

A Year in the Life

An Original Novel by Dana Carlisle

Chapter One

Sometimes I wonder if I am capable of being happy. Oh, I've been happy for brief periods of time, but I wonder if I'm capable of sustaining a true sense of well-being. And then I wonder if anyone is truly capable of it or if happiness is just a myth.

Tomorrow I start my senior year of high school at Parkway Central. I suppose I should be happy and excited, but I just can't seem to grasp the enthusiasm I once had at the beginning of each school year. I long for change and have been disappointed each year as it shapes up to be like all the rest. Why should this year be any different? My mom would probably wonder how I got so cynical at age 17. Hell, I wonder myself sometimes.

It's ironic, really. I, Nikki Dryden, have grown up in a suburb of Chicago surrounded by comfort. I have a terrific twin brother and parents that I have to rate as okay, even if we do seem to argue a lot. My life has not been a life of hardships by any means.

My best friend, Kaiti, and I went to school today to pick up our schedules. We share drama and English, which is cool since those are the only two classes that we're taking in common and we managed to land both of them together. My interests lie in science and medicine, while Kaiti's revolve around languages and the arts.

I'm not quite sure why Kaiti and I have stayed friends for so long since we're so different - right down to our appearances. She's energetic and All-American looking with her cute blonde bob and green eyes which always have a mischievous twinkle in them. She's only 5'4" but a lot of energy is packed into her small frame.

Me? I'm always told I have a "classic beauty" - whatever the hell that means. I keep my black hair long and straight. With my light blue eyes and pale skin I feel like Snow White, but I'm told it's a striking combination. I'm used to my height now that the guys my age are taller than me, but growing up I felt like a giraffe - awkward and insecure.

Kaiti is fun-loving and daring, which is good for me because I tend to be shy and reserved. When I'm with Kaiti I let my wild side, such as it is, show and I feel freer and happier than when I'm being "good girl and straight-A student Nikki Dryden." Jordan, my twin brother, is a lot like Kaiti. I often wish I could be as worry-free and easy-going as them. I'm sure I could be a lot happier that way.

I pray I don't have any classes with Kyle. I'm just not sure I can handle that. No, I know I couldn't handle that. I'm sure that part of my lack of excitement is the dread I am feeling at having to face him at school. I haven't seen him in nearly two months, but that doesn't mean that the pain, the anger, the disgust at myself, and the sick feeling I carry with me in the pit of my stomach have disappeared. Far from it.

Every time I think of...

"Nikki?" I quickly brushed my tears away so that Jordan wouldn't guess anything was wrong and called for him to come in.

Jordan entered my room and one look reminded me why my brother's so popular at school. He's the epitome of good looks, with his dark brown hair, athletic body, and these cool eyes that change from gray to green depending on what he's wearing and his mood. Jordan's been out of circulation since the beginning of our sophomore year. His girlfriend, Amanda, left almost a month ago for her freshman year at the University of Chicago, but they still talk for hours every night and see each other every weekend. Practically nothing has really changed for them since my brother's so busy with sports they really only got to see each other on weekends even when she lived in town.

"What's up, little brother?" I tried to keep my tone light as I teased him about being eight minutes younger than myself.

"What time do you want to leave for school tomorrow?"

"How about 7:30?"

Jordan shook his head. "Have you already found your locker? I didn't have time before soccer practice so I don't know where mine is, how far from first period it is, or if it will even open!" The school is notorious for handing out locker combinations that do not work on the assigned locker.

I sighed, not really wanting to go in early for fear of running into certain undesirables, namely Kyle, but I would do just about anything for my brother. "Okay, 7:15? That should be enough time. Did you have time today to pick up your schedule?"

"Yeah, barely. What lunch period do you have?"

"First," I answered. "So does Kaiti. What about you?"

Jordan nodded. "Cool. I have first, too. Save me a seat?"

"Of course. I'll try to get the same table as last year." Our lunchroom is very territorial. Once you claim a table, after the first couple of days that's *your* table and very few dare challenge that.

"Definitely," Jordan agreed. "That was prime lunch room real estate! Did you and Kaiti see anyone interesting today?"

I laughed to myself, knowing that was his way of asking if I had seen Kyle, without asking if I had seen Kyle. "Nah, we saw a couple of people we knew, but no one exciting." *Thank God*, I added to myself.

