful, written across her expression. “Multiple times.”

Gianna couldn’t hold in her scoffed laughter if she tried. “I’m sure my ninety-two-year-old grandmother would love to share a bedroom with the girls.”

Riley merely arched a look at her, which had Gianna chuckling all over again. This time in concession, as she nodded.

“All right, yes. She probably wouldn’t mind.”

The fact was that her mummo lived for Riley and Gianna’s kids. Quite literally, her grandmother had made the comment that she kept kicking because she needed to see her great-grandbabies grow up many times.

She was so enamored with the girls that she’d finally acquiesced to move from Finland to the States! A request Gianna had made so many times over the years, wanting to be able to support her increasingly aging mummo without uprooting her family’s life here.

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“Look, I’m not trying to stick Mummo in with the girls.” Riley shook her head, her sympathy for Gianna’s grandmother in that situation obvious. “She’d never get a good night of sleep again, and I’m positive she’d be unable to walk in less than a week after the number of small toys she’d step on in the middle of the night when she needs to go to the bathroom.”

Riley refocused on her, using the hands she had in Gianna’s back pockets to squeeze her butt. It was playful, making a grin flash over Gianna’s face at the same time that she felt the answering spark of the touch shoot through her.

It was inescapable, that flash of heat whenever Riley touched her like this. Gianna figured it had something to do with how long she’d had to keep such a tight leash on these feelings. It had to have something to do with the fact that she’d needed to repress the desire Riley’s touch elicited inside of her for over a decade.

For over ten years, the way Riley would casually touch her thigh made Gianna’s stomach clench. The way Riley’s warm breath washed over the sensitive skin of Gianna’s neck when they cuddled made her shiver. The way Riley would lick her lips after taking a sip of her drink made Gianna’s throat run dry.

She’d done her best to cope with those moments. They were unavoidable, and the way she wanted Riley had never once faded or diminished despite Gianna’s best hopes.

And now, she got to live them out. She got to kiss those soft, full lips. To slide her hands over Riley’s perfectly curvy body. To roll her hips into Riley’s when they were lying together, and she felt that zing light her up inside.

Now that she was able to let these feelings out, there was no stopping them, no curbing them. She fucking loved it.

“And I’m so excited that Mummo is coming to live with us,” Riley continued, seemingly unaware of Gianna’s thoughts. “No one tells a better story or makes a better cup of tea than your grandmother. Besides, I love our new house. It’s... us. The way we are now. Our family.”

Gianna didn’t even realize she was nodding in agreement until she’d already done so several times. But what Riley said was true.

Their new house was nestled into a cute little suburb – a place Gianna never thought she’d want to live. It had a yard – something Gianna had never found a need to have; her little city patios worked perfectly fine for her to sit outside in and have a cup of coffee from time to time. It had a two-car garage – something Gianna never thought she’d need, given that she never thought she’d even own a car.

The girls changed everything.

Before Anya was born, Gianna realized abruptly one night that Riley couldn’t be the only person in their home with a license. Riley worked at an in-person job every day! What happened if Gianna and/or their baby had an emergency and she needed to drive somewhere?

So, Gianna had finally let Riley teach her how to drive.

She’d never been someone who yearned to care for a yard, never wanted to learn how to garden. But now, with four kids under ten, she was fucking thrilled to live in a place with a backyard big enough to set up a swing set. A place with a large, fenced-in yard that was just theirs, where their daughters could run around and play and shriek and giggle, a place they could accidentally forget a toy they’d been using and

have to race back to the park to hope it was still there.

A place where she and Riley had their private room, along with all of their daughters and Mummo.

Well, Pippa and Annabelle were still sharing. But if the day came that they wanted their own rooms, they could take over the guest room.

A place that was large enough for them to continue to host holidays without feeling claustrophobic when everyone arrived.

“I love that it’s our home,” she found herself whispering. That sentiment felt so strong inside of her, and she’d thought about it so many in the last couple of months throughout the process of buying a new house. “Our home. Something we’re building together.”

