



Dante's Universe

SELENA

Dirty Demise

Willow Heights Preparatory

Academy: The Envy

Book 1

slena

Dirty Demise

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Unabridged First Edition

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For Team Darling.

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*Show me history untouched by memories
and you show me lies.*

—Carlos Eire

blurb

Colt Darling

If the truth sets you free, can you ever be free without it?

I used to have it all.

Football made me popular. Money made me desirable. My name made me a king.

Girls tried to tame me, but I valued my freedom too much to be tied down.

Until I lost it all.

Now I'm a ghost in the halls of Willow Heights Prep Academy. The bullies allow me to speak to one person—my girlfriend, Dixie. When I defied that order, they beat me nearly to death.

I survived, but I lost my memories of the month before the attack. I tell myself it doesn't matter, but I can't help feeling like I'm missing something.

Here's what I know for sure.

Dixie is my girlfriend.

I'm a social leper thanks to the bullies and their queen, Gloria Walton.

And something happened that I can't remember.

I'm determined to find out the truth, but someone thinks it's better left forgotten.

Someone who sees my freedom as a threat.

*But who can I believe when I can't even trust my own
memory?*

content warning

I write for 18+ readers who have **no triggers**. *If this does not describe you, this series is not for you.* Please return this book for a refund if you're disturbed by fictional characters dealing with assault, suicide, substance abuse, bullying (incl. body shaming and homophobic slurs), and other trauma. I would never want to cause harm, and your safety comes first.

If you're ready for anything...

Welcome to Faulkner, where the city limit is the only limit.

prologue

1 YEAR AGO

Rumor Has It... a notorious loner boy and a girl who's gained sudden notoriety this week were seen leaving campus together before school. Have these two lonely souls found a friend in each other, or is it something more?

Colt Darling

I pull up to Willow Heights well after the last bell. School's been out for hours, but I've been having too much fun flirting with the new girl to keep track of time.

“Back to Life” runs through my head, and I whistle the tune under my breath. Back to reality—too fucking true.

I used to run this place, to sit on the proverbial throne with my cousins, with all the entitlement of an arrogant king who thought he was a god.

Then the Dolce family moved to town and showed our family that even the most powerful king bows at the feet of that cruel bitch, Fate.

Gods don't answer to anyone.

Now, this place is my living hell.

“This was fun,” I say, shutting off the wipers. “Next time you want to make a dude cum in his pants, remember, I'm your guy.”

Harper laughs, and the sound twists down into my chest, boring into me with a mixture of pride and sorrow. I used to make girls laugh. I used to make girls cum. I used to make girls scream my name.

Now girls laugh at me, not my wisecracks, and they'd scream in horror if I came near them. I'm the school's pariah, untouchable in the worst ways. The only girl I'm allowed to talk to is Dixie, and dumbass that I am, I just cut things off with her—for good this time.

I know it's better this way. I'm a lone wolf. I'm not meant to be tamed.

“Thanks for the clothes,” Harper says. “And smoking me out, and the sandwich... Damn, I'm starting to think I

really do owe you a BJ. At least a hand job.”

“I mean... I’m not gonna argue with that logic,” I say, flashing her a grin so she knows I’m not turning down her offer of a BJ, but I’m not holding her to it either.

She’s too new to know all the rules, and too defiant to obey the ones she knows. That’s why she hung out with me today. I’d rather have kept her all night than coming back here, or better yet, taken her and blown right the fuck out of this town and never looked back, like my sister did. But Harper wanted to get her bike and go home, and I’m not quite psycho enough to kidnap a girl, no matter how hot she is.

I leave the truly criminal acts to the Dolces, and maybe my cousin Preston.

Hell, he’d take her just to piss off the Dolces.

Not only is Harper the badass new chick, but she’s also drawn the attention of my mortal enemies. They haven’t ruined her yet, haven’t turned her into a demon doll like the rest of their harem of Dolce Girls—girls who make it their mission to crush my soul at every opportunity. She’s still innocent of the true depths of their depravity, and if that means I’m taking advantage of her...

Hey, I'm still a guy, even if I'm not a criminal.

Harper picks up her backpack from the floorboard as we pull alongside the curb where a lone bike remains in the rack, dripping with rain from the storm today. I brought her to my place to give her some clothes, since the girl is poor, and poor doesn't cut it at Willow Heights. If she's going to survive the reign of the Dolce boys and their demon brides, she needs some designer wear. Lucky for her, the Dolces destroyed my sister thoroughly enough that she didn't even bother to take her clothes when she fled town.

I know I'm playing with fire, but the Dolces left Harper alone all week, and they haven't kicked my ass for breaking their laws and speaking to someone besides Dixie. A little taste of freedom was all I needed to remember what it felt like to be king, and I want more.

I should be grateful for Dixie. She happens to be the lone soul who has immunity from the Dolces' diabolical evil. She's also incessantly in love with me, despite my best efforts to convince her she shouldn't shackle herself to the school's leper.

I'm the one chafing against the shackles though. Before this week, it had been a year since I touched a girl

besides Dixie. A year since, at the last party I attended, a stranger slipped into my bed and rode me bareback until I begged for more.

I get a perverse satisfaction in knowing that today will replace that memory as my favorite fantasy in the spank bank.

Before Harper answers me, the roar of an engine cuts into our flirting. My gaze flies to hers, and the cold stone of reality hits me in the gut.

Reality has arrived.

Harper screams and dives out the door. A giant black Range Rover hits me before she's even rolled to a stop on the sidewalk.

The airbag slams me back against the seat, and for a second, I'm too dazed to know what's what. I struggle to get my seatbelt off and the bag out of my face.

Someone wrenches open my door.

"Did you fucking touch her?" Royal Dolce screams in my face. He drags me out of the car, and I swing at him, but the fucker is nearly twice my size and a hundred times more insane. One look into the inferno of his rage-filled eyes and I know I'm done for.

This is it.

This is Fate, the only bitch crueler than their bully queen Gloria Walton, catching up with me at last.

Royal slams me to the asphalt like he can break through the surface of the parking lot, like he can break through a wall of time and bring back his sister, the one who died with my brother.

My head bounces off the pavement, and a steel knife of abject terror slices me cleanly away from rational through. I strike out, my fist connecting with his cheek. He curses savagely and slams a fist into my gut. I have one instant to see his twin brothers standing over us, holding Harper back so she won't jump into the fray, before Royal's giant fist demolishes my vision, and stunning pain explodes through my face.

My consciousness begins to recede. I don't know if I'm fighting back. I can't feel my limbs, can only feel the dull blows of pain like a hammer beating my skull in. I feel the bones snapping. I feel myself slipping. And I feel a cold certainty sinking down through my consciousness as it fades.

These guys are the gods. Nothing can stop them.

And if anything can, it's sure as fuck not my beaten ass. They've attacked before, but this is different. They've ground me under their heel until they didn't just break me, but they broke my will to fight, to get back up. The one thing they couldn't take was my will to live.

Finally, it looks like they're going to take my life anyway.

I've been waiting for it.

I knew they wouldn't let me get by so easily, only taking one of my fingers and burning my arm to a crisp last year. Not when they nearly killed my cousin and my sister. Not when they blame my family for the death of *their* sister. Even though I tried to make myself indispensable to Royal, the god of hell who's currently bashing my brain in, I knew it was only a matter of time until they came for me.

It's my turn to pay for the sins of my family.

Kings are mortal, after all.

one

Rumor Has It... Two of Willow Heights' reigning kings will be back to rule the school this year! Will the status quo change now that their leader is gone, or will their power remain unchecked?

Colt Darling

“I know you’ve had a tough go of it, but hang in there,” Dr. Swift says, standing and clipping his pen onto his jacket pocket just like they do in the movies. “The brain is still a mystery even to those who study it. It may work things out in its own time. There’s just no way to know.”

“Thanks,” I say, hopping off the exam table and holding out a hand. “I appreciate it. We’re lucky to still have you here in Faulkner.”

“Oh, I’m not going anywhere,” he assures me, shaking my hand in a firm grip.

“Don’t let *them* hear you say that,” I tell him. “You might end up going somewhere in a body bag.”

The Dolce family has infiltrated everything in this town, from the mayor, judge, and sheriff right down to doctors who go along with anything they say. Those who disagreed either left town or were driven out. In a place where gossip runs in the water supply, it’s dangerous to speak against them. Which makes it even nicer to know there are still good people who will deal with our family too, even if they are few and far between.

“I’m just here to keep Faulkner healthy,” Dr. Swift says.

“Healthy as a horse,” I promise him, patting my abs through my t-shirt. “Good as new aside from the few memory hiccups.”

He gives an ironic little smile and claps me on the shoulder. “Keep those spirits up.”

“What’s not to be happy about?” I ask, nodding to the wall of assorted pictures of past football games, as if I’m still a star. “I get to spend an extra year in high school. Best years of your life, right?”

“They weren’t the worst,” Dr. Swift agrees with a grin. “There’s a reason I came back here after med school.” He reaches for the door, then adds, “Though mostly it was the wife’s doing. Don’t tell her that, though. She already thinks she runs things in our house.”

“She doesn’t?”

“Have you seen the woman?”

“True,” I agree. “If my wife’s that hot, I’ll probably just hand her the keys to the kingdom and spend my nights praying she never leaves.”

Dr. Swift laughs and ushers me out of the exam room. “Got any questions for me before I put you back to pasture?”

“Nope,” I say. “Though if you could fill my script again, that’d be cool. Otherwise, I’m all good. I mean hey, what’s one month of memories in the grand scheme? I don’t remember the first two years of my life, and I haven’t missed them a bit.”

“The memories could come back.”

“Even if they don’t, it’s one month,” I say with a shrug. “Not like my life is so eventful that I missed anything. A few

cigarettes under the bleachers and apparently a fight with my girlfriend. And who wants to remember that?”

“I’d forget a few of those if I could,” Dr. Swift agrees. “Have a good senior year, Colt.”

I thank him and head out to the waiting room to meet Dixie. I like that Dr. Swift still talks to me like I’m a regular guy, not a social pariah who had exactly zero friends for the past few years, thanks to the Dolce Decree that said anyone associating with the Darling family was a threat. As people quickly found out, the Dolces are fond of dealing with threats in particularly gruesome ways. We became the proverbial heads displayed outside the castle walls, letting everyone know how they’d be treated if they sided with us. That was enough to convince the entire town to shun us.

“What did Dr. Swift say?” Dixie asks, rushing to meet me at the entrance to the waiting room.

“Nothing new,” I say, sliding an arm around her.

I could have brought her in with me, but sometimes I need a break. Dixie’s sweet—the kind of sweet that can give a guy a toothache. She’s always there, hovering and fussing over me. Sometimes I just want her chill the fuck out and stop treating me like something broken and perilous.

“Want to get ice cream?” I offer.

“Yes, please,” she says, standing on tiptoes and wrapping her arms around my neck. She smiles up at me, and even though I’m not much of a PDA guy, I know better than to pull away without giving her a quick kiss.

If I don’t kiss her in public, she’ll bring it up later, asking if I’m embarrassed to be seen with her because she’s a big girl. I don’t give a shit what she looks like. She’s put up with me for three years, and that first year was pretty fucking rough. We labeled her a dog and treated her like one. If she can love me after that, plus give a pretty solid blowjob, I owe her this much in return. Hell, I owe her anything she asks for. I even got my tongue pierced this summer to show her my appreciation.

“I wish we could go to Two Scoops of Love,” she says when we’re in the truck, passing the local ice cream shoppe.

“I could drop you off and swing around the block to pick you back up,” I offer. “It wouldn’t be fair to the town to lose their only ice cream parlor. Two Scoops is a landmark.”

Last time they served a Darling, their vintage wooden sign mysteriously caught fire in the night. Every business in

town knows you only get one chance. Next time the whole place will go up in flames.

