

You're Mine by Penny Brooks

#Chapter 131 - Read You're Mine by Penny Brooks

Chapter 131

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Chapter 131

Easton

Harper: Where are you?

We're already at the movie theater and it's about to start! I climb into my car and just sit there, staring at the message from my girlfriend.

I should tell her who I ran into. I should. It would be the right thing to do. The honest thing to do. We need to keep up open communication.

I need to tell her everything. Running into Leigh is major.

I don't need to go into the specifics, but I should tell her. Yeah, I definitely should. But damn it, I'm full of doubt. About everything.

Me: Had to get gas. It's busy but I'll be there soon. Promise. Harper: Hurry! I'll save you a seat.

Only if you bring me popcorn. :) I smile despite everything, regretting my decision to stop and get gas.

If I'd only waited, I never would've run into Leigh. But I can't tell Harper via text that I talked to Leigh.

Can't tell her at the movie theater either. I'm not about to ruin our date.

The longer I wait to tell her, the less inclined I'll be to say anything, and then I won't tell her at all and look like a giant ass liar who's got something to hide.

Fuck. I punch the steering wheel once. Twice. It doesn't make me feel better.

All I'm left with is a throbbing hand and a messed up head because I don't know what the hell I should do.

Reaching for my phone, I go to my text thread with Ryan and start typing.

Me: I ran into Leigh just now at the gas station.

Ryan: No fucking way.

Me: Yeah, and she said some fucked up shit too.

Ryan: She was always a complete bitch.

Damn, I love my best friend. He's forever in my corner.

Me: Yeah, she was. She still is. Guess her husband kicked her out and she's leaving town.

Ryan: Good riddance.

You can breathe a little easier without her around. Hesitating for only a moment, I decide to ask him for a little advice.

Me: Should I tell Harper I ran into Leigh?

He takes a while to respond, and I get antsy. So do the people who are waiting to use the pump I'm sitting next to.

They start honking at me and I pull away from the pump, parking in one of the spots as I wait for Ryan's response.

I'm gonna be really late to the movies at the rate I'm going, but fuck it.

I need advice from my best friend first.

Finally, I get a response. Ryan: I don't think you should mention your run in with Leigh to Harper. It'll only upset her and she finally feels good.

Today is the happiest I've seen her in a long time, and I don't think you want to ruin her mood.

Me: I don't, but I need to be honest with her. I love your sister, Ryan. I don't want to hide things from her. When I do that, it gives her reason to distrust me and think I'm up to no good.

Ryan: Well you're not, right?

I mean, fuck that bitch.

You haven't been with Leigh in a while. Me: You're right, but still. I hate keeping things from her. Ryan: Think of it as keeping the peace. And hey, if she finds out, blame me. It's my fault.

I told you not to tell her. Me: Fucking deal, dude. You said it, not me.

Ryan: Cool.

Whatever. Now get your ass over here. The previews are about to start. By the time I'm walking into the theater ten minutes later, the place is pitch black dark and the previews are definitely running.

The seats are mostly full, but I spot my girlfriend smiling at me in the darkness.

I make my way up the stairs and down the row where they're sitting, plopping into the empty seat beside Harper and flashing a grin in her direction. "Hey, babe."

She pokes me in the ribs.

"You're late. And you said you would buy me popcorn."

I'm about to leap out of the seat and do just that but she holds me back, keeping me in my seat.

"I'm kidding. I made Ryan buy popcorn for us."

Ryan leans over to whisper shout, "You owe me big, bro. That shit ain't cheap and she always wants the biggest size."

"I really love popcorn, Harper says innocently as she takes our popcorn bucket from Sadie and puts it in between us.

"There you go."

I lean in and deliver a kiss to her lips, discovering that they're buttery delicious.

"Thanks, babe. You're the best."

We share popcorn and watch the movie, our fingers brushing each time we grab more.

The movie kind of sucks and I'm distracted by Harper's scent, especially when she leans her head on my shoulder and scoots in closer, like she's trying to snuggle.

I lift the armrest, so there's nothing separating us and she's practically in my lap. "No funny business over there,"

Ryan says, earning a few shushes for his warning.

I just smile at him, my arm around Harper's shoulders, her lush body snug against mine.

No way am I feeling Harper up in a movie theater with her brother sitting right there.

I'll save the feeling up in a theater for another time, when we're alone. Besides, I'm too damn distracted thinking about Leigh and the shitty things she said.

That bitch knows how to carve someone up with words, that's for damn sure. Maybe it's because she's as mean as a snake and twice as fucking deadly.

I hate her. Worse?

I hate how that little confrontation with her made me feel.

Stupid.

Dirty. Like I'm a liar. Glancing down, I drop a kiss on Harper's forehead and tell myself it's going to be okay. Really.

Chapter 132

Chapter 132 Harper Easton: Are you sure about this?

Me: Sure about you coming over tonight?

Umm, yes. It has to happen, Easton. You have to spend time with my family or this is going to be awkward forever.

Easton: But your mom ... she's going to look at me ... and remember.

I cringe as I stare at his last text. I'm sure he's right, but there's nothing I can do about it. Despite every warning that's humming through my body, I know it's time that the love of my life finally faces my parents. With a face that's not covered in me.