"Well, I promised Amanda I'd call. Ready by 7:15?" he looked at me expectantly and I nodded.

"Tell Amanda I said hi," I called to his retreating back. He waved to show me he heard and I got up to shut the door behind him.

I felt listless and disappointed that he didn't stay long. I looked at my phone, a sixteenth birthday gift from my parents with its own private line, and thought about calling Kaiti but I had spent the day with her and just didn't feel like talking with her. That surprised me since I knew I could always count on her to cheer me up. I felt restless, wanting to be alone, but wanting human contact at the same time. Why couldn't I shake this feeling?

I walked to my window and looked out at suburbia. Dusk was falling and a light breeze blew the trees in our heavily wooded backyard. Our golden retriever and Jack Russell terrier were chasing each other around the yard, making me smile in spite of myself.

Sometimes I wish I were a dog. What do they know about worrying about peer pressure, wardrobes, bad hair days, and getting into college? All Wishbone, the terrier, worries about is his stomach and all Hobbes, the retriever, worries about is who's going to play with her next. Watching them playing, oblivious to the fact that a new school year was beginning the next day, I envied them their carefree existence.

Chapter Two

"Nikki! How was your summer? I haven't seen you since you and Kyle broke up!" Shayne Lockridge, one of Kyle's best friends, exclaimed as he entered my first period classroom and slid into the seat behind me. Wonderful. My school day hadn't even officially started and already Kyle was haunting me.

I did, however, manage to flash Shayne a genuine smile. He may have been a member of Kyle's gang of friends, but he really was a great guy. "Yeah, I kind of laid low the rest of the summer." I didn't tell him that I hadn't left the house for two straight weeks after Kyle dumped me, ignoring Jordan's and Kaiti's cajoling, bribes, and threats.

"Too bad, you missed some killer parties." Shayne turned serious for a moment as he looked at me intently. "I missed you at them."

I smiled ruefully, my heart fluttering just a little at Shayne's admission. "I just don't think I would have been welcome."

A funny look crossed Shayne's face. "Well, I for one would have welcomed you - and so would the rest of the guys. Screw Kyle, we liked you for you, not 'cause you were his girlfriend. And Kelli and Jen were asking about you, too."

Kelli and Jen were two of the guy's girlfriends. Kyle hung around with a pack of five guys, himself and Shayne included. Kelli, Jen, and I had been "their girls," a title all three of them had enjoyed immensely. I knew Shayne was telling the truth because both Kelli and Jen had called me a number of times after I left the group, but I never returned their calls. I hadn't wanted to have any reminders of Kyle. Eventually they had stopped calling. Shayne had even called a couple of times, but he didn't mention the fact that I had never called him back.

"I just don't think that I would have been welcome by...everyone," I finished lamely. Damn! I couldn't even bring myself to say his name out loud. Shayne knew who I meant, though.

"That's not true. Listen, Nikki - " but Shayne was interrupted by the sound of the bell and Mr. Bloxom calling his genetics class to order. After explaining his expectations and requirements for the coming year, he ordered us to pick lab partners for the semester so Shayne and I paired off. Even though he reminded me of Kyle, I just couldn't bring myself to dislike him. He was too genuinely nice. *Not to mention good-looking*, a voice inside my head stated mischievously.

After we changed seats according to our partners and Mr. Bloxom wrote down our seat assignments, he gave us the last ten minutes of class to talk. Shayne immediately turned to me. "Are you okay?"

I stared at him, surprised by the question. I noticed the concern in his eyes and immediately felt my defenses rise. "Of course. What do you mean?"

"I know it was hard for you - "

"I cut him off. "Look, I'm fine," my voice sounded harsh, even to my own ears, but I just couldn't help it. I didn't want his pity. *Just what do you want from him?* the little imp inside my head asked, but I ignored it and pointedly changed the subject with Shayne. "What other classes do you have?"

As we compared classes, we realized we shared two more classes, calculus and English. I tried to ignore the thrill I felt when I realized I would get to see Shayne three hours a day. Maybe more depending on his lunch assignment. "Do you have first or second lunch?" I asked. "I've got first."

Shayne's sudden smile took my breath away. "First. We can go straight from calc and grab a table for everyone."