Riley frowned up at her, confusion clearly etched into her face. “What do you mean? This is our home, too. I mean, it was.” She sighed, exasperatedly blowing out a breath. “You know what I mean.”

Gianna shrugged, dancing her eyes around the bereft room that had once been their living room. Granted, it had only been a couple of weeks ago that this area was filled with their furniture, a smattering of toys over the floor.

But they’d slowly but surely moved everything over to their suburban paradise, and they were officially closing the sale of this house the next day. Which was why they’d arranged for Joel to go over and watch the girls as they did a final walk-through, making sure everything was ready for them to truly walk away, forever.

“Well, I know it was our house,” she allowed, shrugging listlessly. “But... I bought it years before you and I were even a possibility in my mind. Before I ever thought that

this could happen between us.”

“You loved this house when you bought it!” Riley returned, staring up at Gianna as if she’d grown two heads.

“I know!” Riley wasn’t wrong; Gianna had loved this place. “But it’s always been just that. A house. A house I meticulously decorated to my taste, a house I planned on living in by myself for several more years to come.” She paused, trying to put exactly how she felt into words. “Riley, you are home to me.”

There. It was that simple, and expressing it aloud felt so right. That was what she’d learned all those years ago.

“So, yes. I loved this place. But I love the house we’re buying together more. A place that is meant to be ours right from the start.” She gently curled a lock of Riley’s hair between her fingers as she stared down into her wife’s eyes. “I figured you’d feel the same way.”

Riley’s face was the picture of consternation as she met Gianna’s gaze. There was an obvious softness in them as she slid one of her hands up out of Gianna’s back pocket to stroke lovingly up her spine. “I do feel that way. I do love our new house and the way it already feels like a home.”

Her eyebrows knitted together, the look on her face so serious. The way she got when she was thinking about something important.

“But... I always felt like this was our home together. Even before I actually lived here.” She breathed out a cute, self-deprecating chuckle. “I know you bought this place and didn’t know that we would get married or have kids or anything like that. I get what you’re saying.”

The smile on her generous lips melted away slightly, leaving only the echo of it as Riley's expression grew so earnest, so intense.

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“The thing is, Gianna, you’ve always been my home, too. Even if it took me a lot longer to consciously think about what you mean to me,” Riley paused, holding tightly to Gianna. “The reality is that I spent my twenties looking for a love that I would have never been able to find.”

Gianna scoffed, lightly tugging on Riley’s hair in her grasp. “Babe, please. Don’t insult my favorite person – or me, actually – and tell me that the woman I’ve been in love with for my entire adult life wouldn’t have been able to enchant anyone else.”

It didn’t matter that they were married now. Gianna still refused to allow Riley to state that other people wouldn’t fall head-over-heels for her. In fact, Gianna loved being able to comment on that now that they were married. Because now, she got the peace of mind of knowing that even if there were hundreds of people who would have loved to be with Riley, Gianna was the one that got her.

Riley’s eyes rolled slightly, and she shook her head. “That’s actually not what I’m saying. Actually, that’s a moot point.” The exasperated teasing look in her eyes completely faded, into something urgent and genuine. “The point I’m making is that even though I didn’t realize I was in love with you, you’re the reason I never fell in love with anyone else.”

Gianna’s heart flip-flopped in her chest. Riley told Gianna she was in love with her every day. In both words and actions. But it would never be something she took for granted.

Even so, this was something Riley had never said to her.

“What, exactly, do you mean?”

“I mean that...” Riley thoughtfully rolled her lips. “What I mean is that Dull Dan could have been Dashing Dan, and I don’t think it would have mattered. Maybe for a few dates, but not in the long run. Yes, I wanted to fall in love, and yeah, I was – technically – dating, and I believed I was trying to make that happen. But it was never going to happen.”

Riley drew in a deep breath, her torso pressing right against Gianna’s, and she felt Riley’s strong and steady heart beating alongside her own.