Oh God. I don't think I'll ever recover from the Christmas tree incident. But if things are going to progress with Easton—and I want them to more than anything—then my family has to move on. They have to accept him. They have to get to know him on a level that isn't just Ryan's best friend, but as the boy I'm dating.

The boy I'm positively in love with. And, now, they will, because after a long conversation with my parents, my punishment finally over, they've decided they're ready to welcome Easton.

So, they've invited him over for dinner, followed by a sleepover, which is something Ryan had asked for. I'm positive Easton will be sequestered to my brother's room with probably a padlock and chains wrapped around the door. Sadie will be in mine, and Mom said she's going to make us breakfast in the morning.

One of the perks of being off from school for winter break. Me: I'll encourage Dad to pour her some wine and after half a glass at dinner, she won't even remember. Easton: Or that's all she'll think about.

I hope he isn't right, but there's a good chance he is. Fuck. Me: Does that mean you're not going to come?

Easton: You know I'll be there. At 5, right?

Me: Yup. Sadie and Ryan should be here at that time, too, giving my parents plenty of distractions so the attention won't just be on us. Easton: You mean, ME. Me: Stocooop. Let's focus on something amazing, like you staying for breakfast tomorrow morning. Easton: I'd rather be devouring you, but I have a feeling the days of hooking up at your house are long gone. Me: Don't be so sure, I may just be able to surprise you. See you soon. Don't be late. Easton: And piss your mom off even more?

I know better ... I find Sadie's number and press it, holding the phone to my ear. "Hey,"

I say when she answers. "What are you doing?"

She laughs and I can tell it's not at me, especially when she adds, "Ryaaaaaaan, stop, your sister is on the phone."

She pauses. "Sorry, your brother is being all kinds of cray. What's up?"

"I'm calling to make sure you guys are still coming for dinner."

I move over to my closet, trying to look for something to wear for tonight. "And that you're definitely staying the night?"

"And miss a sleepover with my girl, come on, Harp. Like I'd ever forget."

I sigh, shutting the door to my closet, nothing inside looking cute enough. "Sadie, I'm so fucking nervous."

I fall onto my bed, covering my face with my arm, the worry I didn't mention to Easton now really hitting me. "This is the first time my parents are meeting him as my boyfriend—I mean, they've met him plenty of times as Ryan's BFF. But boyfriend status changes everything."

"It's going to go perfectly, Ryan and I will be there to take the heat if things start to get fishy. And, don't worry, I'll say something super sassy if that happens, enough so that your mom won't even remember that she busted his ass—ya know, eating you out."

"SADIE."

I groan. "Oh God. I can't."

I stuff my face into my pillow. "Easton keeps bringing it up and I just want to forget it."

"Okay, no more stressing. The food is going to be great because your mom's a hell of a good cook."

Ryan and I are bringing dessert, and your parents are going to fall for Easton's charm and we're all going to live happily ever after."

I snort. "I love your confidence."

"Oh ... and if you feel the need to take a few hits from one of the joints in Ryan's nightstand, that might not be a bad idea either."

My eyes go wide. "What are you saying?"

Do you think I need to?

Because shit is going to hit the fan—"

"Relax, it'll all be fab."

I hear my brother say something in the background. "I've got to go. We'll be there soon."

The phone goes dead, and I push myself off my bed and out of my bedroom, scents from the kitchen hitting my nose before I even reach the bottom of the stairs.

"Need help with anything?"

I ask, standing by the counter.

Mom is cutting up vegetables for what looks to be a huge salad. She glances up at me, and then at the microwave.

"No one will be arriving for another hour, I think I'm fine, I have plenty of time."

I can't tell if she's feeling as anxious as me. Mom always has a cool demeanor unless she's screaming at one of us and most of the time that's aimed at Ryan. "What are you making?"

I walk over to the stove. "It smells delicious."

She laughs. "Lasagna, you can't tell?"

Normally, you sniff that out like a bloodhound."

That's because it's the best dinner she makes, and I have a feeling my love for it is the reason we're having it tonight. "Right,"

I reply, glancing through the window at the stove, seeing the cheese bubble. "Looks yum."

"Do you want to tell me why you're hovering?"

I turn around, meeting her stare. "I ..."

I didn't plan on what I was going to say. I'm not even sure what made me come downstairs. I just know the nervousness I was feeling in my room was too much and I needed to bust out. "No reason,"

I tell her. "I just thought I'd offer to help."

Which I never do and that suddenly makes me feel worse. "I mean, since it's my boyfriend coming over and you're going out of your way to do all of this for him, the least I can do is ... set the table?"

Her eyelids narrow as though she sees right through me. "You want to make yourself useful?"

She nods at the pile of carrots. "Peel those and chop them when you're done."

"On it."

I hold one of the large carrots in my hand, aiming the peeler against it. "Hey, Mom"—I take a breath—"I appreciate this."

A heat starts to warm my cheeks. "It ... means a lot that you invited him over."

She wraps the garlic bread in foil and says, "Your father and I —"

But her voice is cut off when my dad walks in. He's holding a bag that he places on the counter, taking out a large bottle of wine from inside. "I thought we could both use this."