"Who's everyone?" I said nervously.

"Not Kyle," Shayne stated emphatically. Then his voice softened. "Nikki, I wouldn't do that to you."

I relaxed. "Okay - " what I was going to say was cut short by the bell. "Listen, I'll see you third hour."

Shayne smiled and nodded.

All through my second period chemistry class, try as I might, I could not keep Shayne out of my mind. He had always been friendly toward me, making me at ease with Kyle's group from the very beginning when I had felt so out of place. Even Kyle never took the time to do that for me, just assuming that I would feel comfortable with his group of friends from the get-go, and I didn't, well, too bad. In some ways, Shayne was even better looking than Kyle. He was originally from the West Coast and it showed. His longish blonde hair, crystal blue eyes, and

perpetually tanned skin just shouted California surfer boy. He was unlike anyone I had ever met.

It surprised me this morning to realize that he was intelligent, too. Genetics, calculus, and the particular section of English we were taking were all accelerated or Advanced Placement courses. Kyle and his other friends were smart, but it was almost more of a street smart. I never would have labeled any of them as intellectual.

But I couldn't feel this way. Not again. I couldn't open myself to someone again. After Kyle, I vowed that I would never again trust another male. And now I could almost feel myself falling for one of his friends. But Shayne had always been special...

The bell rang, signaling the end of class. I was stunned to realize that I had daydreamed it all away. I grabbed my books off my desk and headed for calculus...and Shayne.

Our eyes met as soon as I entered the room. I smiled as I slide into the seat behind him. "Is this seat taken, sailor?" I flirted.

Shayne laughed out loud. "It is now!"

I smiled. "How was French?"

"Boring," he seemed to consider me for a moment. "I kept thinking of seeing you third hour."

I desperately tried to keep my face neutral. No way was I going to let it show how his words made me react inside. "Really? I guess it must have been pretty boring," I said, self-deprecatingly.

Shayne laughed again. "Smartass."

I changed the subject. "I am not looking forward to this class. I had Miss Strong last year for trig and she *hated* me," I grimaced.

"I've never had her myself but I hear she's really tough unless you happen to be one of her favorites."

"Well, you're a male so you should have no problem. She just loves her male students," I said sarcastically.

"Why didn't she like you? You're the type of student most teachers adore."

"I'm not quite sure why, honestly. I can just tell she doesn't. I think she thinks I don't apply myself and that to her is the ultimate sin. Or maybe she's just pissed off because she knows I never studied for her class and still managed to pull off A's. Trig just came real easy to me for some reason, so I never had to put any effort into it."

"Or maybe it's because you don't weigh 500 pounds and she's jealous," Shayne snickered and I couldn't help but laugh as well. Just then, Miss Strong entered the classroom and we sobered immediately as the bell rang and she stood before the class and looked at us all with her critical eye.

"This is a very demanding class requiring effort," she started. I don't know if it was my imagination or not but she seemed to emphasize the word effort. "By the end of the year you should be able to perform well enough on the College Board's Advanced Placement Exam in Calculus to receive four college mathematics credits. Any of you who don't wish to work your hardest and apply yourself may leave now." I was surprised when her eyes only briefly passed over me during this last statement - I knew her words were directed at least partially to me.

When no one moved, she continued. "Good. Now, your seating arrangement shall stay how you've sat down today, as I'm trusting as high school seniors you're all adults. Please don't give me any reason to re-arrange your seats."

I sighed in relief. Unless I messed up, I could sit by Shayne all semester. In our only other class left together, I knew Mr. Quick sat everyone alphabetically so we'd be nowhere near each other.

I took some notes on what Miss Strong was saying about the upcoming semester of calculus, but more for her benefit than because I really cared.

So far it was shaping up to be a pretty good school year. Half of the day down, no Kyle, all of my friends in my lunch period, and Shayne Lockridge in half of my classes. Yes, I could definitely handle this!

Chapter Three

"Kaiti!" I stood up and yelled at the petite blond entering the cafeteria. She saw me, waved, and headed over with Alicia, Tobi, and Staci, three of our friends.

I saw the surprise on Kaiti's face when she saw Shayne sitting at the lunch table with me. I could tell by the look on her face that we were definitely going to have one of our infamous "sessions" after school today. Sure enough, no sooner had I introduced Shayne to the three girls, when Kaiti turned to me.