“Because I was so emotionally invested in you and in us. Even before there was, romantically, an us.” Riley’s voice was so low it was barely a whisper.

Gianna heard it loud and clear as her stomach erupted in butterflies. It felt, wildly and amazingly, as if Riley was confessing her love to her for the first time.

“How could I have fallen in love with someone else, really fallen for them, when my favorite part of every day was talking to you at the end of it?” Riley asked. “How could I have fallen in love with someone else when the person I wanted was... you? The thing I wanted so badly to find was someone to build a life with without it feeling like work? I wanted to find someone who erased the very thought of loneliness from my mind. Someone who made me feel seen and heard and understood. Someone who made me laugh, who made me feel comfortable enough to cry with.”

Riley lifted her other hand, moving up to gently cup Gianna’s jaw.

“You were already that person, Gianna.”

She released a breath she hadn’t registered she’d been holding, realizing that her throat was tight with emotion as she swallowed.

“Yeah? You think?” On one hand, she felt ridiculous asking Riley if she really meant what she’d said. Not only because Riley always meant what she said, but because they were literally married! She knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Riley deeply loved and adored her.

On the other hand, she felt those words soothing over a place she hadn’t known needed soothing. A place from her past, that unrequited place. Something she’d never held against Riley; as she’d always said – their friendship wasn’t a consolation prize.

“I don’t think it, I know it,” Riley’s conviction was undeniable. “Gianna, sometimes I was excited to have shitty dates because I knew afterward, my reward would be coming here to be with you.”

An incredulous laugh escaped Riley as she gently stroked her thumb along Gianna’s cheek.

“I just never realized what that meant. I never realized that I’d already been building the life I dreamed of with another person. Someone who supports my dreams, loves me completely, goes on vacation with me, and celebrates holidays with me. Someone whose company is my favorite thing and always has been.”

Gianna blinked and felt the tears spill out onto her cheeks as she drew in a shaky breath.

Before she could move to wipe them away, Riley did it for her.

“The truth is that you and I were always going to end up here. Together. In one way or another. Because I wouldn’t have been able to do this with anyone else. It was always you, even if I didn’t realize how emotionally invested I was with you. But the way I love you, this didn’t start when we started sleeping together. That just allowed me to open my eyes,” Riley finished in a murmur.

Gianna used the hand she had threaded through Riley's hair to cup the back of her head, drawing her up. Riley moved with her, already sighing into the kiss by the time their lips touched.

The thing was, Gianna really didn't care how long it took them to get here. She didn't begrudge Riley those ten years. Because she, too, had loved what they'd built, even if she'd believed it would never be more than friendship.

Thank fucking god that it was so much more than that, though. She hummed at the thought, curling her lips into a smile against Riley's. Her wife.

Riley slowly broke their kiss, blinking up at Gianna. She slowly swiped her thumb back and forth over Gianna's sensitive, damp bottom lip.

"And that's why I love this house. Because maybe I didn't buy it with you, technically. But that laundry room has always been ours." She gestured over Gianna's shoulder toward the room in question. "That's always been our safe place. From bonding in there to making out in there to hiding from the girls when we need a moment of peace. And this living room has always been my safe haven. The place we'd curl up together, whether we were watching reality TV or whatever cartoon the girls were obsessed with at the time. I was here to help you decide what doorknobs to choose and where to hang that painting you bought in Paris. Maybe you bought it thinking it was yours, thinking I'd never move in here. But I've always been yours, too."

A low, keening sound escaped Gianna's throat as she tugged Riley against her once more, needing to feel her lips against hers.

Riley made her feel so much. She was the only person on this planet capable of filling Gianna's heart like this. The only person Gianna had ever wanted like this.

She was the person who had given Gianna the small herd of children – the family –

she'd ached for but never believed she'd have. The person who had filled all of the sad, angry, lonely places inside of her and taught her what it was to be loved. The person who had taught her what it was like to truly feel like she was home.

And the best part was that Riley had always been hers, just as Gianna had always been Riley's.