At least the town would have a reason to hate me then.

But I couldn't do that to Faulkner, let alone the owners of the place. They're good people who made a welcoming space for the queer community back in the 90s, before that was a cool thing to do.

"No, it's fine," Dixie says with a sigh. "The Downtown Diner has pie and ice cream."

I glance sideways at her, the familiar mix of guilt and resentment forming a low ache inside me like I'm having my balls crushed little by little each day. I could take her to Two Scoops after hours, but I haven't. It's risky, and she doesn't need to sneak in. She can just go with her friends like a normal person.

I know that makes me a shitty person, that I won't risk anything for her after she's given up so fucking much for me. I can never repay her for it, for the years of her life she's wasted on me. Somewhere along the way I realized that and tried to end it, but she won't let me go.

It was too dangerous for her to be an official girlfriend the last few years, though she would have if I'd let her. I'm the one who kept distance between us. I told her it was for her safety, so the Dolces didn't target her for associating with a Darling.

But things changed this summer.

It wasn't the attack. That happened last fall.

It was realizing I'm not done. I have to repeat senior year. After everything—having my finger severed, my hand burned so badly I'll never again be able to straighten my fingers fully, my face beat in until it's a miracle I'm still breathing—that was the blow that almost killed me.

I can't ditch this town like Mabel. I'm stuck here another year.

The only consolation is that after a little incident with Duke Dolce this summer, he conceded that I could have a few freedoms this year. Of course I asked for immunity for my little baby cousin who's just starting high school.

When I told Dixie, she immediately pounced. Apparently I should have asked to be able to take our relationship public instead. So I went back to Duke, and

eventually, I was able to talk him into adding that to my allowances this year. Dixie has no idea the price I pay for these favors, but then, that's on me. I prefer to keep my unsavory dealings to myself.

Dixie's happy as fuck that I'll be back for her senior year, that we can finally walk around school together. I try to see the bright side. I'm lucky I have a girlfriend at all.

Part of me hates her for it though. She's reveling in the very thing that broke me at last.

I pull up alongside the curb at the Downtown Diner, where local legend Scarface Scarlet will still serve the Darlings. That lady gives zero fucks about the feuds between rich people. Rumor has it she got an astronomical insurance policy on the place when the Dolces started targeting businesses. She may pay out the nose for the peace of mind, but it's also a giant fuck off to the Dolces. If they burn her place to the ground, she'll make out like a bandit. Instead of hurting her, they've handed her the jackpot.

We step inside the little place, cheerful with its red Formica tables and the smell of decades of fryer oil cooked right in.

“Y’all have a seat,” Scarlet calls from the back of the dining room where she’s wiping down a table. It’s midafternoon, and only a few tables are occupied. Dixie picks one, and I pull out her chair, then sit and hand her one of the laminated menus from the rack in the center of the table.

Scarlet bustles over, flipping her pad open and pulling a pen from her bun. “Aren’t you the gentleman?” she asks, though I can’t tell if she’s being sarcastic.

“Two pies, two cokes,” I say, holding up my good hand to gesture.

“That for the both of you, or just this one?” she asks Dixie, tipping her head at me.

Dixie giggles and darts a glance at the diner’s scarred owner before returning her gaze to me. “For both of us. I’ll have the strawberry, with ice cream, and a Dr. Pepper.”

Scarlet writes down the order and turns to me. Another brick drops onto the load of guilt I carry around. When we were asshole kids, and even asshole teenagers, we’d come in here and stare at her until she offered to sell us a picture of her face so we could stare at it without taking up a table. Now there’s not a person in my family who doesn’t bear the scars of

the past few years, either internally or externally. If that ain't fucking karma, I don't know what is.

“Peach pie *a la mode*, and a Sprite for me,” I say.
“Thanks, darlin’.”

Scarlet rolls her eyes and stomps off. I never know when I've offended her. My cousin Preston thinks she's the shit, but the lady kind of scares me, even though I fit into this side of town far better than he ever will.

“So, everything went okay at the doctor?” Dixie asks.
“No bleeds, no swelling... Nothing new on your memory returning?”

“He said it may or may not come back, there's no way to know,” I explain. “I'm not worried about it. I'm sure I didn't miss much besides our breakup. And again, I'm sorry.”

“You don't have to keep apologizing,” she says, reaching across the table to take my hand. “It was a year ago.”

“And you stuck by me that whole time.”

“It's not like you were running around sleeping with other girls,” she points out. “You were in the hospital. What kind of person would dump a guy when he's in the hospital?”

“I’d already dumped you, though,” I say. “No one expected you to give up your junior year sitting at my bedside. *You* could have been running around sleeping with other people.”

“I’d never do that,” she says, her grip tightening. “I love you, Colt.”

I shift in my seat. I’ve never been comfortable with those words, but again, I know if I don’t say them, she’ll be hurt. She drops that phrase like it’s nothing, as if she’s testing to see if I’ll say it back at last, after two years of not returning the sentiment.

It’s not that. I love her in the only way I know how. But to her, words are cheap. She’s a gossip blogger, after all.

I know the power of words. I know how deeply they can cut, as deep as the blade that sliced off my middle finger. I know they can hurt more than any knife, can cause more damage than any weapon.

Even a bomb can only kill so many.

Words can order a thousand bombs to drop.

But I’ve hurt her enough already. I may not remember the last time we broke up, but I remember all the times before

that. I could hurt her a million days in a row, and she'd still come back on day one million and one. She'd let me use and abuse her, and she'd still tell me she loves me, still offer to do anything I could want if I'll just take her back one more time. Eventually, I realized that if I push her away, I'm just prolonging the pain I'm causing her—and my own guilt.

She'll be there until the day I die. Hell, she'll probably throw herself into the coffin and demand to be buried with me.

So I make the most of what I have, the little bit the Dolces allow. I can have this one girl that they don't want. I can buy her pie and ice cream, drive her home, and suck her glorious tits while she rides me. I can try to remember what happened during a month when nothing good would have happened because nothing good happens to Darlings in this town anymore. And I can try to forget that tomorrow I'll be back in school for my senior year—for the second time.

As if Fate weren't quite cruel enough for making me endure two years of the Dolce reign, now I get to repeat the year I missed after they nearly killed me. Despite my words to Dr. Swift, I know high school will be the worst time in my life, no matter what happens in the next fifty years. It can't be worse than what I've already endured.

But there's some consolation, too.

At least my sister graduated, so I don't have to watch them slowly torture her to death.

At least Royal Dolce graduated, so it's just his twin brothers left.

At least they didn't get all my memories.

At least when I go home later, I can jerk off in the shower remembering the girl who crawled into bed with me at the last party I ever attended, two years ago, when I still believed life could be good, when hot girls still wanted to fuck Darling boys. When I cum, I can pretend it was Royal's sister in the dark that night, that it was her tight cunt milking my cock, that it was her blood I saw the next morning when I woke up alone and realized she'd been a virgin.

If I'd gotten a choice, I'd have given up far more memories than they took. I'd have given up the next *two years* of memories to keep that one glorious night, the last night I was young and naïve. I was the furthest thing from a virgin by then, and I'd never have called myself anything close to it, but looking back, that night was the last night of my innocence, too.

two

Rumor Has It... Willow Heights' notorious bad boy outcast is repeating senior year. Will he remain on the sidelines for another year, or has fortune finally smiled on him? Check back for more Tea drops!

Dixie Powell

“I can’t believe this is our last year,” I say, as I slide into the passenger seat of my bestie’s car on the first day of senior year. “We’ve almost survived high school.”

“I know,” Quinn says from the back seat. Susanna picks her up first, but as official bestie, I claim permanent shotgun rights. “It’s going to be so weird with Royal gone. Do you think someone else will join the elites?”

“No,” I say lightly, because everyone looks to me for gossip, even my friends. “The Dolce twins would never want

it to look like they replaced him. Then the new person would have more power than they do.”

“What would we do without our social genius here?” Susanna teases, grinning at me and almost missing the stop sign at the exit of my subdivision. She slams on her brakes at the last second, and we all giggle, high on the excitement of the endless possibilities that wait for us this year.

“I bet you’re going to win Homecoming *and* Prom queen,” Quinn says.

“I don’t need any of that stuff,” I say, sinking back against the passenger seat and smiling out the window. “I have Colt.”

I won. One more battle on the road to ultimate victory. At last, he’s seen how much he needs me. I might have to work harder and wait longer than other girls, but I always get what I want in the end. It might look like I’ve already gotten it, now that Colt’s my boyfriend, but I’m not done yet. I play the long game. Maybe Colt was a loser for most of high school, but there’s a whole lifetime after high school, and that’s what I’m playing for.

Endgame is Colt on one knee and a hundred-thousand-dollar diamond on my finger; a big fancy wedding where

everyone in town will look at me and absolutely froth with jealousy, wishing they could be me. Endgame is a doting husband who can support me while I become a social media influencer so famous everyone in the world knows my name. Endgame is a mansion in Beverly Hills and a house in the Hamptons; retiring young and living as rich eccentrics on the Darlings' hundred plus-acre estate on the north side of town.

“Have you ever thought,” Susanna says, adjusting her grip on the wheel and casting a furtive glance my way, “That maybe if you *didn't* have Colt...”

“That I'd be devastated?” I ask. “Or that I'd wasted my entire high school on one boy?”

“We still have senior year,” Quinn mutters in the back seat.

“I'm just saying,” Susanna says, shifting roughly.

We all lurch in our seats.

“Well, don't.” I cross my arms and glower out the windshield. They don't understand. They weren't here freshman year, when Colt was a shining star, one of the three suns that the universe revolved around. They've seen him

beaten into the ground, literally. But I know he'll rise again.
We'll rise. Together.

“Don't get me wrong, if you love him, we all love him,” Susanna says. “I just think...”

“What?” I demand. “That I should abandon him like everyone else?”

“You don't have to give up your whole high school career,” Quinn says. “If he's a good guy, he wouldn't want that.”

“He doesn't,” I snap. “He loves me, so he lets me go. I love him, so I go back. That's what my cousin says, and she's famous, so she knows.”

“I just think you could do better,” Susanna says. “I mean, he's literally the school leper. He's the lowest on the totem pole, and you're at least peripherally popular. If you weren't with him, you could definitely win Homecoming and maybe even Prom. But if he's your date?”

I catch her and Quinn exchanging a glance in the rearview.

“He doesn't even go to those things,” I point out.

The Dolce boys may leave me alone, but they wouldn't let Colt go even if he wanted to, so he doesn't try. Maybe this year will be different though. Maybe I can convince him to work out a deal with Baron, like he worked out a deal with Duke so that he can openly date me.

“Exactly,” Susanna says. “Everyone knows you're judged on your date too. You campaign as a couple. You don't win on your own merit.”

“Gloria Walton will win Homecoming again,” I point out.

“Maybe,” Quinn says. “But Royal graduated. If she doesn't have a boyfriend this year...”

“And they only let people win Prom once,” Susanna adds. “You could win that even if she wins Homecoming again.”

I'd never dump Colt, but I still let myself fantasize for a minute. I imagine having a popular boyfriend to give me the little edge I need to join the in-crowd instead of one who drags me out of it. I imagine how it would feel to walk across the stage, to have Gloria Walton take the crown from her head and settle it onto mine when I take her place.

But that's stupid. She's a hot blonde cheerleader. Girls like her always win. Fat girls with freckles instead of fake tans? Not so much.

But to be up there, the most popular girl in school...

I sigh at the thought. I used to fantasize about that a lot, back when Colt was popular. But he wasn't really my boyfriend then. Even his junior year he wouldn't let me call us that. After sticking by his side for his entire hospitalization, though, dozens of surgeries to reconstruct his face, put a metal plate in his skull where they smashed it... He's finally realized that there's no end to my loyalty. I'll be his forever.

And he'll be mine.