"You're coming to my house after school today, right?"

I smiled, hoping I was hiding my laughter. "Yes, Kaiti, I'll be there."

Jordan walked up to our table then with Jason and Darren, two of his soccer team mates, and I could tell that he was not pleased to see Shayne sitting with us, but he smiled at me. "Great table, sis." As the three soccer players sat down, Jordan made a gesture with his hand toward us. "Jason, Darren, this is Alicia, Staci, and Tobi. You know Kaiti and my sister, Nikki."

I was pissed. I waited a moment to see if he would introduce Shayne, but once Jordan started eating he made it clear that Shayne did not exist to him. "And this is Shayne," I announced, glaring at my brother, who didn't even look up.

I looked at Shayne apologetically, but he was laughing. "Well, Jordan, I see you're still pissed at Kyle. And with good reason, I might add. I happen to agree with you." He looked straight at Jordan with no challenge in his eyes and no malice, just an even gaze.

Jordan looked up, surprised, and I could tell he was caught off guard. He looked ready to say something when Alicia jumped into the conversation.

"You're one of Kyle's friends?" her voice was filled with incredulity, pronouncing the word Kyle as if it was a vile word - which it was.

Jordan answered Alicia but looked directly at Shayne. "Yes, he is. Which means he's no friend of mine." He turned to look at me. "And he shouldn't be one of yours."

By now I was mortified, but more importantly, I was furious and my legendary temper had just kicked in. "Look, I appreciate everyone's concern but I think I've passed the age where I can choose my own friends. I'm not a masochist. I am not going within 100 feet of Kyle, but I do consider Shayne my friend. Period. End of story."

I glared at Jordan, daring him to fight me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jason and Darren trying to pretend to be fascinated with their lunches. Poor guys; they had no clue what they were getting into when they sat down. Of course, truth be told, I didn't either.

Shayne spoke up then. "Look, Jordan, I can understand your concern. I don't agree with the way Kyle treated Nikki either, but there's nothing I can do about it. I'm not going to hurt Nikki."

Jordan still wouldn't look at Shayne, but he did finally mumble an apology. "I'm sorry I overreacted."

"No problem," Shayne replied easily. Blessedly, Kaiti started talking about her morning classes and lunch progressed with no more explosive topics. When the warning bell rang, signaling we had five minutes left to get to our next class, we all automatically jumped up. Almost three months away but already acting like Pavlov's dog when we heard the bell. I was suddenly depressed. Hell, it probably wasn't even suddenly - I think it might have started at birth. At the very least, it began at the beginning of lunch with everyone's over protective attitude. Poor, defenseless Nikki, too weak to take care of herself.

"Nik? You okay?" Kaiti's concerned voice interrupted my reverie. I noticed, too, that Jordan had heard Kaiti's question and watched as he turned his head to hear my response.

I smiled brightly. "Of course! I was just thinking how it's the first day back and it feels like we never left."

"I'll second that!" Tobi piped up. "You want to walk to German with me?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Do you have time to stop by my locker with me? I came straight from calc to grab a good table."

Tobi nodded. "Sure, no problem." We said our group good-byes and headed off in our separate directions. Shayne caught my eye and winked. I couldn't help but smile back - until I caught the disapproving look on my brother's face. I gave him a nasty look and headed to German with Tobi.

As I expected, Mr. Quick sat us alphabetically in English so Shayne was across the room. The bright side was that Chancellor and Dryden came right next to each other on the roster so I was sitting behind Kaiti in the last two seats of the first row. The corner - Kaiti and I grinned as we imagined all of the notes we could pass unnoticed to each other.

I had never had Mr. Quick myself, but his standards and expectations were legendary. I knew I'd have to work hard for any grade I got, let alone an A. I looked over the syllabus he handed out and saw it included a unit on Shakespeare's play texts and poems, a poetry unit that included Renaissance and Transcendental poetry among others, Faulkner, Hawthorne, and a unit on American essays from 1620 to the present. Yes, I definitely had my work cut out for me.

I glanced across the room and caught Shayne grinning at me. I smiled back, knowing he was commiserating with me over the content of this semester's syllabus.