He then removes four nips of vodka and adds, "And these."

"Honey, start pouring,"

she replies. My parents feel the need to get wasted, something they hardly ever do. Because they can't get it out of their mind. The fucking Christmas tree. Awesome.

Chapter 133

Chapter 133 Easton "Hi,' Harper says as she opens the door for me, throwing her arms around my neck.

I take a quick glance around us, making sure her parents aren't in sight.

The last thing I need is for them to oversee any kind of PDA and come running at me.

With fucking knives.

But the coast is clear, so I wrap an arm around her waist and bury my face into her neck.

"Fuck, you smell good."

"Don't get any ideas."

"I have zero ideas."

Tonight, tomorrow morning—you might as well be my sister with how far apart we're going to be."

I lean back, looking at her face.

"All right, maybe not a sister, that would make the thoughts that are in my head right now really fucking gross."

She laughs and holds out her hands.

"Is this for the fam?"

I nod as she takes the bag from my grip.

"It's wine. I told my parents I was coming over and Mom insisted. I think there's something else in there, too—some oil or vinegar, or some shit like that."

"That's so nice of them, I'm sure my parents will really appreciate the gesture."

She takes my overnight duffle from my arm and says, "Come on." I follow her, knowing within a few steps, I'm going to come face to face with my biggest fear.

Her father, my worst fucking nightmare.

And, just like I anticipated, he's there when I round the corner to the kitchen, holding a glass of wine as he leans over the island, talking to Harper's mom.

They both turn completely silent the moment I enter.

"Dad, Mom,' Harper initiates, "Easton's here." Every moment under the fucking Christmas tree flashes through my head, followed by the look on her mom's face when she kicked my ass out.

Fuck.

"Easton, her mom says, "it's nice to see you again."

I can't tell if she really means it or it's the wine talking—the glass that's so fixed in her hand, it looks like it's glued there.

"Easton ..."

her dad says, and he steps closer, his hand going to my shoulder, which he squeezes.

Harder than I'm expecting.

"Thanks for joining us." I nod.

"Thank you for having me."

"His parents sent gifts,' Harper says, taking out the items from the bag, making sure her parents see.

But her dad isn't interested.

His eyes are on me and they're not going anywhere.

"So ...ahhh,"

I pause, trying to think of something to say.

"Where's Ryan and Sadie?"

I look around the kitchen, listening for noises upstairs.

"They're not here yet," Harper tells me. She winces. "They should be here any second."

I can still feel her dad's eyes on me.

I'm trying to avoid his stare with every bit of resistance I have, but I can't any longer.

The second I make eye contact, I immediately regret it.

Because his stare tells me something is about to go down.

And I'm only proven right when he says, "Why don't we go have a little chat, son." My fucking stomach drops. Especially when he nods to the porch.

"Out there."

"All right," I reply, quickly glancing at Harper whose eyes are sending apologies and horror.

I wish, more than anything, I could take the glass from her mom's hand and down the red that's in there.

That feeling only intensifies as I follow her dad outside and take a seat next to him.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush," he says.

"You're a man, you're doing manly things, therefore I want to know you have good intentions with my daughter."

I want to fucking die. I didn't prepare for this. I didn't expect to be hauled outside and have to lay my truth on the table. I just want to tell him I love his daughter and things are going to be all good.

But can I say that?

"Only have good intentions, sir."

The sir surprises me, but I'm happy I added it.

"Harper means a great deal to me.

I care about her so much and ..."

My hands are sweating, my stomach queasy.

I feel like I'm standing in front of our whole school, naked, with my hand covering my junk.

"And our relationship is very important to me."

"Are you being careful?"

I clear my throat.

"Careful?"

"Yes, son. Careful. Harper is seventeen years old. She's going to college next year. The last thing I need —the last thing the both of you need—is a bun in the oven."

Another topic I didn't expect.

And one that feels like a slap across the dick.

I shake my head.

"No buns, sir.

Definitely no buns."

"You're sure about that?"

I swallow. Do I come inside her? Yes. But she's on the pill. Fuck, I feel like the audience just grew to our entire fucking city and now I'm standing buckass naked in front of them, too.

"I'm sure. We have our whole future ahead of us—I'm going to college too, my parents are pushing for pre—law, so! can follow in my brother's footsteps and work at Dad's firm."

"I know you're one of the responsible ones, Easton."

He takes a drink of his wine and I watch it go down his throat, envious when he swallows.

"But Harper is my baby girl. I have to watch out for her, no one else will."

"I will, sir. I always have her back. Nothing will ever happen to her when she's with me. I promise you that."

"Then that leads to my next question."

I shift in my seat, the interrogation making this chair extremely uncomfortable.

"You say you're going off to college and so is Harper, what's going to happen if you go to different schools?"

Do I have to worry about Harper dropping out so she can be closer to you?"

He leans his elbows onto his knees, moving even closer to me.

"Because my daughter will graduate, and she will get her degree, and she will be everything she's ever dreamed of, mark my words.

You—or anyone—won't be stopping her from making that happen."

I shake my head.

"I want all those things for Harper as well.