"You've only ever slept with one guy, dated one guy," Susanna goes on.

That she knows about.

I'm not about to correct her, though. Some skeletons are better left in the closet.

They came to Willow Heights sophomore year, so they weren't here to see me freshman year, when I was the class dog. I'm glad they missed it, that they only see the version of me that's untouchable and practically popular.

“You sound like my parents,” I say, rolling my eyes.
“Haven’t you ever heard of true love?”

“Sorry,” Quinn mumbles. “You’re right.”

“What if you only think he’s the best because you’ve never had anything else?” Susanna presses.

“I don’t need anything else,” I say, raising my chin. “I got the best the first time.”

“We just love you,” Quinn says, reaching forward to squeeze my shoulder. “We want you to be happy.”

“Then you should be happy that I’m with Colt,” I say.
“Because he makes me happy.”

“Okay,” Susanna says, sounding less than convinced. She turns into the Willow Heights lot and slams on the brakes, almost rear-ending the brand-new Bronco in front of us. “If you’re happy, we’re happy for you.”

We make it into her parking spot alive and climb out into the sticky, heavy morning air. I spot the SUV we almost hit parked in the front row, where the top tier students park. Gideon Delacroix climbs out and gives an awkward smile, and I feel all warm and smug inside.

I know it's weird, but I still see Colt the way I did freshman year, when he was one of the most popular guys in school. Once, he made love to me in Grandpa Darling's treehouse, and Gideon definitely overheard, maybe even snuck a peek. He was pretty much a kid then, and I never told Colt. It's our little secret. But it makes me feel proud every time I see Gideon and know that he sees me as someone who could get a guy like that.

It feels like everyone else has forgotten. I'm not just with Colt because I'm the fat girl and he's the loser. He chose me when he was one of the three kings, the shiniest stars on the football field, and he could get any girl he wanted.

And he wanted me.

We start toward the front of the lot just as Duke Dolce's Hummer pulls up. I elbow my friends, slowing our pace. It only takes a second to share an update on my account on *The Tea* app. I'll make a full blog post about the first-day drama later, but people like little tidbits too, so I update them throughout the day when I see something noteworthy. The Dolces and the Waltons are the most popular families at this school, so of course everyone will want to know they arrived together on the first day.

I'm dying to know more, to get each of the Waltons' stories.

Last year, Gloria was supposed to be with Royal, the most popular guy. But midway through the year, he started parading around with Harper, a new girl. Everyone knew they were hooking up, but Gloria never missed a beat, never once showed a crack in her façade. In fact, she befriended Royal's side piece. I know she heard the gossip, people saying she was weak and if they were in her shoes, they'd put Harper in her place. They'd never put up with a guy openly cheating, would never let him put them on the back burner while he flaunted his new, exciting piece of ass.

I understood, though. I know how it is to love someone who hasn't quite committed. I've waited for my man too. Gloria plays the long game, like me.

When Royal dumped Harper and she disappeared off the face of the earth, Gloria was still right there, where she'd been all along. If she'd thrown a fit and given Royal an ultimatum, he would have dumped her. Instead, she slid right back into her spot beside him, claimed the crown at Prom, and sailed out of junior year right where she started—on the top of the pyramid.

I know better than to interrupt the march of the royal court, so I stand back with everyone else who's in the lot, gawking at them. I imagine what it would be like to be the center of attention that way, and I briefly fantasize about shoving Queen Gloria in the back just to see how far she'd fly.

To quell my jealousy, I remind myself that though everyone's watching Lo with seething envy now, I've got them where I want them. Soon, they'll be gobbling up my blog posts and fiending for more.

Which means I have to give them more.

I make a few posts on *Rumor Has It* throughout the morning, then slip into the café at lunch, searching to see who will be seated at the table with the Dolce boys. I spot Gloria entering the café and hurry over.

“Hey, Dixie,” she drawls in her sweet, Georgia accent. “Y'all doing okay?” She glides toward the elite table on her stilettos, making it look effortless as always.

“Yeah,” I say, catching her elbow to stop her before she's surrounded by her squad. “What's up? You finally going to tell me which of the D-boys you're dating this year?”

“Oh, come on now,” she says with a dismissive wave of her hand. “We’re not still into labels in this day and age, are we?”

Even her laugh is soft and sweet.

It’s hard not to hate someone so perfect.

“Hey, quick question,” I say before she can evade my inquiries entirely. This has been nagging at the back of my mind for a year, and I still haven’t unearthed the truth. “You were friends with Harper last year, right?”

I know she was. When the new girl dipped at spring break and never came back, Gloria was obsessed with it for the rest of the year.

“Yeah,” Gloria says, giving me a guarded look. “What about it?”

“Did she ever say anything to you about Colt? Like, when they were hanging out before he was injured.”

Lo bites at her lower lip and checks her table like she wants to flee the conversation.

She knows something.

I knew it!

That bitch.

She swings her ponytail and gives me a haughty look. “Why would she say anything about that pus-filled blister to me?”

“He’s hot and you know it,” I say, annoyed that she can’t even pretend to be nice when talking to his girlfriend.

“Maybe if you like weeping wounds in human form,” she says. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to eat before I lose my appetite thinking about your herpes encrusted boyfriend.”

She flounces off to join her group and I go to mine. I pick at my food, watching the elites and stewing. I can’t tell if any of them are together, but I’ll be watching so I can be the first to spill the tea. All I can tell so far is that very little has changed, even though Royal graduated and he was the king last year. His twin brothers are still in power, and it looks like Gloria’s found a way to stay on top yet again.

Which is good, I remind myself, pushing down my jealousy. She can give me the scoop for my blog. Maybe I can even get her to spill Harper’s secrets now that she’s gone. I’ll just have to make an effort to be a better friend, get close to the Waltons, before I ask again. I don’t want to be too obvious.

I bristle at the thought of being the ugly sidekick to the perfect Walton trio, though.

Maybe I won't have to go that far. It's not like it matters, anyway. As long as Colt doesn't remember, Harper doesn't even need to enter the equation. She was great while she lasted, always causing scenes and giving me tons of juicy gossip for the blog. Not to mention the massive hits I got by posting about her disappearance last spring.

But she's useless now. No one cares about a dead girl six months later.

I need to keep my eye on the prize and not lose focus by thinking about what everyone else has that I don't. It was silly to think a girl like me could win Homecoming or Prom, anyway. If Lo doesn't win, one of her sisters will.

That's fine.

When I win popularity contests, when I win guys, it's for my dedication and perseverance, not something shallow I was lucky enough to be born with. I succeed because I'm clever and strategic, not because I have pretty privilege. The Waltons can have their high school crowns. I can't begrudge them. That's as good as it gets for girls like them.

One day, I'll make it big, and I'll be famous. They'll be here with their fading looks and their alcoholic husbands whose glory days are behind them. Girls like that peak in high school. I'm just getting started.

Senior year is going to be *my* year. It's already my best year yet.

I finally locked down Colt Darling. Harper's out of the picture. And before the year's up, I'm going to solve the fame equation.

three

Rumor Has It... Senior project collab groups have been finalized! Which cliques will be torn apart by disagreements, and which will survive the semester? Only time—and this girl—will tell.

Colt Darling

Senior year at Willow Heights is a fairly relaxed affair, since they want us to be prepared for college, when we'll have to motivate ourselves. In the morning, I have a few classes required for graduation, and the rest of the day is reserved for the big independent study project that WHPA requires of all seniors. Since I'm not sure I'll go to college, I'm not too worried about it, but the counselor insists I join the group I've been assigned for my project.

I leave the office and head that way. I could go to college if I wanted, even with the brain damage resulting from the attack. Hell, I'd probably get special accommodations. Mr.

Dolce may have poisoned this town against anyone who carries the Darling name, but my family has deep pockets and connections at several Ivy League schools. His demon spawn children may have taken over Willow Heights's secret society and kicked me out, but the Midnight Swans members sitting on the board at Harvard and Yale remember the motto—*Once a Swan, Always a Swan*.

I step into the nearly empty classroom and stop short, the quick flash of a blade of terror cutting away all reason for one paralyzing moment.

“Fuck,” I mutter, backpedaling toward the door.

This isn't an independent study session, ironically named since the school wants a group project that shows our ability to cooperate, delegate, and work in a collaborative environment like we'll have to do in a real-world work setting.

This is an ambush.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I repeat, my damaged brain short circuiting as it returns to the day they left me for dead in the parking lot.

“Chill out, man,” Duke says, lifting himself from the table where he's sitting facing Baron and Gloria. His biceps

and triceps strain against the sleeves of his t-shirt as he lazily swings himself down and drops his feet to the floor. He straightens and fixes me with the devastating smile that's charmed the pants off half the girls in school and convinced the dudes he's human and capable of kindness.

But though the attack wiped my memories from the month before it happened, I haven't forgotten that the year before that, Duke held my arm in a fire and laughed as the smell of my cooking flesh filled the air. People think he's less dangerous because he's always clowning, but I've seen his idea of fun, and it's as bone-chilling as his twin's cold sadism.

"What is *he* doing here?" Gloria Walton asks, her lip curling in disgust as her scathing gaze bubbles my skin like acid. She may look like everything every guy in school has ever wanted, but she's as toxic as the Dolces.

"He's in our group," Baron says, lazily rolling a sucker from one side of his mouth to the other. He sits sprawled in a chair in a casual pose, but he's studying my reaction intently from behind his glasses.

"What?" Gloria demands, whipping around toward him. "I can't work with that puddle of festering ooze!"

Baron doesn't bother with a response. He keeps watching me like one of those psychotic surgeons who performs experiments on their patients when they're immobilized. But her dramatics give me a moment to get my shit together and pretend none of it bothers me.

The last thing I want to be is interesting to Baron Dolce. I watched my sister pay the price for that mistake. I learned two years ago just how dangerous drawing their attention can be, and as damaged as my brain may be, it hasn't forgotten the consequences. I wish I could forget that day in the basement instead of the month before the attack.

"Sit, take a load off," Duke says, gesturing lazily to me as he drops into a seat next to his brother, their poses as identical as their faces. One little tussle with Baron that knocks his glasses off, misplaces his sucker, and messes up his neatly styled hair, and he's indistinguishable from his twin. Their identical faces stare back at me, watching for any sign of disobedience, any excuse to enact some sick punishment that only their twisted minds could conjure.

My soul slumps in defeat.

As if repeating a year isn't quite punishment enough, I'm stuck with the demon twins and Satan's Bride for my

senior project.

I know better than to go to the office and ask for a different group. The admin wouldn't save me.

This isn't an accident. The Dolces run the school, and they wanted me here.

But why?

I dig in my pocket, pinching one of the two pills between my fingers. I swallow it dry before approaching the group. Hopefully it'll kick in before they attack, and I won't feel a thing. Actually, I'm going to need a stronger prescription for that. Or hell, to survive this nightmare year at all. I'll have to hit up Dr. Swift and ask him to up my prescription, though he's probably going to cut me off soon.

Oh well. Maverick can hook me up like a regular junkie if a legit doctor won't fill my script.

"What an unexpected honor," I say, dropping into a chair and brushing my hair out of my eyes like this whole situation isn't fucked six ways from Sunday. "I knew I was allowed to consort with my girlfriend in public, but I never dreamed I'd be in a group with the most popular trio in school.

Guess my star's on the rise again. Am I invited to a place at the royal table, too?"

"As if," Gloria huffs, her cutting gaze stripping the flesh from my bones. She turns to Baron and gestures at me in disbelief. "Why is he in our group? People are going to think he's our *friend*."

"We just wanted to keep an eye on him," Duke drawls in his deep, New York accent. "Don't worry, Lo. Everyone knows you only ride the Dolce dick train."

She scoffs and rolls her eyes, but I catch a flair of hostility in her gaze while the twins are too focused on me to notice. She can't deny their words, though. The entire school knows she spreads her legs for their whole family.