I scribbled furiously all hour, trying to take down everything Mr. Quick was saying about how to succeed in his class. I definitely knew I needed some tips. I was surprised when the bell rang; I'd been concentrating so hard on trying to write everything down that I hadn't realized how fast the hour went. I hadn't even thought of Shayne once I started my note-taking.

Shayne was waiting outside the door for Kaiti and me. "So what did you think of that?" he asked without preamble.

"It's gonna be rough, but I am actually looking forward to this class," I said as we headed down the English hall toward our sixth period classrooms.

Kaiti immediately interrupted the conversation I was trying to have with Shayne. "We're going straight to the auditorium so we're not late for drama, right, Nik?"

I mentally counted to ten, realizing that nothing had gotten accomplished at lunch. "Yes, Kaiti," I said through gritted teeth.

Shayne smiled mischievously and winked at me. "That's perfect then. I have study hall right next to the auditorium. I'll walk with you."

I laughed and ignored the pained look on Kaiti's face. It served her right as far as I was concerned!

My laugh was cut short when I heard Kaiti's next words, directed at a passerby. "Hey, Josh! Where are you headed?"

I turned to see Josh join our cozy little group as we headed to the auditorium.

"Study hall," he answered Kaiti in his smooth baritone voice. He looked toward me and said, rather shyly, "How are you, Nikki?"

I smiled, rather shyly myself. "Fine. And you, Josh?"

"Can't complain," he stated in that simple way of his. I stared at his profile. He had matured a lot since junior high, but he was as good-looking as ever. His jet black hair was wind-blown and casual and his deep tan a testament to the many hours I knew he spent on the soccer field. When he smiled at me, I had been a little surprised to see the reserve in his normally warm brown eyes.

Suddenly, I became aware of Kaiti looking at me with an expression that said she was adding two and two and coming up with 25. She spoke up before I could say anything. "Shayne, this is Josh. Sounds like you two have study hall together."

The two nodded at each other, but neither gave any sign of friendliness toward the other. "You're headed to study hall now, I assume," Josh said, his voice pure controlled politeness.

Anger, violent and unexpected, exploded somewhere inside of me. I don't know where it came from, I just knew that suddenly I was overwhelmingly angry. I guess it was because I was sick to death of everyone judging Shayne. Making me justify my friendship with him. Not trusting my judgment. And now someone I hadn't spoken more than 10 words with in the last three years, despite how close we had once been, appeared to be doing the same thing.

I kept my cool on the outside, but I wanted to scream on the inside. When Kaiti and I said good-bye to the guys as they headed into the classroom, I gave them my brightest smile, but I knew that my heart just wasn't in it. Kaiti and I continued into the auditorium in silence. We took seats in the front row and waited for class to begin. Just before the bell rang, Kelli and Jen entered the auditorium, laughing together. I braced myself, wondering how they would react to me. Kelli saw me first and immediately smiled and waved. Jen then followed suit. I smiled and waved back and then relaxed in my seat as they chose seats a few rows back.

Mr. Crollman took his position in the front of the class. "Good afternoon. Welcome to advanced drama. I recognize most of you from previous drama classes - glad to see you back." He paused and looked around before continuing. "The scheduling gods have done it to me again and I have a debate class prior to this in the English hall, so I will not be around too much before class. However, since this is the last period of the day, I will be happy to stay around after class and answer any questions you may have."

I was tempted to stay after class today, just to avoid going to Kaiti's, but I knew it would just delay the inevitable. And the anger already floating just beneath the surface bubbled up again. Combined with the depression I had felt the night before and had been unable to shake, this easy anger disturbed me. But dammit, this was supposed to be the best year of my life and it was starting out with a bunch of people trying to baby-sit me! I forced myself to calm down and focus on what Mr. Crollman was saying. The activities we would be performing this semester sounded like a lot of fun: famous scenes, a group lip synch, and action scenes. I was really looking forward to this semester.

The teacher passed out our drama books, full of some great scenes I noticed as I flipped through the pages, and gave us the last twenty minutes of class to read through the books and talk to the other students. I groaned inwardly, knowing Kaiti was about to turn on me. Blessedly, before Kaiti could open her mouth, Jen and Kelli called to me. I told Kaiti I would be right back and hurried back to where the two girls were sitting.

"You pulled a disappearing act on us this summer!" Kelli exclaimed.

And that's all she wrote...