I'm only here to make your daughter's life better, I'm not here to hold her back from anything."

He stares at me.

Like he's ready to toss me inside a ring.

But within a few breaths, his glare calms, and he takes a drink.

"Good. It sounds like we're both on the same page, then." I nod.

"Definitely."

"There are rules in this house, son."

He points to the window that overlooks the backyard—a window, I know, is in Harper's room.

"You will never step foot in that bedroom, do you hear me?" I'm holding down the bile in my throat when I say, "Yep. Got it"

He continues to eye me down.

"I can't control what happens outside this house, but I'll be damned if you touch my daughter while you're under my roof.

So, not a single needle on that tree better shake.

Have I made myself clear?"

"Loud and clear."

"Good."

He takes another drink.

"Then, it's settled. You'll have manners while you're in this house, Harper is going to college, and there won't be any grandchildren in my near future. I think I've covered everything."

"Sir?"

His eyes widen.

"Yes."

"I just want to say ...thank you." For not fucking killing me. And for making this the most awkward and uncomfortable conversation I've ever had in my goddamn life.

Chapter 134

Chapter 134 Harper Easton and Dad return from the patio and Easton looks like he's seen a ghost.

Or an entire colony of paranormal creatures.

He's pale and sweaty and I feel terrible for him.

I can't believe Dad hauled him outside.

Well, I can, but I can't imagine what he said to him.

Part of me wants to ask Easton when we get a minute alone, and part of me would rather never know to save myself the embarrassment.

"Are you all right?"

I whisper the moment he's at my side.

"No."

He wipes his forehead.

"I'll never recover from that conversation.

Ever."

I glance at my dad who's now standing next to my mom as she adds dressing to the salad.

The two of them smiling at each other, like they just checked the final item off their list.

"Was it that bad?"

"Let's put it this way ..."

He glances toward the oven.

"If there are buns in there, baking, don't serve me one."

He adjusts his shirt and I see the sweat marks under his arms.

"In fact, I don't know if I'll ever eat another bun again."

Oh God.

It was THAT bad.

"I'm going to go add ice to the water glasses,"

I declare, and quickly fill a large bowl with cubes and carry it into the dining room, Easton on my heels.

When I get us out of ear range, I say softly, "What did he say to you?"

He holds onto the back of a chair.

"Oh, he covered it all—birth control, pregnancy, not being allowed in your room or touching you under his roof, you going to college, dropping out of college because of me."

He pauses.

"I think I've covered most of it."

"I think I'm going to be sick."

He shakes his head.

"That makes two of us."

I drop the ice into the glasses and move over to him.

He immediately takes a step back.

And then another.

"Easton?"

"I don't want him to think anything is happening in here."

"Seriously?"

I place the bowl on the table.

"It's like that?*" He nods.

"You weren't out there ...

you have no idea."

"Ugh."

I want to kill my father, but I can't.

"Graduation can't come fast enough."

Except ...

do I really mean that?

Easton will be off to college.

I will be, too.

What if those places aren't anywhere near each other?

"Harper, the lasagna is done, can you grab it from the oven?"

my mother calls from the kitchen.

It's like she stopped hearing the clink of ice being put in the glasses and no longer wants us alone together.

This is already getting old.

"Be right back,"

I tell Easton and I hurry into the kitchen, grabbing the mitts before I reach into the oven.

Dad is mysteriously gone, and Mom is cutting and plating the garlic bread.

"Mom?"

She glances up, the knife still in her hand.

"Mmm—hmm?"

I don't know how to say this, but I need to say something.

"Easton has gotten the wrath from Dad.

Can we...

I don't know ...

make a promise to move on and never mention"—I nod toward the living room where the Christmas tree sits —"that again?"

She sets the knife down, the noise making a clank against the counter.

"Do you really think you're in a position to negotiate?"

She puts her hands on her hips.

"You just got off thin ice, young lady.

You have your phone back.

I'm not breathing down your neck every time you leave this house.

Don't push it, you hear me?"

I take that back, I don't care where we end up, graduation needs to happen right now.

"Mmm—hmm,' I answer, giving her a taste of her own verbal medicine.

"We've armrrrived, Ryan shouts from the front door, in a sing—song way.

Relief suddenly floods through me.

I look toward the entryway of the kitchen, where Easton is standing, he mouths, "Thank fucking God,' telling me he feels the same way.

"You're late,"

I say, punching my brother in the arm as he joins us in the kitchen.

"Blame Sadie, she was being naughty."

"Ryan!"

Sadie shouts, her face turning red.

"He's lying!"

I look toward Mom and she's smiling, hugging Ryan hello, not an ounce of anger on her face.

Of course, she doesn't get upset by what Ryan said.

He's a son.

Christmas tree shenanigans don't apply to him.

Ugh.

Again.

"How's it going?"

Sadie whispers as she hugs me.

"Easton looks like he's about to raid your parents' liquor cabinet."

"I'm surprised he hasn't yet."

"That good, huh?"

"If you didn't show up soon, I was going to have to fake an illness or drop the lasagna or set the kitchen sink on fire— something, anything."

She pulls out of our hug, giggling.

"I'm glad you didn't."

You're a horrible liar and not exactly a professional arsonist.