"Glad I'm worth keeping around," I say, winking at Duke. "I knew y'all couldn't stay away from all this." I lounge back in my chair and gesture at my body.

I'm not going to survive this year anyway. I might as well get it over with.

Duke lunges at me like he's going to knock my teeth in. When I flinch instinctually, he howls with laughter. "Little

pussy just about pissed himself,” he crows, reaching out to high-five Baron, who lifts his hand without looking.

Duke slaps it and finishes cackling, but his eyes are dark with warning when they bore into mine. Seems he really does want me alive, if only because I’m his connection when a craving hits. Unlike me, he’s ashamed of his vices, which is how I got enough leverage to come back to school this year with a few more privileges than I had the last two.

He couldn’t promise me immunity from his brother, though, and he knows Baron won’t stand for any insolence. Duke might give a second chance or let me talk shit back when he’s in the right mood, or he might strike ruthlessly and without warning. That’s the brilliance of his brand of terror. You never know if you’ll get unforgiving cruelty or an easygoing jokester.

Baron’s always a sociopathic monster.

“So y’all decided to keep your friends close and your enemies closer?” Gloria asks, crossing her arms over her chest and pouting. “And I don’t have a say in it?”

“Do you ever get a say?” Baron asks coldly.

“No,” Gloria grumbles, darting a glance in my direction. For a second, our gazes clash, and there’s something real and deep in those sapphire eyes framed by long, silky lashes. A shiver works its way over my skin, making my cock twitch in my pants and my brain short circuit for a second, just long enough to forget that while she might not be as psychotic as the guys she fucks, she goes along with every evil they conjure in their sick minds.

She drops her gaze and swallows visibly, which confuses the fuck out of my system that’s already stuttering like sparks are shooting from a dozen snapped synapses in my fucked up brain.

“Is he here to do all the work while we take credit?” she asks. “Or am I expected to actually get along with that a deformed golem?”

“I don’t think you want to leave the work up to me,” I point out, tapping my temple, where the edge of a metal plate holds my skull together. “Brain damage and all.”

“Wait, so you’re just going to poach our ideas, coast along on some excuse that you’re sped, and get a good grade off our hard work?”

“Your boyfriends’ idea, not mine,” I say with a shrug. “And considering you were just trying to use me to get a good grade, you can hardly act self-righteous about it.”

Duke crosses his arms and leans back in his chair, regarding me. “So, how messed up is your brain, anyway?”

I consider running my mouth for about two seconds, but then I think better of it. My will to live is basically tied to the need to protect my little cousin Magnolia, but it’s enough. I can’t abandon her to survive them alone.

“Not that messed up,” I say. “I forget shit sometimes. Doctor says my short-term memory will probably come back altogether. I can’t remember what actually happened, or the month or so before y’all bashed my head in, but otherwise, I’m golden.”

“Then how do you know who did it?” Baron asks, cocking his head.

I shrug. “Who else would want me dead?”

“Lots of people want the town creep gone,” Gloria says, giving me a distasteful look.

“Doesn’t really matter,” I say. “I’m here now. Dixie filled me in on everything that happened, and I’d rather not

remember getting my ass handed to me.”

“How does she know everything that happened?”

Gloria asks.

“She’s the only person I hang out with,” I point out.

“Well, her and Harper, but she’s not here to ask. I went through all Dixie’s blog posts and her Tea account to catch up. Doesn’t look like I missed much.”

“But you’d never know for sure,” Baron muses, looking way too fucking fascinated by my amnesia. Having his cold snake eyes on me gives me the creeps.

“True,” I admit. “Now, if y’all are done dissecting my brain, I’m ready to get this year in the books and be done with it. If you want to take a chance on me getting our project done, I’ll give it a shot.”

“Like I’m going to let you sabotage my chances at Yale,” Gloria says. “I don’t trust you for a second.”

“Feeling’s mutual...” I struggle for the word I want to call her. It’s on the tip of my tongue, but it doesn’t come. So I finish with a lame, “Princess.”

She wrinkles her nose and taps on her phone screen.

“So, you really don’t remember anything?”

“Nope,” I say. “That month is a clean slate.”

Baron’s studying me like he really would like to dissect my brain, so I try to move on to the topic of our project. I can’t help feeling like there’s some reason they’ve roped me into this group. They’ve never been too concerned with keeping their enemies close before. Why now?

I’ve been telling myself it doesn’t really matter that I lost a month. I’m sure nothing happened. I don’t exactly have a thriving social life.

Still, I got a tattoo sometime that month. Dixie’s been on my ass about it all summer, as if she can nag me into remembering. And though I have lots of tattoos, I can’t help but think it means something.

As we get started discussing what we should do, I look around at my group. Three years ago, I was in their place, one of the kings of the school, the ones who made the rules and decided who was a god and who was a dog. Back then, I never would have allowed the school scum into a group project with me. I would have been with Devlin and Preston, my brother and cousin. Maybe a girlfriend, if one of us had one.

Not Destiny. She was gone by then.

The thought makes my heart grind to a halt in my chest for a second before it picks up again, the way it always does. I never stop missing her, even after all this time.

Karma's a real fucking bitch, that's for sure.

I bring my mind back to the present. Back to the question of why the fuck the Dolce twins want me here. Gloria obviously didn't know about the arrangement and would rather work with anyone else, which means the demon twins made this decision for all of us. Is it just because I have something on Duke, because I know shit about him that he wants to make sure I never tell anyone else?

Or because Baron wants to torture me for the rest of the year?

My money's on that one.

Either that, or something else happened that I don't remember. Something during the month before the attack.

A layer of cold dread settles heavy in my veins as I watch them, wondering which of their fists caused the blow that erased that month.

And suddenly, I know this is everything they never intended it to be—a gift.

They've just handed me a reason to live, a way to get revenge that isn't gained with fists or deals whispered under broken streetlights in shady parking lots.

Living itself is my revenge.

They already destroyed me socially, physically, and mentally.

But if I don't let get to me, don't let their psychological torture break me when I've come so far, I've won. If I have to endure one more year so I can leave and never hear their names again, then so be it. I won't fight the assignment because I know it's useless. I won't play with fire and get myself killed, but I won't grovel like a bitch either. When this is over, I'll walk away knowing that I'm still me, despite the scars. I won't let them take that away from me. I won't let them bring me to their level, won't let them make me into a monster like them.

I won't let the rage at what they've done consume me the way their rage consumed them when they lost their sister. They blame my brother for it because he was with her, because he was fucking her when the car washed away and they drowned. They blame our whole family, and their impotent rage has been a blitzkrieg on this town ever since. They think

that burning us all to the ground means they won, that they're the victors.

They don't see how much power they're giving us, if only in their own minds.

I won't give them the same power over me. I won't let them change me. If that means keeping my mouth shut and enduring their taunts and mind games, it's a small price to pay. When it's over, I'll forget they ever existed as thoroughly as I've forgotten the month before the attack.

They'll never stop thinking about me.

Are they wondering what I'll remember?

It pisses me off that I'm wondering too. They seemed awfully interested in my forgetting. What is it they want me to forget so badly? Or is that just another mind game, a way to torment me mentally?

I know one thing for sure. Being around them won't hurt me the way they expect it to. It might even jog a memory into place, if there's something to remember. Baron would never slip up, but Duke... Duke could be manipulated, especially when he's had too much to drink. He might say too

much, revealing if there's something he's not telling me or if this is all a game.

I may not have all the instructions, but I know this is one game I won't lose. Not when it's my mind on the line. If they're fucking with me, that only proves something about them—that they're more afraid of my family than they let on. They haven't forgotten how much power we had or how recently we had it. They know the town hasn't either. They know how easily and quickly the tables can turn, that they could lose it all with one wrong move.

I may look beaten to the world, and maybe it's even true. But luck never lasts forever, no matter how much it feels like it when you're on a losing streak that hasn't broken in two years. One of these days, Fate will deal me a lucky hand again. I just have to live to see it.

And if they're not fucking with me, and they know something about that month that I don't, I'm going to find out what it is. Maybe it's the ace I've been missing all this time.

four

Rumor Has It... The football team may be in trouble without last year's King to be a god on the field as well as the halls of WHPA. Could they find help in unexpected places? If so, the Tea will be too hot to keep contained for long!

Colt Darling

“Come on, babe,” I wheedle, scooting onto the edge of the desk where Dixie sits in the office after school, entering tardy slips into the computer. “It’s Friday. The headmaster probably already went home.”

“I’m not doing it in the principal’s office,” she hisses, her cheeks turning adorably pink.

“You’ve worked in the office for two years,” I point out. “You mean to tell me you’ve never fantasized about sneaking into the headmaster’s office and getting railed on his desk?”

“No,” she squeals, glancing at a brunette sitting in a chair near the door, waiting for a meeting with the counselor. “Now let me finish this so we can go home.”

“You’re such a good girl,” I tease, leaning down to kiss her. “How’d you end up with a bad boy like me?”

“Right?” she asks, giggling. “We’re such a cliché.”

“I just don’t understand how I haven’t corrupted you yet,” I say, chucking her under the chin. “I’m pretty sure you told me three years ago that you could be as naughty as me. What’s more naughty than stealing the principal’s old paddle? Do it for me, and I’ll spank you over my knee with it for being such a naughty girl.”

“Stop,” she protests, her face turning as red as her hair.

“Your loss.” I stroll over and drop into an empty chair a couple seats down from the brunette. She’s cute, but I haven’t seen her before, which means she might be a freshman, and that’s jailbait territory. Besides, I’m trying to be a good boy and prove myself to Dixie. I haven’t exactly been boyfriend of the year up until now.

I ignore the brunette, even when she overtly stares. Finally, she whispers, “It’s you, isn’t it?”

“What’s that?” I ask, turning to her. I search her face, but I swear I’ve never seen her in my life. I’ll never really know for sure about anyone, though.

Shit like that fucks with my head.

“You’re him, aren’t you?”

“Do I know you?”

“Oh, sorry,” she says. “I’m Josie. I’m new here. I transferred from Hellstern.”

“Have we met?” I ask, checking on Dixie from the corner of my eye. She’s studiously ignoring us, but that only tells me she’s trying her hardest to overhear.

“No,” Josie says. “But my friend hooked up with you a couple years ago. You’re the BDSM guy, right?”

I glance at Dixie and then back to Josie, giving her my best you’re-insane look. “Sorry, not it.”

“Pretty sure,” Josie says, clearly not taking the hint. “You’re the high school dom. The leash guy. You’re famous at my old school.”

“You must have me mistaken for somebody else,” I say, giving her a warning look.

She takes out her phone and starts scrolling through pictures. “I have a picture. My friend showed everyone. She couldn’t shut up about it. I wasn’t sure, but when I heard you saying you were going to spank that chick...” She glances at Dixie, who may or may not be able to hear us.

“My girlfriend,” I say pointedly. “Sorry, you’ve got the wrong guy. I have no interest in tying anyone up, and even less interest in hurting them. Though if you’re looking for a sadist, Baron Dolce’s your guy. I wouldn’t wish him on my worst enemy, but if you’re into that shit, I guess more power to you.”

“Ohh,” she says slowly, nodding and tipping her phone so I can see the screen without it being too obvious to Dixie. There’s a picture of me sitting on a couch at a party, holding a leash that’s attached to a collar around the neck of a girl I vaguely remember from a couple years ago. I wasn’t Dixie’s boyfriend then, but she’d still be pissed. I don’t blame her. I may have made it clear I wasn’t her boyfriend all that time, but I knew how she felt. If I was a decent guy, I’d have cut her off. But I kept fucking her despite knowing she felt some kind of way about me that I didn’t feel about her.

