

Mike pauses mid sentence, eyes flickering away from me to stare across the room. I turn to see what he's looking at. The birthday girl is twirling in the centre of the room. I grit my teeth at Mike's expression as he stares at her.

She twirls again, glass in hand, soft-drink spilling over. It splashes onto her skirt and onto the floor but she doesn't notice. She dances, and I can see her singing along and though the words don't reach me I can tell she is out of time and out of tune.

She spins, loses her balance and laughs breathlessly. That I do hear, as do most the other teens - mostly guys - milling about the room. They all look at her with varying degrees of surprise, amusement and scorn. She doesn't notice that either, because she is drunk and probably because she doesn't care. They are my friends, not hers. I clench my fists together and turn my gaze back to Mike, reconsidering, yet again, why I continue to associate with these people.

'Is she really that drunk?' Mike asks.

I nod and shove my hands into the pockets of my jeans, 'Yep, she really is.'

'How much has she had?'

I watch the lights bounce off her beaded dress and reflect rainbows around the room. Two girls across the room point at her and giggle. I roll my eyes.

'Three,' I say.

Mike turns to me, eyebrows raised, 'Seriously?'

'Yep,' I say.

'How much booze is in those things.'

He says it as a statement, rather than a question, but I answer him anyway. 'About a shot of vodka in each one.'

Before he can respond, she twirls around again and ends up in front of us, eyes bright and cheeks flushed. Her breath comes in short bursts and her chest heaves.

Mike stares.

I grimace and bite down on the urge to tell him to keep his eyes on her face.

‘What’s got vodka?’ she asks.

‘You’re drinks,’ I supply and she beams.

It’s a drunken smile and yet it is more genuine than the usual caustic grin she wears. It’s part of why they’re all staring at her. She’s never let them close enough to see her true smile before.

‘Aren’t they yummy?’ she says and then adds, ‘Almost as yum as Pina Colada’s. Say why didn’t we have any of those?’ she asks, taking my hand and twirling under my arm.

Before I can answer, she let’s go and steps over to Mike.

‘Do you like Pina Colada’s?’

She looks up at him, eyes glittering through her lashes. I roll my eyes. Apparently she’s not so drunk to have forgotten how to flirt.

‘Sure,’ Mike says, his voice high pitched.

He clears his throat and his eyes flicker over to me for a moment. I glare and his gaze shifts away and refocuses somewhere above her shoulder.

‘Great!’ she laughs.

The song changes and she darts away from Mike, twirling around the both of us instead.

‘The room is spinning!’ she says, laughing again as she loses her balance.

Mike is still staring. I clench my fists, unclench them and shove them back into my pockets because it’s too tempting to punch him. I catch sight of some of the other guys staring. Guys that are in her class and wouldn’t give her a second look on an ordinary day.

‘You’ve only had three drinks,’ Mike protests. ‘It can’t be that strong.’

‘She’s a lightweight,’ I say.

She pauses to pull her phone out of the top of her dress. I can see the screen has several notifications and she starts responding to one. Her fingers fly across the screen, rapidly punching

out words. The intense expression of concentration on her face is a telltale sign that she's not quite up to standard, yet her speed is still impressive.

'Really light,' she says, looking up and then raising her eyebrows, 'Like a feather! I'm a featherweight,' she giggles, and jams the phone back into the top of her dress.

Mike laughs, and lets her lead him back into the middle of the room to dance. I must be slipping, because he casts only a slight nervous look before allowing her to drag him off. I don't stop them, though I consider how I'm going to word our next *conversation*.

It takes two hours for my friends get bored of watching her and move onto the next party. One that has more booze no doubt.

She doesn't care, nor notice, when they start to trickle out. A few of them wish her a happy birthday, and she smiles at them, big and bright and unlike anything they've seen from her. It's in their eyes as they leave, looking back at her with less malice than usual. Realising that she's just a normal teenager, like them, and not the hard, rough and tumble shell she normally portrays.

Only three of us are left when she finally crashes. She sits down on the couch next to Mike and Drew, who are playing the xbox, and asks to have a turn. Before they finish hooking up another controller for her to play, she's asleep.

They laugh and I join in making fun of her as she snores softly on the end of the couch.

I sit on the floor in front of her and take up her controller and the three of us play xbox for another hour.

Then Drew heads off, claiming work in the morning, and Mike yawns and makes for the guest room.

For a moment I consider hauling her up to her room, but she looks so content. Calm. Calmer than she's been in a long time. So I go to the kitchen and fill up a glass of water, pop two aspirins and leave them on the coffee table. Better to leave her curled up in that awkward position, than to wake her from whatever peaceful dreamland she's wandered into.

I'm almost asleep when the bedroom door creaks open. I have that split second feeling of falling and jerk into wakefulness. The mattress dips, and I lean up to see her face.

'You okay?' I ask.

'Yeah,' she says, 'Just have a headache.'

The glowing numbers on my clock tell me it's been half an hour since I abandoned her to the couch and though she's still wearing her party dress, she seems sober.

'Is anyone still here?' she asks, flopping back on the bed next to me.

'Just Mike.'

She is silent and shifts, nudging me with her elbow.

'I'm surprised you let him stay,' she says.

'Why?'

She laughs, teasing and says, 'You know why.'

'Brat,' I retort.

She nudges me again, and I can just make out the grin on her face before she rolls away from me, yanking at the covers.

'You have your own bed,' I point out.

'Night,' she responds, 'Thanks for the party. I dunno how much you had to pay everyone to turn up-'

'Don't be stupid,' I say.

She laughs again, softer this time.

'Well, thanks anyway,' she says. 'It was... it was really fun.'

She sounds like she means it. I smile into the darkness and roll to face the wall, our backs pressing together like they did when we were kids. Back when I was afraid of storms and nightmares and couldn't bare to be in a room alone.

'Happy birthday, sis.'