Your parents would end up grounding you for life and the next time you'd see Easton, you'd be his neighbor in some old— ass assisted living place."

I start laughing at the thought.

So does Sadie.

And the whole build—up of tonight and all the anxiousness I've been feeling makes me laugh even harder.

"What's so funny?"

Ryan asks.

I know Mom's looking at us and Easton is glaring from the entryway, obviously too spooked to come any closer in fear that we'll be less than six feet apart.

"Nothing,"

I tell Ryan.

He wraps his arms around Sadie's waist.

"Doesn't sound like nothing to me."

"You're finally here," my father says as he walks in, rubbing his hands together before he picks up the wine glass he left on the counter.

"Hmmm,"

he says, lifting the glass into the air, inspecting it.

"Did I drink all of this?"

I swear it was half full before I went upstairs."

I feel like all eyes are on me, so I say, "It wasn't me."

"I didn't touch it," Easton says, his hands up, like he's being arrested.

Ryan walks over to our father and puts his arm around his shoulders.

"It was me.

The wine was looking a little lonely and I decided to sample it."

"Lonely, seriously?"

I inquire.

"A half of a glass ...

gets lonely?"

I can't wait to hear this.

Ryan smiles, lifting the bottle to refill Dad's glass.

"Yeah, and it's a good thing I was here to keep it company."

He pats his stomach.

"I'm starving, let's eat."

Mom shakes her head, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, Ryan."

Oh, Ryan?

OH, RYAN?

That's all she's going to say?

I can't even with my parents.

With Ryan getting away with drinking and naughtiness and grabbing Sadie.

While my poor boyfriend looks like he's about to give birth through his dick.

"Does that mean I can have a glass?"

I ask.

"No!"

both of my parents say at the same time.

What.

The ever loving.

Fuck.

Mom points at the lasagna.

"Bring that into the dining room, Harper, and pour water into the glasses you just filled with ice.

It's time to eat."

I put my hands through the mitts and as I'm passing Sadie onto the way to the dining room, I whisper, "You better have brought edibles for dessert."

Chapter 135

Chapter 135 Easton "This is delicious,' I say to Harper's mom after I take my first bite of her lasagna.

"Thank you again for having me over."

Harper had told me her mom was a good cook.

She wasn't kidding.

At least that's one positive thing that will come out of this experience.

I certainly won't go to bed hungry.

"Thank you, Easton.

I'm happy you like it,"

her mom replies.

"Yup, he's right,' Sadie says, her mouth full.

"This is some seriously good grub.

The last time my mom made lasagna, she used cottage cheese instead of ricotta—I guess she ran out."

She takes a bite of garlic bread, the crunch loud enough to wake the dead.

"I wish I could say it was good, but it had chunks of pineapple in it."

She makes a face like she's about to hurl.

"Pineapple with meat sauce, that's a hard no."

"I'm happy to share my recipe with her,"

her mom says.

"Just remind me in the morning and I'll text you a picture of it."

“Easton, her dad says, wiping his mouth with a napkin, giving me a second to chew and swallow, preparing for more battle.

“How are your grades this year?”

"My grades are good, sir."

“Easton always makes honor roll,”

Sadie chimes in.

"He's one of the smart ones.

You know, like Ryan here."

She bats her eyes at him, and he kisses her.

Man, that kid has balls.

I'm sitting beside Harper, but I've barely looked at her.

I don't fucking dare.

With her dad sitting across from me, I can feel him stare at me while he chews.

While he takes a drink.

While he moves his salad around the plate.

Will this ever fucking end?

"So, is Sadie right, you make honor roll?"

he asks me.

"Yep."

I hold my piece of garlic bread, but I don't take a bite.

It reminds me of a bun—and just, no.

"My parents have always pushed for good grades."

And that's why I pushed Leigh to make sure I was always receiving them.

Damn, wouldn't that conversation go over well at this dinner table.

One mention of it and he'd probably bury me next to Fido in the backyard.

"Your dad, his law firm is the one down on Main Street, next to the bank?"

"That's the one,"

I tell him.

"Thought so.

I pass it every time I go to the bank.

I didn't realize your brothers work there as well until you mentioned it.

What an accomplished family you have there, young man."

Did I mention that part?

Or did he Google my family when he disappeared upstairs before dinner?

The thought has me even more uneasy.

On paper, we look like the dream.

But if you start digging— and maybe he knows how—we're a hybrid of American Gangster and The Wolf of Wall Street.

"Easton's going into pre—law,' Harper says, looking at me.

At least I can feel her looking at me.

I don't glance at her.

"My parents would like me to, I admit.

"But I haven't decided on a major yet.

I want to keep my options open.

Seems a little early to declare something I could end up changing."

"Changing to what?"

he asks.

"Law would certainly provide well for your future family."

"Dad, the wife is allowed to provide too, you know.

It's not like I plan to sit home and watch The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills all day."

He lifts his wine into his hand.

I've lost count how many glasses he's had tonight.

But this time, when he sips, he swallows half the glass.

"Harper, my dear, let's not have the marriage conversation.

You still live at home, you don't even own a car.

Hell, you don't even own the clothes you're wearing.