I realize I was a piece of shit, but I’m trying to be better this year. Trying not to be the guy who kept fucking the

only girl he was allowed to fuck because he cared more about getting laid than how she felt. And yeah, in the beginning I fucked a few girls from other schools who didn't know or care that I'd been declared an untouchable leper at my school. They didn't face the same consequences a Willow Heights girl would have if she'd shown interest.

I pull out my phone and type, ignoring the way I'm sure Josie must be eyeing the missing finger on my left hand. I let her see the words I'm typing.

Can you leave it? GF isn't cool with that.

Josie types on her own phone. *Ur not her daddy dom?*

no

She opens her contacts and types in a new one, labeling it *Daddy*.

I shake my head. *Really. Not into that scene.*

I pocket my phone and go over to Dixie, leaning down to kiss the top of her head. "I've gotta go meet Magnolia before the Dolces find her alone. I'll wait at my truck."

I leave before Josie can talk to me further. My past haunts me enough without anyone else adding to it. I sit on my

tailgate and slip a pill into my mouth before lighting a cigarette.

“Can I have one of those?” Magnolia asks, striding across the parking lot in her chunky boots and a flouncy skirt thing.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t either,” she says, hopping up beside me and slipping her backpack off her shoulders. “But whatever you’re taking, I want one too.”

“Nice try, but you’re my baby cousin, and I’m not getting you in trouble.”

“Ew, you make it sound like you’re knocking me up.”

“No, you made it sound like that,” I point out, exhaling a stream of nicotine vapors. “I told the family I’d look out for you this year, and that means not letting you get mixed up in any of the corrupting shit that happens here, not just the Dolces.”

“But mostly the Dolces,” she says. “I can see why. They’re fine as fuck.”

“They’re also walking STDs who’ve stuck their dicks in every girl in this school.”

“Not every girl,” she says with a little grin.

“I swear, Maggie, if I find you near them...”

“You’re going to kick their asses?” she asks, giving me a skeptical look. “How’d that work out for you last time?”

“Not very well,” I admit. “You don’t want to be responsible for the next time, when they’ll definitely murder me, do you?”

“Are you seriously trying to manipulate me by saying you’d basically commit suicide by attacking them and getting yourself killed if I mess with them?”

“Glad we’re on the same page.”

“Ugh, I hate this family,” she groans. “Between you and Preston, it’s like your goal in life is to make sure I don’t have any fun.”

“Trust me when I say that nothing the Dolces do to our family is fun.”

“I don’t know, Duke seems fun,” she says, winding a blonde ringlet around her finger and swinging her legs back and forth. I spot Josie leaving the building, but instead of heading for a car, she comes strolling over.

“You really don’t know when to quit, do you?” I ask.

“I just wanted to apologize,” she says, hooking her thumbs into her backpack straps. “That was pretty uncool of me to say in front of your girlfriend.”

“Yeah,” I say. “It was.”

She shifts on her feet.

“What’d you say?” Maggie asks.

“Want a smoke?” I ask, nodding to the pack of cigarettes on the tailgate.

“Nah,” Josie says, wrinkling her nose. “But I’ll keep you company until my ride comes.”

She hops up and leans against the corner of the truck bed, pulling her knee up and letting the other foot dangle. “So, you’re really not into that stuff? Or you just don’t want your girlfriend to know?”

“Both,” I say, glancing at Maggie. “She doesn’t know every detail of my past, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Are you talking about the leash stuff?” Magnolia asks, tucking her hands under her knees and kicking her boots together.

“How the fuck do *you* know about that?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes. “Girls talk, genius. Everyone knows. Trust me, Dixie knows too.”

“Great,” I say. “My little baby cousin knows I used to put collars on girls.”

“I’m not a baby,” Magnolia says. “You know when you were into that shit? When you were my age.”

“True,” I say, grinning. “Guess I can’t keep you innocent forever.”

“I won’t talk,” Josie says. “As long as you weren’t cheating. Girl code and all that.”

“We weren’t together,” I say, feeling the looseness taking over my body as the pill sinks into my bloodstream. “Actually, I used to bully Dixie pretty badly—my whole family did. We led her around on leashes and stuff. Mostly it was me, and it got around to Hellstern and other schools when they saw us at parties with her. So, sometimes girls who were after a... certain kind of experience... would come to me. I provided a service. That’s it. It’s not necessarily something I’m into.”

I know I’m talking too much, but it’s the bartender syndrome. Everyone at WHPA knows me. Everyone except

this girl.

I'm sure I'll regret it once Gloria and her bitch squad corner her and inform her that I'm a social disease, the way they do every girl. But in this moment of weakness, I want someone to hear my side first, to know me for an hour, a day, without her perception being colored by her need for self-preservation.

After today, she'll see me through the lens everyone else does, the one required to survive the Dolce reign at this school. Right now, though, she's a cute girl who's interested in me, even if she's only after the same thing her friend was, and I know I'm not going to provide it now that I'm committed to Dixie.

"Seems like if you're interested in that, your girlfriend should know," Josie says. "I mean, maybe she'd give you what you want."

"She knows," I say, rolling the cherry of my cigarette along the tailgate. "Obviously, since she was the first girl on a leash. She just doesn't know I've done that kind of thing with other people. And she wouldn't like it, that I used something I did to humiliate her, and made someone else's fantasy come true with it."

“Guess that makes sense,” Josie says.

“Not really,” Magnolia says. “She’s the OG dog. She must’ve been into it.”

“You should go,” I say to Josie when I spot the Dolce twins heading for their car in the premier parking spot, the one my brother had before their family came along and knocked us on our asses. They must have just finished Coach’s famous, inspirational Friday pep talk, the one he gave before every game, like he was auditioning for *Friday Night Lights*. A wave of nostalgia rolls over me when I remember what my life used to be, when I was a king like them. When I didn’t have to worry about the consequences of talking to a pretty girl.

“Why?” Josie asks, following my gaze.

“That’s Baron and Duke Dolce,” I say. “Also known as Satan’s left and right testicle. Duke’s the kind of kid who lit people’s sheds on fire and danced as they burned. Baron’s the kind who made sure the dog was locked inside first.”

“Damn.”

“They’ll probably castrate me for talking to a girl they want to fuck.”

“Why would they want to fuck me?” she asks. “I haven’t even met them.”

“You have met a guy before, right?” Magnolia asks. “You went to Hellstern High, not some all-girls school or an exclusively female cult?”

“No interest in fucking any guys,” Josie says. “Big ole lesbian right here.”

I finish my cigarette and toss it to the pavement. “At least my girlfriend won’t castrate me when they’re done with me.”

“Well, well, well,” Baron drawls in his New York accent as he approaches, Duke at his side like a faithful puppy. I’ve managed to avoid them aside from our project, but the second I talk to anyone but Dixie, their radar goes off. “Looks like the little worm’s gotten cocky from being in our senior project after all. Maybe we need to remind him he still takes it up the ass from the Dolces.”

I meet his eyes, locking onto his gaze as I reach for my cigarettes like I’m just some dumbass who isn’t concerned for my safety. But I’m tensed, ready to spring if they make a move to touch Magnolia or Josie. If they want to finish the job Royal started and murder me this time, it wouldn’t be a great loss.

But I couldn't live with myself if they took out their wrath on my cousin or Josie, who didn't know any better.

"Yeah," Duke says. "We gave you Dixie, not this chick."

"I know my place," I say, leveling him with a cool look. "I'm with Dixie, like you said. Josie just came over to bum a smoke. And believe me, I'm well aware of your family's fascination with Darling dick. I wouldn't dream of putting mine somewhere you don't want it."

I know they wouldn't hesitate to kill a Darling, but maybe I'm feeling a little reckless with a cool new chick at my side. Maybe I like the way she sees me, and I want to impress her. Not for any romantic reasons, but because it's been a long time since anyone saw me as worthy of interest.

"Unless you want your dick to find its place at the bottom of the river with your dad's, you better hope we don't hear otherwise," Baron says, pulling a sucker from his pocket.

"Noted," I say, giving him a salute with my disfigured hand so he's reminded that I know exactly how serious he is about removing parts of my body. There was already a rumor around school my junior year that they'd cut off my dick. I don't care. It's not like anyone's going to see my dick besides

Dixie, and she probably wouldn't even leave me if I was as dickless as Dad.

“So, who's your new friend?” Duke asks, tipping his chin at Josie and eye-fucking her for good measure. “I'm more interested in my dick finding its place in her.”

“I'm Josie,” the new girl says, not moving from her spot. “I'm a man-hating dyke.”

“And I'm sure you know who I am, since you worship at the foot of our family tree, but just in case, I'm Magnolia Darling,” my cousin says. “I wear one of those rape condoms all the time, so if you try anything, your dick will be shredded like you fucked a cheese grater.”

“Dude,” Duke says, stepping back. “What the hell? Is that a real thing?”

“Fuck around and find out,” Magnolia challenges.

“Shut up, Mags,” I mutter. I want to believe they won't fuck her up too badly this year, but there's no use tempting fate.

I know better than to trust their word, no matter what Duke promised.

I light my cigarette as Maggie smiles sweetly at the Dolces, still swinging her legs like a kid. “Oh, and FYI, I’ve taken self-defense classes where they teach you how to actually snap a penis in half. Did you know the penis is the only part of the body you can break besides a bone?”

“Come on,” Duke says to his brother. “We gotta eat before the game. There’ll be plenty of pussy at the afterparty.”

“As for you...” Baron looks my cousin up and down like he’s already imagining how much he’ll enjoy sadistically torturing and murdering a fourteen-year-old. He pops the sucker into his mouth and eye-fucks her for good measure.

She bares her teeth in a feral smile and mimics breaking something in half. “Snap, snap.”

“Crazy bitch,” Duke says, then shifts his gaze to mine. “New bitch is fugly, too.”

“I’m so hurt,” Josie says, rolling her eyes.

“You should be,” Baron says, frowning and removing his sucker. “What we say is law at this school.”

She gives a little scoff. “So you’re going to tell everyone I’m ugly, and they’ll believe it, like a bunch of brainwashed morons?”

“Beauty is subjective,” he says. “It’s not a law of nature. You might not think you’re ugly, but when you see the girls here, you’ll know what I mean.”

“Only an ugly chick would talk to this guy,” Duke says, tipping his chin at me.

I shrug. “Have a girlfriend, don’t care what anyone else looks like.”

“Like you care what your girlfriend looks like,” Duke says. “You’re so desperate you’ve been fucking your own dog for three years just to get your dick wet. Too bad you can’t do any better.”

“Maybe I could,” I say coolly, locking eyes with him while I take a slow drag.

“This isn’t public school,” Baron says to Josie. “Try wearing some makeup and combing your hair once in a while. Put in some effort if you’re going to go to Willow Heights. There are standards to uphold at a place like this.”

“I’d rather put that effort into making my girlfriend cum,” she says. “You should try it sometime.”

Duke snorts. “Nice try, dyke. Half the girls in this school will never be the same after the orgasms I gave them,

and you don't see me showing up with a face that could make a dude's balls pull in like a turtle head."

"I'll have to disagree on that one," I say.

"It was truly a pleasure," Josie says, hopping down and heading for a blue Camaro that just pulled up. "See you tomorrow, Dixie's boyfriend."

I've been called things lightyears worse, but when the Dolces laugh at me as she climbs into the car and speeds off, my temper flares. I bite back a response and suck hard on my cigarette. I might want to be a better man, but I'm still a man. I don't want to hand over my balls completely. I'm not built to play anyone's best supporting actor, not even my girlfriend's.

I was supposed to be the star of the show.

Even though I know it'll never happen now, it still irks me to be known only by my affiliation to a girl who used to be the school dog. It just reminds me that I'm now lower than the lowest freshman during the Darling reign.

"You can have that bitch," Baron says. "But if I hear she's lying about the gay thing and you're fucking her, you'll be the next Darling missing a penis, *Mr. Dixie*. Now go home

and fuck your fat girlfriend and be grateful for what you have.”

“Yeah,” Duke echoes, his gaze sliding away from mine. “It’s not like anyone else wants your puny little limp dick. You’re lucky we still let that bulldog slob your knob.”

He stares over my head at the tree at the back of the lot and scuffs the pavement with the toe of his Berluti. Sometimes I think he’s actually half human, though Baron is definitely full demon. At least some of Duke’s evil is just a show put on for his twin, to prove he’s just as tough, as cool, as sociopathic.

Not that it matters. He still raped my sister along with his brothers.

When they walk away, I fish another pill out of my pocket and swallow it dry. My hands are shaking, and I think I’m going to hurl.

The pills were to help with the pain of all the surgeries. I’m healed. The pain is gone. I shouldn’t need them anymore.

But the thought of losing the pills is worse than the thought of losing more memories.

They get me through the afternoons I have to spend sitting in a room with my attackers, men who walk away without a scratch after every crime they commit against my family. Who can blame me for needing a little help to numb the fear, the pain, the rage?

five

Rumor Has It... A certain freshman from a fallen family is braving the waters at Willow Heights this year. Will the Kings target her as a threat, or will she remain free of the stains of her family's dirty demise?

Colt Darling

My hands have stopped shaking by the time Dixie comes out. She frowns as I toss my cigarette butt. "You shouldn't smoke so much."

"You shouldn't nag so much," I snap, hopping off the tailgate and swiping the discarded cigarette butts from the ground. I drop them into an empty coffee cup in my door as I climb in. I know I should open Dixie's door, but I'm in a foul mood after my encounter with the sons of Satan back there.

Magnolia scrambles up into the back seat and buckles in, giving me a look that says even she's disappointed that I'm

treating Dixie that way.

“What happened?” Dixie asks, hauling herself up and into the high seat of my Ridgeline. “You were happy a minute ago.”

“Nothing,” I mutter. “Let’s just listen to music.”

No way am I telling her it pissed me off for someone to call me Mr. Dixie. And I can’t tell her how it felt to talk to Josie. She’d think it was a sexual thing, that I was attracted to her. I can’t tell her how I feel about myself every time I talk to the Dolces, knowing I’ve sold my soul to the devil to protect Magnolia, to stay here, and even to date Dixie. After all, she’s exempt from their wrath because she was best friends with their sister before she died.

She doesn’t get that every breath I take has to be paid for in blood and favors.

“I want to talk,” she insists. “Tell me. That’s what girlfriends are for, right?”

I grit my teeth and switch on the radio, but she shuts it off again, cutting off the *Bathtub Burnouts* mid-wail.

“Seriously,” she presses. “What happened? Is it that girl?”

“What girl?”

“The girl you were talking to in the office,” she says.
“The transfer student. Josie Duck. You know she’s related to Zoey Duck?”

“Who?”

“Zoey Duck,” she says. “Of Zoey and Jace.” She widens her eyes like I’m an idiot for not knowing some celebrity gossip.

I sigh. “It’s not about her. And before you get all jealous, she’s a lesbian, so don’t.”

“She told you that?”

I glance at her, wondering if this is something I’m not supposed to say. But the chick told four people already, so it’s not like I’m outing her. “Yeah.”

“Why would she tell you that?”

I open the window a crack and reach for my cigarettes.
“I don’t know. She just did.”

“Can you not smoke in the car?”

“Agreed,” Magnolia calls from the back. “You’ll make my hair stink.”

“Right.” I drop the pack onto the console.

“I don’t see why she’d tell you that unless you made a pass at her,” Dixie mutters.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“What?” she asks, twisting toward me. “She wouldn’t. And don’t go saying you’re a loser, because we both know that now that Royal’s gone, you’re in a much better position.”

“How?” I ask. “The twins are still here.”

“Yeah, but they don’t play quarterback.”

“Neither do I.”

“But QB is always team captain,” she says. “Now that DeShaun’s leading the team, maybe you have a shot.”

Magnolia snorts from the back seat.

“A shot at what?” I ask, wondering if she’s lost her goddamn mind and is really saying what I think she’s saying.

“At getting back on the team,” Dixie says, confirming that she has, in fact, lost her ever loving sanity. “Think about it. You and DeShaun have known each other since you were babies. He’s a founding son. *You’re* a founding son. There are only two Dolce boys at Willow Heights now, and with

Magnolia back, there are two Darlings. You have equal numbers.”

“Magnolia is a girl,” I point out, turning toward my cousin’s house. “A freshman girl. You think she’s a match for one of the D-boys?”

“Hey,” Maggie protests.

I’d never have sent my baby cousin to Willow Heights in a million years, but her dad enrolled her, so I have no say in the matter. I promised Preston I’d protect her with my life, and I meant it. I know this doesn’t change the fact that I couldn’t save my sister from the Dolces, but it feels like a second chance in some fucked up way.

Keeping them from ruining Magnolia is more important than graduating.

“I’m just saying, I think you should try,” Dixie says as I turn into Magnolia’s drive. “You loved football. You could play again. If everyone else on the team wanted you back, they could overrule the two Dolce votes. You just have to get them on your side. Remind them how good you are.”

“I haven’t played since sophomore year,” I point out. “I have brain damage. I doubt Dr. Swift would even clear me to

play.”

“You never know until you try,” she says.

I grit my teeth. “I do know. Even if he let me play, the team wouldn’t.”

“Well, this is getting toxic, so I’ll see y’all tomorrow,” Magnolia says, hopping down from the back seat and slamming the door. She waves before hurrying up her front steps. I watch her unlock the door, making sure she’s safely inside before I drive away.

“How do you know the team wouldn’t let you play?” Dixie insists. “I hate how you let the Dolces take everything. You don’t even fight back.”

I bite my tongue and grip the wheel until my knuckles ache. What am I going to say? If she can’t see from my burned arm and my missing finger what happens when I fight back, nothing I say will convince her.

Dixie lays a soft hand on mine. “I just want you to be happy, Colt. I know how much you loved football. Think about it. Not many people get a do-over. You get to have senior year without Royal. I’d hate to see you wasting that because you didn’t even try.”

“What is this really about?” I ask, resisting the urge to pop another pill as I turn into the gravel drive of my house a few minutes later.

“You could be popular again,” she says. “I know you want that. You loved being the center of attention.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I did. And look where it got me.”

“Will you just try?” she begs. “Just talk to the coach. If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for me?”

I close my eyes and inhale a slow breath through my nose. What’s one more rejection, one more person laughing in my face? I’m used to it by now. It should be easy.

But it’s not.

Not when it’s the coach who once told me I’d play D1 ball in college, maybe even go to the NFL. The coach who, the very next year, cut me from the team with no explanation and put Duke Dolce in at running back, even though I was faster and had better hands.

I’m not going to go beg like a bitch when I already know the answer. If I wasn’t good enough junior year, I’m sure as fuck not good enough now, during my second attempt at senior year. I’m a flunkie with a fucked up brain. Not exactly

the kind of guy Willow Heights wants representing them, not to mention I haven't played in two years, and with the head stuff, I'm a liability.

"Please?" Dixie says, leaning over and running her hand up my thigh. "I'll show you how much it means to me..."

"I'm getting a beer," I say, throwing open the door and swinging down from the truck.

God, I'm such an asshole. I wish she'd just walk away like everyone else has. She actually has a reason, and she's the one person who never leaves, no matter how many times I push her away. I should just come right out and tell her that I can't love anyone again, that it's too risky. Not because of the Dolces, but because of Destiny.

Destiny is my private grief, though; something sacred I hold onto that belongs to me alone. She's the tragedy that was forgotten in the aftermath of all the ones caused by the Dolces. I know letting that happen makes me a selfish bastard, that I should make sure no one forgets her. But being remembered, being noticed, is dangerous.

My reasons are even more selfish than that, though. I like to keep her for myself, this one thing that the Dolces can't

touch. They can't ruin what's already gone. Her death is a victory somehow, a hurt that they didn't cause, a love they can't corrupt. They may have destroyed everything else in my life, but they can't destroy Destiny. I still have her, just as I still have the girl in the pool house at that last party, the one who wanted a Darling boy to take her V-card so badly she tricked me into taking it, never telling me who she was or that she was a virgin.

When everything else has been twisted by their rage until I forget a time when surviving the Dolces didn't occupy every thought, when it's all painted with ugly smears of blood and shit, it's important to remember there was purity. There are things they can't reach, history they can't rewrite.

This, I remember.

Once, I was loved, desired, coveted by girls I wanted just as much, not ones I got by default. Girls I chose instead of the one I had chosen for me by my conquerors.

Inside my house, I unbutton my shirt and peel it off, hanging it on the back of a kitchen chair and kicking off my shoes before grabbing a couple beers and a hard seltzer. I down one of the beers, toss the empty, and meet Dixie on the front deck. I don't hang out at home more than necessary.

You'd think my mom and sister died here, with the way they haunt the place.

Dixie sinks into one of the patio chairs under an umbrella and takes her drink. "Are you mad at me?"

"No," I say, sitting across from her and lighting my cigarette. "But I'm not asking Coach to put me back on. School's already started. The team is set."

"I just think—"

"Well, stop," I snap. "If you want to be famous, make it happen for yourself, Dixie. I don't have coattails to ride anymore. I'm a fucking loser, don't you get that?"

"Oh, Colt," she says, her eyes softening with something way too fucking close to pity. "I don't think you're a loser."

"Yeah, well, maybe you should." The chair legs scrape loudly across the wooden deck as I push back from the table and stand. "Open your eyes, Dixie. I'm not the guy you fell in love with freshman year. I have nothing you want. Why can't you see that?"

"You're what I want," she says, her lip trembling.

“I’m going for a drive,” I say. “I’ll take you home on the way.”

Dixie clutches her drink and doesn’t speak the whole way home. I know I hurt her, just like I always do, but I’m too pissed to fix it. When did I become this guy, a guy who takes out his problems on the one person he knows will take it? It’s like I’m trying to make her leave.

Maybe I am. I don’t deserve her. I’ve been an asshole for so long I don’t know how to change, and I sure as hell can’t atone for all my sins against her.

But being a shitty person runs in the family. If my father hadn’t knocked up his brother’s wife, I’d never have been conceived. What chance do I have of being a decent guy, even for a girl who deserves one?

I toss my bottle out the window as I turn into her neighborhood, satisfied by the shattering sound behind the truck.

“You should come in,” Dixie says. “I don’t think you should drive right now.”

“I’ve only had two beers,” I say. “Chill the fuck out.”

“Still,” she says, looking at me doubtfully. “We can hang out. My parents aren’t home. I’ll make cookies, and we can watch a movie. You can probably even stay over if you pretend to leave later and wait for my parents to go to bed. You can sneak back in once they’re asleep, like you did last time.”

I don’t want cookies. I don’t want to watch a movie. I don’t want to be reminded that once, her parents would’ve done anything to have her hang out with a Darling. Now I have to sneak in like a thief in the night to steal time in their daughter’s bed.

I remember the Dolce twins’ words in the parking lot.

I should be grateful for her.

Sometimes I am. But not today.

“Not this time,” I say, turning into her drive. “I’m sorry.”

I know I’ll regret this tomorrow, but I’m too fucked up to care right now. I’m tired of pretending to be a nice guy, and I don’t need to add to the list of reasons I’ve been a dick.

“You know, I heard what you said to Josie,” Dixie says, wetting her lips. “I still have the collar. I’ll wear it again if you

want.”

“No, Dixie,” I say, gripping the wheel to keep from slamming my fist down on it in frustration. “That’s not what I want.”

“Then what do you want?” she asks, sounding equally frustrated.

“I want...”

A million things I can’t have. That’s what I want. But trying to explain that will backfire. Fighting with Dixie is like fighting with quicksand. Every word out of my mouth just sinks me deeper into a pit of my own making, because every time I tell her something I want, she takes it to mean that she’s not enough, that I don’t want *her*.