Marriage is getting ahead of ourselves, don't you think?"

Now the marriage image is in his head.

Wonderful.

"Let her dream, honey,' her mom says.

"We had dreams when we were her age, didn't we?"

He eyes his wife.

"Sure did.

And now, we're here, at this wonderful stage of our lives, where you walk into our house and see our daughter doing the unmentionable under the Christmas tree."

This conversation went from bad to worse.

Fuck me.

I want this table to just swallow me whole.

"Dad ..."

Ryan starts.

"Trust me, it's better that it happened to Harper.

Had it been Sadie under there, there wouldn't be an ornament left and every light would be shattered all over the rug.

My girl gets w—i-l-d.* "Ryan!"

Sadie gasps.

Ryan looks at Sadie and says, "What?"

It's not like I'm lying."

"L can't believe what I'm hearing right now,' Harper groans.

I don't know what the fuck to think.

I'm just happy the conversation has shifted to someone else.

"Did Ryan behave this way with every girl he's brought home for dinner?"

Sadie asks Harper's parents.

Her mom sets down her fork.

"Honey, you're the first girl Ryan has ever brought to dinner."

"What?"

Sadie says, smiling at Ryan.

"Is that true?"

He shrugs.

"You're special and loud—two things I like."

She slaps him.

"OMG, shut up!"

"And that's what you love about me."

I finally look at Harper while Ryan and Sadie are having their back and forth and she's shaking her head.

She's as fucking horrified as me.

"I don't know who I want to kill more,"

she whispers to me.

"But this dinner can't be over soon enough."

"What's that?"

Ryan says from across the table.

"Nothing,"

Harper replies.

"Keep talking about—your sex life, or whatever it was you were sharing with us."

"I wasn't, but if you really want me to go there—"

"No!"

Harper says, nodding toward Sadie.

"You're my brother, she's my best friend.

I'm good.

Really.

If I need to filter myself, the same rules apply to you."

"Actually,"

her dad says, "the same rules don't apply because Ryan hasn't been walked in on, so the image isn't burned into our minds."

"I thought we were moving on from this,"

Harper pleads.

"Moving on?"

Her dad mocks.

"I'm afraid we're just getting started."

There really won't ever be an end to this.

Every time I come to this house, I'm going to have to prepare myself for these relentless digs.

Fuck.

Harper looks at Sadie, and Sadie immediately says to their parents, "Did Ryan tell you guys what we brought for dessert?"

"You really didn't have to bring anything,"

her mom says.

"I picked up some ice cream, it's more than enough for everyone."

"No, no, I insist," Sadie says.

"We stopped by this super cute bakery downtown, right by your dad's law firm"—she smiles at me—"and they had the prettiest cupcakes I've ever seen.

We got a dozen."

"A dozen?"

Harper says.

"Who's going to eat all those?"

"We'll work up an appetite and finish those off in no time, don't you worry, Ryan answers.

"I know how you boys work up those appetites nowadays, so let's keep Easton out of the living room," her dad says.

"Dad, enough!"

Harper barks.

"Honey, you're too much,"

her mom laughs.

Ryan points at me and smiles.

He thinks this is a fucking riot.

When I glance at Harper, she's setting her fork down on her plate.

The same place mine is resting.

Our appetites completely gone.

Chapter 136

Chapter 136 Harper "That was fucking brutal,"

Easton says as we collapse onto the couch in the living room, the dinner finally behind us.

"Like a root canal with no Novocain, performed by a first— year dental student, kind of pain."

I feel every word of that, deep in my soul.

"Easton ..."

I turn to him.

"My family is the worst.

If I knew it was going to be like that, I would have ..."

My voice fades as I think of what the alternative would have been.

"I don't know what I would have done, but I'm sorry."

I lean toward him, needing to feel his arms around me, his lips on mine and the moment I get within a few inches, he puts his hand on my chest, keeping me from coming any closer.

"Not under this roof, remember?"

I roll my eyes.

"They're in the kitchen, they can't see anything that's happening out here."

"What if your dad has laser vision or cameras or, I don't know, a sixth sense.

I'm not taking any fucking chances."

"Dude, Sadie and I banged in their bed a few days ago and he didn't notice.

You're giving my dad far too much credit,"

Ryan says from the recliner where Sadie is sitting on his lap.

"Gross."

I gag and look at Sadie.

"My parents' bed?"

Really?"

She shrugs.

"It's spacious."

"I'm not taking any chances,' Easton says.

"From now on, we go to my house, yours is forever off limits."

Which makes me sad.

Our house was always somewhat off limits, a place no one wanted to come to since it's on the poor side of town.

But now that Ryan and Sadie are together and Easton and I are dating, our house has become much more popular.

And now that's going to change.

Because my parents are ridiculous.

Ugh.

"Well, we're here now,' Sadie says, "so what do you guys feel like doing?"

Watching a movie?

Playing a game?"

"Getting high, Easton says.

"I second that,' Ryan adds.

"Third,"

I reply.

"Mom!"

Ryan yells.

"Dad!"

He stands from the chair, setting Sadie's feet on the floor.

"We're going to the gas station."

"All of you?"

Mom asks from the kitchen.