“What?” she presses, looking so fucking eager it breaks my heart.

“I want to be alone.”

She hesitates, her lip trembling. “Are you breaking up with me again?”

Before, I would have. We’ve done this song and dance so many times the moves are burned into our muscle memory. I tell her she should find someone else. She tells me she

doesn't want anyone else. I leave and get fucked up. She calls me crying. I go back to comfort her. She reels me back in with food and sex, because I'm no better than a dog.

But I promised I wouldn't do that again.

"No," I say with a sigh. "I just need some space."

"Space," she says, suspicion entering her gaze. "Like, space to see other girls?"

"Fuck, Dixie," I say, dropping my head back on the seat. "For the last time, no."

"Well, what am I supposed to think?" she asks. "You said that before, and then you slept with other girls."

"What girls?" I ask.

"I don't know, maybe the girl Josie was talking about," she says. "Or the one you got that tattoo for."

"For fuck's sake, I don't even remember getting that," I grit out. "How can you hold it against me?"

"I'm not holding it against you," she protests. "I'm just telling you what happened."

"Well, I'll make sure not to get any tattoos tonight," I say. "Or fuck any of Josie's friends."

“How can you be sure?” she asks. “You black out when you take too many of those pills. You don’t know what you do.”

“How do you know?”

“Because,” she says. “I’ve—we’ve hooked up when you were on them before. And you didn’t remember.”

“Then maybe you should stay off my dick when I’m fucked up.”

“You wanted to,” she protests, her eyes filling with tears. “You’re always really sweet when you’re on them, until you start drinking.”

“Then next time, don’t let me start drinking,” I snap. “Then you can feed me pills and program me to be the boyfriend you want.”

I hate myself when a tear rolls down her cheek, but it doesn’t make me want to stay. It makes me want to leave this girl who somehow manages to make me feel worse about myself every time I’m sure it’s not possible.

six

Rumor Has It... A new face at Willow Heights has been chatting up the ostracized rebel boy. Will the Kings allow their whipping boy a girlfriend AND a friend? Or is the new girl out of luck?

Colt Darling

I drive to Grandpa Darling's house, closing my eyes as always when my truck lumbers onto the one-lane wooden bridge on the way. My heart thunders erratically in my ears, the only sound louder than the planks clanking under the tires. Stomping the gas, I count silently as the truck eats up the distance in seconds. My stomach drops out when we hit the gravel on the far side and start to skid. Only then do I open my eyes and breathe again, gripping the wheel to take control of the truck while keeping my foot smashed on the pedal to get far from that place as fast as I can.

I fucking hate that bridge.

I can't remember what made me think coming here would be worth that torture, and now that I've crossed, there's no way out except to cross it again on the way back.

At Grandpa's, I don't go in. I've never gotten along with my grandfather the way Preston does. Though my grandpa had seven sons, he had three favorites—my dad, Preston's dad, and Devlin's dad. They had five kids between them. I'm the baby of the group, the one who never should have been born—the bastard child, the product of a scandalous affair that rocked the whole town.

It doesn't matter that my father married his brother's wife once their divorces were final, or that they've been together eighteen years now, while Mom's marriage to my uncle lasted less than five. It doesn't matter that I'm the one with my birth parents at home, while my half-sister and half-brother had to shuttle back and forth for visitation when they were young. My name will always be a stain, the one with an asterisk beside it on the family tree.

When we were kids, I didn't understand why I was treated differently. Grandpa doted on my sister, treating her like a precious angel who could do no wrong while I was the nuisance he got saddled with in the bargain. Our parents often

left us with him during the long and messy years surrounding their divorce, and he built Mabel a cozy bedroom at the end of the spacious attic with her own canopy bed and a window overlooking the estate.

I was shunned to a guest room at the far end of the opposite wing of the giant mansion, as if he couldn't bear to be reminded of his disappointment at my father's indiscretions, the family's shame embodied in a bastard son.

I used to try so fucking hard to get his approval that it makes me sick looking back on it. I never got it. It was Devlin who made me realize I didn't need it, that I was a Darling son and every bit as worthy of our name as him or Preston. We may not have shared a house or a father growing up, but he never made me feel like anything less than a brother.

He and my sister are gone now, but I have no interest in the old man's attention now. I'm just milking my trust fund and using his cars in the meantime. It's all very "Cats in the Cradle," but then, what can anyone expect from a guy like me?

I leave my truck and take the Bacalar, put the top down, and drive. I fish in my pocket and find one more pill, the one I stash for emergencies.

I lose myself in the drive, in the delirium of numbness, and the next thing I know, I'm standing at the counter in a liquor store with no memory of how I got here.

"Got ID?" asks the cashier, who has a skull and crossbones tattoo over his right eyebrow. The gangs don't bow at the feet of the Dolces. That's why I come here.

He sets down a bottle of Don Julio and waits while I pull out my wallet and slide Devlin's driver's license under the glass shield to him. The guy looks from the license to me. Everyone in town knows my brother is dead, even people on this side of the tracks. It was all over the news for months. It's hard to comprehend that the license hasn't expired, that it's been less than three years since he disappeared into the river. It feels like seven lifetimes have passed since then.

The guy hands back the ID and my credit card without comment. Who's going to refuse a guy whose brother died like that, whose family was destroyed as thoroughly as mine? I may be an outcast at Willow Heights, and my family may be scorned by the other founding families in Faulkner, but on this side of town, I'm just another asshole looking for a lucky break. Here, when you get a chance to *be* someone's lucky break, you take it.

The guy hands over a black plastic bag with the bottle inside.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

I make it to Grandpa’s Bacalar, but the two cards spill onto the pavement when I pull out my keys. I stare down at them, at the face of my dead brother barely visible by the feeble glow of the streetlights. No matter how many people tell me I’m lucky to be alive, we all know he’s the lucky one.

As I straighten from collecting the cards, I catch sight of the neon letters above the painted glass front of the tattoo parlor across the street. That must be why I’m here, though I don’t remember making the decision that led me across the tracks.

I’m itching for another pill, and I reach into my pocket, but my fingers sweep across empty fabric. Damn it. I’m out.

I cross the street and bump into the door, managing to open it on my second attempt.

“Dynamo,” says the tattoo shop’s owner, his accent carrying an edge of warning when he sees me swaying on my feet.

“Hey, Mr. North,” I slur, attempting a smile even though as far as I know, he’s never smiled in his life. He towers over me, fixing me with his hard, emotionless green eyes. I get the impression he doesn’t like me too much, though we’re quite familiar by now, considering the number of times I’ve crashed on their couch when I couldn’t face going back to my haunted house. He probably doesn’t trust any male old enough to fuck his daughter.

He keeps staring me down until I clear my throat. “Is Maverick in? Or Mad Dog?”

“Junior just left,” the guy says. “Maverick’s in the back. What do you need?”

“A piercing,” I say, looking for an excuse that won’t piss him off. I don’t know how much of the information that changes hands in this place goes through him, but since he’s a gang lord, I assume he knows everything, including the fact that his sons sell more than ink and artistic talent.

“Dynamo,” Maverick drawls, emerging from the back room. “Haven’t seen your ugly face in a minute.”

“Ugly?” I say, feigning insult. I lay my cheek on my palm and give him my most charming smile. “I spent nine

months and millions of dollars making myself this pretty before I came to see you.”

“Huh,” he says, narrowing his eyes and looking me while he shakes a Tic-Tac out of the box and slips it onto his tongue like one the pills I’m itching for. “You don’t look much different to me.”

“That’s the point,” I say, straightening up, the world tilting as I do. “Looking this good ain’t free.”

“I got this,” he says, nodding to his dad. “I’ll close up.”

Mr. North steps in and wraps his hand around my jaw, pulling my face up until we’re nose to nose. “What are you on?” he demands, his eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“Nothing,” I protest. “Just a prescription and a few beers.”

“You’re fucked out of your goddamn mind,” he snaps, though I thought I was doing a good job of acting normal. He holds on a second longer, his fingers biting in, and I know it would hurt like a bitch if I weren’t three pills deep. They reconstructed my face, but some places are tender while others are numb.

“Nah,” Maverick says, coming over and clapping me on the back. “He’s alright. Give him a break, Dad. Dynamo knows how to handle his shit.”

Mr. North releases my face and steps back, shaking his head in disgust.

Mav steps between us, facing me as he grabs a handful of my hair at the crown of my head and tugs my head back, pulling it from side to side to look at my neck. “Your face may have gotten fucked up, but this... This is some of my best work. Glad they didn’t fuck it up too.”

The fingers of his other hand skim lightly down the side of my throat, and a shiver works its way down my body. He’s so close I can feel the heat of his candy-scented breath on my skin, and my fingers twitch with an urge to reach out and touch his ink the way he’s touching mine.

“I’m not sure I should leave you with him,” Mr. North says, though I’m not sure which of us he’s addressing.

“I’m fine,” I insist, pulling back from his son.

“There’s Narcan in the safe,” Mr. North says to Maverick, relenting at last. “Use it if he needs it. I’ll be upstairs.”

He turns and walks out, and Maverick locks the door while I collapse into the chair. “I brought tequila.”

“I don’t think you need that,” he says, but he takes it and takes a shot. I take one before he snags it and sets it on the floor. “How you been, *ese*?”

I peel off the undershirt I’m wearing and turn my arm so he can see the back of my triceps. This is why I’m here. It clicks into place now.

“You remember giving me these?”

“Yeah,” he says, standing over me. “I remember every piece I do.”

“Did I say anything?” I ask. “Was it for a girl?”

He smirks and runs his warm, calloused thumb over the inked fingernail prints dug into the back of my arms. “Yeah, it was for a girl. She broke the skin.”

“Do you remember who the girl was?”

“Nah,” he says. “Like I told your girl when she asked a few months back, you never said.”

A flash of irritation goes through me, even though I know Dixie was just trying to figure out what happened, maybe help me recover a memory. Still, the fact that she didn’t

tell me she went to see Maverick grates on my nerves. When the truth she's seeking is about me, I should be the first to know. I shouldn't be finding out from someone else, months later.

And what is the truth, anyway? Who the fuck did I care about so much that I wanted to keep her passion with me forever? Dixie never stops reminding me how much it hurts her, so I know they're not hers. Hell, I've never gotten a tattoo for Dixie. Maybe that's why she's so pissed. The only girl who gets a permanent place on my body is Destiny, whose simple death date is woven into one of the designs that makes up my left sleeve. Dixie doesn't know that's what the numbers mean, or she'd give me shit about those too.

I've never cared about anyone the way I cared about Destiny. I didn't think it was possible. I resigned myself to the fact that her death fucked me up so much I'd never love again. And I was okay with that.

I was okay with flirting and fucking random girls, giving them the good time they wanted with a leash, and never going deeper than the surface. I was okay with settling for Dixie, a girl who's safe and loyal, who loves me more than I'm capable of loving her.

Because loving Destiny taught me how dangerous it is to give someone the power to hurt me that way. Feeling that deeply means you'll hurt that deeply when they're gone. That shit's not for me. I've known that since freshman year, when she died.

So who the fuck did I tattoo onto my skin? I know I wouldn't do that for just anyone. How is it possible that someone made me feel more deeply in a month than Dixie has in three years? Who did I fuck who was so good I wanted to keep a reminder of her with me forever?

And where the fuck is she now?

"Want me to cover them?" Maverick asks, interrupting my spiral. "They're small. It'd be easy."

"Not tonight," I say, sinking back in the chair and grabbing the tequila. A few swallows, and I've forgotten all about the tattoos. "I want my nipples pierced."

Mav goes to get ready, putting on gloves and getting his equipment together. His inked arms are on full display below the sleeves of his black tee. "Can you get on the table, or do I have to lift you?" he asks, his back turned.