"Yep, we'll be back in ten."

"Drive safe,"

my father says.

It's literally amazing how much Ryan can get away with.

My brother runs upstairs to get his keys and weed, and we hurry out to the car, Easton climbing into the backseat with me.

"Drive,"

Easton says, keeping his eyes on the front door.

"Before your dad changes his mind."

Ryan laughs and hits the gas and Sadie lights up the joint, taking a hit before passing it to Easton.

"Dude, that was an hour of pure fucking torture,' he exhales, smoke now filling the car.

I take the joint from him.

"My dad just doesn't know when to stop."

"I think it could have been worse,"

Sadie says.

"Your dad could have hung Easton by the balls, and he could have eaten dinner dangling over us like a chandelier."

"Fuck,' Easton groans.

"No, thank you."

"See?"

Sadie says.

"Way worse."

Ryan keeps an eye on the time and the second we're done with the joint, he heads back to our neighborhood and parks in the driveway.

"Perfume,"

Sadie says, spraying all of us.

"Gum,"

she offers, taking out a pack from her purse.

I'm chewing a piece, laughing at Sadie's wobble as we walk back into our house, my parents sitting in the living room, watching some stupid show.

"Cupcakes,' Ryan says, and we follow him into the kitchen.

"Jesus, I'm fucking starving."

He opens the box and digs right in, taking a bite before the baking cup is even off.

I pick up a chocolate strawberry flavored one and devour a bite of frosting, watching Easton do the same.

I'm just getting to the cake part when Mom appears in the kitchen.

"Just so we're clear—girls, you're sleeping in Harper's room.

Boys, you're on the couch."

"What about my room?"

Ryan asks.

Mom shakes her head.

"Which is across from Harper's room, not a chance."

She leaves and I look at Easton.

"It just keeps getting better and better."

I finish and lick the remainder of the cupcake off my fingers.

"I'm glad tonight was somewhat salvaged with this ..."

I go to lean in for a kiss and he stops me.

"Still nope"

I sigh and look at Sadie.

"I'm over this.

Let's go to bed."

She nods and kisses Ryan.

"Until the morning, lover?"

He grabs her ass.

"You know it."

I blow Easton an air kiss and Sadie and I hurry up the stairs, falling onto my bed the moment we get inside.

"L could eat seven more cupcakes,' she groans, cuddling into my side.

"Same."

"It wasn't as bad as you think.

It really wasn't.

Maybe they're giving him shit because they really like him.

Ever think of that?"

It might be the weed, but what she's saying actually makes sense.

"You might be right."

"What's your mom making for breakfast?"

I laugh.

"I saw a bunch of bread on the counter, so I'm thinking French toast."

"Mmm."

"Go to bed, you endless pit of hunger,"

I giggle.

"Don't be surprised if I sneak downstairs soon for a snack."

"A Ryan snack or a snack—snack."

"Ohhh,"

she moans.

"I like your idea waaaay better."

"Go to bed,"

I repeat, and I close my eyes, the night replaying in my head.

I don't know when I fall asleep, but the sound of my phone wakes me.

It's not just the beep of a text message.

It's a notification explosion and I pat the bed, searching through the sheets and blanket until my phone is in my hand.

The brightness of the screen makes me squint through my sleepy eyes and I bolt up from bed the moment I come across a notification from WHGOSSIP.

WHGOSSIP: It's the start of winter break and what's more fun than some unexpected flurries?

Yes, friends, I have the storm you've all been waiting for, and it involves our favorite duo.

Just when we thought things were over between Easton and Mrs.

Scott, we come across this little frosty flake.

Hey, WHORE, do you think he was confessing his love ...

or giving her directions—to his cock?

My hands shake as I click on the notification and see the picture that loads.

One of Easton and Mrs.

Scott outside a gas station.

The two of them standing close.

Way too close.

His hand is reaching for her.

Her face is full of anguish, like missing him is eating her alive.

The timestamp shows the date and time.

Both I can't forget because Easton was supposed to be with me.

At the movies.

But he was running incredibly late.

And now I know why.

"I'm going to fucking kill him,"

I say to Sadie, who's still asleep.

"Huh?"

she grumbles.

"Who?"

I clutch my phone and haul ass downstairs where Easton and Ryan are passed out on the couch, my mom cooking in the kitchen.

"Get up,"

I seethe, hovering over Easton.

I wait for him to look at me, earning Ryan's stare too, and I hold my phone so he can see the screen.

"How the fuck are you going to explain this?"

Chapter 137

Chapter 137 Easton There are moments in a guy's life where he questions if he's seen it all.

I had about a million of those moments tonight.

Never thought I'd be the sort of guy to stare longingly at the knives just a little bit too hard and wonder how the hell I could get just injured enough that I'd have to go to the ER by way of an ambulance.

I mean, I clearly couldn't escape in my own car, why not use the health insurance my dad so generously provides?

People slip all the time, right?

It's the holidays! Turkeys explode.

Houses burn down.

Trees get desecrated.

It could have worked.

So could making a run for it into oncoming traffic, but I couldn't do that to Harper, I doubt she'd want my death on her hands by way of her dad scaring me shitless and mentioning trigger words like pregnancy, buns, and tree.

I shudder and find myself laying on the couch, staring up at the ceiling, high as fuck, missing my girl and sleeping like shit.

My eyes get heavy as I turn on my side and throw my arm over my eyes since I'm in direct sight of the Christmas tree.

Motherfucker, was that on purpose?

I groan and flip to my other side toward the couch and finally settle in with visions of sugarplums and Harper's dad dancing on my grave in my head.

Nice.

"Get up!"

Harper's voice hisses from behind me.

I nearly fall off the couch in an attempt to turn around and stare up at my girlfriend.

Ryan's sleepy gaze goes from high to completely sober as he stares at her holding up her phone at me.

This can't be good.

I literally can't see at first, despite how bright her screen is and have to rub my eyes a few times before things get more clear.

"Are you kidding me?"

I grab her phone, fully aware my girl has tears of anger in her eyes and that this could potentially be really bad for me—again.

Should I just start expecting this on the daily?

I momentarily wonder if I need to have a therapist on speed dial, then I think of Leigh, and see the picture of us talking, along with a video that seems to have just posted, showing me reaching for her.

I want to snort.

Yeah, I wasn't reaching out for a hug, can nobody tell that it was total self defense on my part?

The woman's like a leach and the last thing I needed was her trying to touch me or hug me.

I shudder.

What the hell did I ever even see other than an easy way to keep an easy A?

Ryan gives me an oh shit look.

And Harper looks ready to legit bang her cell over my head until either my skull cracks or her screen.

Perfect.

More certain death.

Ryan is the first to speak, "Harper, as angry as you look right now, you still gotta keep it down so Mom and Dad don't come out here and lecture us again, mention the tree, or make it so I can't get laid because you can't keep quiet.

I get low key stressed every time you get upset and, yes, that's selfish, but damn guys have needs, too!"

Harper lets out a sigh and stares down her brother in a way that sends alerts all over my brain and toward my body, like I might need to actually cover my dick, so she doesn't just start kicking random dicks out of anger.

"Ryan,"

she says through clenched teeth.

Ryan, good friend that he is, starts to bolt from the room, then suddenly stops and looks over his shoulder.

"I'm always on your side, Harper, you're my sister.

But, honestly, those bitches are just jealous whores and at some point you have to know that shit's gonna happen.

And they aren't going to leave you guys alone, at least not anytime soon."

He sighs and looks up while I lick my lips, waiting to defend myself.

"Look..."

Ryan strolls over to her and pulls out his phone.

"These are the texts from Easton the day some idiot took that video and picture."

Harper slowly grabs his phone and stares down at the screen.

I know what they'll say.

They'll say that Ryan said not to stress Harper out and to keep it to myself, not because I need to hide shit, but because she wasn't feeling well and she's dealt with enough.

I wait for her to finish reading.

She lowers the phone and hands it back to Ryan.

"So..."

He yawns.

"I'm off for cupcakes, and when I say cupcakes, I mean I'm off to lick Sadie's—"

"Not now,' I interrupt.

He just grins and slowly makes his way toward Harper's bedroom, like he's Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible.

The idiot even skips two of the creaky stairs and crawls across the floor.

"Damn, he's still high, I say to myself as I fall back against the couch and stare up at my girl.

Harper slumps her shoulders and drops her phone onto the carpet, then crawls onto me, straddling my body.

"I'm sorry, I just...panicked.

People are going to talk and—"

"People always talk,' I interrupt with a shrug.

"But what's most important is how you feel and what you believe."

I lightly grip her chin between my fingers.

"So, what is it, Harper?

What do you believe?"

"You."

She leans forward, our foreheads softly touch.

"I'll believe in you."

I smile despite the stress of the night and the sudden wake up call.

"Good."

It feels good that she has no hesitation.

"Now, can we please all put this night of horror behind us?"

She laughs then jumps off my lap and grabs my hand.

"Come on."

We both tiptoe into the kitchen.

Two cupcakes are left.

"Is she here?"

I look from left to right.

Harper holds up her hand and walks around the corner toward the master and turns back to me in triumph.

"She's showering and getting ready, it's gonna be at least another hour."

"Yessss."

Harper approaches and grabs one of the cupcakes then, looks around the corner toward the master, then pulls me into the pantry and turns on the light.

"Are we making soup?"

I joke.

She hands me the cupcake.

Okay?

I take it.

She pulls her shirt over her head and I thank God she's not wearing a bra.

Damn, her tits are the thing of dreams, legends, and wars.

She holds out her hand.

I give her the cupcake, expecting her to eat it topless which hey, that's the sort of porn I could jack off to for an eternity.

Instead, she presses the top of the cupcake between her tits, letting the frosting smear down the middle.

I gawk.

Like a horny, pre—teen who can't control his boner, I feel myself surge to life, my cock pressing so hard against my briefs that I want to jack off to a fucking cupcake with pink sprinkles.

I'll never be the same after this moment.

She shoves me back against the shelf of cereal, then runs the cupcake down toward her pajama shorts until frosting touches the waistband, wraps a leg around my waist, nearly knocking over the Lucky Charms as she whispers, "Eat me."

I don't have to be told twice.