I watch him work, confident and self-assured, like a man who's never been beaten into the ground so many times he can't get back up. And yet, I know he's in a gang, and that's exactly what happens during initiation.

“What's your secret?” I ask.

“Big balls and a strong stomach,” he says, tossing me a wicked grin over his shoulder.

“Come ‘ere,” I say.

He comes back, holding the long, thick piercing needle in one hand and a little tray in the other. He tips his head back and looks down at me, a tower of tattooed muscle and masculinity.

I reach out and hook my fingers over the top of his jeans. Gripping his belt buckle until it bites into the heel of my hand, I hold onto him a minute before I give the softest tug, an invitation more than a command.

He hesitates and then steps forward so his knees are on either side of mine. “What are you doing?”

“Do it here, in the chair.”

For a second I think he's going to refuse, but then he sinks down so he's straddling my thighs. “You're gonna

bleed.”

“I don’t care,” I say, running my hands up his thighs and pressing my thumbs into the creases at his hips. I lay my head back and close my eyes. “Make me bleed.”

“You’re fucked up. Your pants probably cost as much as my car. You really want to get blood on them?”

“I don’t care.” When he swipes an alcohol swab over my skin, the cold tingles through me, and my nipples harden. I groan and tighten my grip on his hips. “Fucking tease.”

He rests a forearm gently against my throat until I open my lids. His luminous green-and-gold eyes pin mine like a butterfly. “Hold still.”

I nod, fighting to swallow until he removes his arm and goes back to work. He stretches my skin with one hand, then pushes the piercing needle through with the other. The pain is down deep, under the drugs, but I still feel it throb low and heavy in my belly.

“Fuck,” I groan, dropping my head back. “Do it again.”

He slides the long, thick needle through, in and out, slowly fucking the hole in my nipple with it until I feel a drop of blood trickle down my chest. My whole body is shimmering

with pleasure, and my cock is stiff and straining against my Armani slacks.

Mav reaches for the barbell, but I squeeze his hips again. “The other one.”

He holds my left nipple in his gloved fingers and pushes the needle through, piercing that one too. This time, I moan aloud, pushing my hips up. “Fuck, I’m so hard.”

Maverick chuckles and sets the needle aside before dropping his other hand, skimming his palm over my erection until he feels the metal in the engorged head. “How’s the cross doing?”

I shoot him a challenge with my eyes. “Why don’t you take a look?”

“You know why.”

I smirk at him and brush my thumb against the fly of his jeans, where I know he’s got plenty of piercings of his own. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

“You’re fucked up.”

I sit up, clamping a hand around the back of his neck and jerking him forward. My lips crash against his. When his stubble rasps against mine, it gives my whole body shivers. He

rakes a gloved hand up my back and buries his strong fingers in my hair, fisting it at the roots and tugging to angle my head. His mouth tastes like tangerines and tequila, his kiss deep and rough.

Fuck. I'm so hard I think I'll cum all over myself as I grip the front of his shirt, dragging him closer. His tongue wars with mine, the metal ball in his circling the silicone one in mine. His solid chest strains against my fist when he inhales, his broad shoulders looming above me. I growl when his shirt skims the painfully sensitive skin of my bleeding nipples.

He draws away after a minute, dragging my head back against the headrest. "You know I only top," he says, reaching for the barbells. "So unless you've switched things up in the last year, we're still where we were then."

"Did we fuck?" I ask.

"What?"

"I lost some memories in the attack," I say, tapping my temple. "I'm gonna be pissed if we finally did it, and I can't even remember."

He shakes his head, his eyes dark with sorrow. "Nah, man. We never fucked."

“God damn,” I say through a groan. I press a fist to my heart and give him a pained look. “It’s just such a waste. You’re so fucking pretty.”

“I think you’re the pretty boy,” he says with a smirk, slipping the cold steel through the bleeding hole and fitting the other end on. “But if you want to pick someone off the Wall of Sluts, I can give them a call.” He nods to the door to the back room, where dozens of old-fashioned Polaroid snapshots of women and a few men of all ages, colors, and sizes show off the work he’s done on them.

“Damn,” I say, looking over the pictures. “I thought I was a whore when I had three or four girls on the roster.”

“I haven’t run through those ones yet,” he says, slipping the other barbell in. “They just indicated they were down to fuck when they came in. Pick one with enough holes for both of us.”

He gives my cock a squeeze before standing and backing off my lap.

I go to the door, plucking one down. “This guy’s straight,” I say, folding the picture in half. I’m about to turn away when I catch sight of a familiar blonde. I barely recognize her with so little makeup and so little loathing in her

gaze. In the photo, she's leaning her head on her fist, smiling into the camera with a flirty little twist to her lips that makes my semi go stiff all over again.

In response to my body's reaction, something dark and angry moves over me like the shadow of giant wings.

Fuck Gloria Walton.

She doesn't deserve my desire. But I keep staring at the picture, a funny flutter at the edge of my mind, like I've seen it before.

That's impossible. Maverick took all these pictures here, at the tattoo parlor. She's lying on the table Mav offered to help me onto. A date is scrolled across the little white space at the bottom.

I run my thumb across the glossy surface. Her hair is loose, hanging like a curtain in front of the cleavage peeking out of her little white tank top. On her wrist is a pale blue butterfly.

It starts out girly, the type of pretty thing I'd expect a Walton to get—not that I'd expect her to have a tattoo at all—but the edges of the wings are tattered, as if they were shredded by a serrated knife blade. Specs of dust and tiny

pieces of torn blue wing scatter from the edge, down her forearm, the torment captured in excruciating detail, the helpless butterfly forever reliving the moment it lost its ability to fly.

Instead of the pretty, generic stamp that should be on a Barbie body inhabited by a demon soul, it's tragic and haunting, fucking breathtaking to the last detail, like everything Maverick touches.

It pisses me off that he wasted it on someone as ugly as Gloria Walton.

“She’s a solid ten. Want me to text her?” Maverick asks, coming up behind me with a little bag that I know contains instructions for caring for the piercings, like I’m new at this shit. With his chest flush against my shoulder blades, he peers over my shoulder and rubs his chin in the crook of my neck.

“When the fuck did you tattoo Gloria Walton?”

“Last November,” he says, nodding to the date on the photo. “Looks hot as hell on her, doesn’t it?”

I grunt in response.

I was in a coma last November.

Dad was sparing no expense, sending me all over the country, desperately scrambling to get my skull repaired before my brain shut down. Fighting for me when he could have broken down, defeated after losing his entire family to the Dolces. When the doctors told him it would be a miracle if I lived or came out of the coma they put me in to keep my heart beating and my lungs breathing while stopping the post-traumatic seizures from increasing the damage.

His brothers were rallying around him for support—the ones he had left.

My aunt was checking my cousin Sullivan out of the mental hospital to come down and wait at the hospital in Rochester with him while I had surgery.

In case I woke up.

In case I didn't.

Preston was flying to Boston with Magnolia to wait while I was in surgery for another eighteen hours, and then another, and then another.

Mabel's mom—Dad's ex-wife—and Preston's mom were flying in to pray over me.

Grievances were forgotten.

Most of them.

Mabel never came. Mom never came.

When I finally woke up, when I came back to Faulkner to start the long and slow recovery process, Dixie was waiting, crying over my bed.

And while all that was happening, the panic and grief, shock and desperation, fear and uncertainty, Gloria Walton was getting a fucking tattoo.

Probably reveling in victory with the Dolces.

“You want to corrupt a wholesome one like her?” Maverick asks, nudging my ass with his hips to bring me back to my present reality.

“Trust me, there’s nothing wholesome about Satan’s Bride,” I say, folding the picture in half and sliding it into the other one. I put them both in my wallet. I don’t know why. It’s a dangerous thing to do, since Dixie likes to snoop through my shit, but I’m just fucked up enough not to care. I just want to save Maverick from her because I owe him that and so much more.

And maybe I’ll look at the tat later, try to reconcile how someone as prissy as Gloria Walton has a tattoo, and how

the cesspool of evil inside her head could have conceived of something so delicate and lovely. It doesn't quite fit, like the tickle of memory that I've seen this picture before, even though that's impossible. The last time I was here was last October, when I got the fingernail marks tattooed onto my arms.

But it's as if the pieces of the puzzle that makes up the Gloria Walton I know are shifting, and I've caught a glimpse of something more behind it. Fucked up as it is, I want to be the one who sees what's hidden behind that iron-clad exterior, not Maverick.

And hell, maybe it's something I can use, the way I use Duke's secrets against him.

I brush my cheek against Maverick's stubble, ignoring the rush down to my toes that always comes when I do that. "I'm saving you a whole lot of pain by taking this one off your hands."

Maverick just chuckles and drops his arms from around me. "I think I could handle a Willow Heights bitch, but if you want her, take her. I've got plenty where that came from."

“I don’t want her,” I growl, suddenly back in a shitty mood as I imagine what she’d do if she showed up to a booty call from Mav and found me waiting with him. I don’t come here to be reminded what I am to her, to everyone at school. This place is a refuge, and she’s managed to infiltrate it and taint it with the venom of her presence and her perfect fucking face and her perfect body and her perfect hair...

“Want me to call one of the others? How about her?” Mav asks, pulling down a photo of a curvy Black girl with mermaid-colored braids.

“I have a girlfriend,” I grumble. “I can’t fuck any of these girls.”

He grins and shakes his head. “You were trying to fuck *me* five minutes ago.”

“Fuck you.”

He palms the front of his jeans. “You can climb the ladder any time, pretty boy.”

“I’m going home.”

“The fuck you are.”

“What, you going to tie me up?” I challenge. “Finally get kinky with me?”

“I’m sure as hell not letting you drive,” he says, snagging the tequila and my shirt off the floor. “Now put some bandages on so you don’t bleed on the couch, and you can crash with us again.”

“Fuck off,” I say. “I’m not staying here again. Your mom’s lectures are worse than my girlfriend’s.”

“She can’t help it. She’s a teacher,” Maverick says, stopping to tape a couple bandages on me when I don’t move to obey. “If you don’t want to stay, I’ll take you home. You’re not getting behind the wheel like this.”

“What do you care?” I demand, knowing I sound like a belligerent asshole. I jerk away from him and yank my shirt back on before chugging tequila from the bottle until he snatches it away and slams the bottle down on the counter.

“That’s a great fucking question,” he snaps. “You obviously don’t, which means you must not be worth giving a shit about.”

“Just now figuring that out?”

Maverick grabs the front of my shirt and shoves me back against the counter, his mouth slamming into mine. I try to push back, but he pins me with his hips, grinding his cock

against mine. His fingers work into my pocket, and a minute later, he pulls back, his lips swollen and slick from the kiss. My keys dangle from his hand.

“You’re fucking lucky that I do give a shit,” he says.
“Now get in the car before I change my mind and dump you out back with the trash.”

seven

Rumor Has It... A certain tattooed rebel may be the answer to the Knights' problems on the field. Will the team allow him to join if it gets them a winning season, or will his ambitions die on the sword of their pride?

Dixie Powell

It's after midnight when I see lights in the drive. I shut my laptop and hurry downstairs. My parents don't love the fact that I got so serious about Colt so young, even though they encouraged me in my attempts when I was a freshman. Once the Darling name lost its luster, they were less enthused about my continued adoration for one of the former golden boys.

No one in this town thinks ahead except me.

I open the door to find Colt's tattoo artist hauling him up the walkway. Colt's arm is draped over his shoulders, and he's stumbling so badly he's barely keeping his feet under him.

Relief floods through me. He was out with his gangster friends getting drunk, not with a girl.

A wave of *déjà vous* washes over me when I remember the scene in reverse, with everything flipped upside down. On that fateful New Year's Eve when Devlin died, he came to pick me up for the party with Colt and Preston, and I almost turned them away because I was grounded. When my parents found out I'd been invited to a legendary Darling party, they told me to stop them. I remember how desperate I was to be with Colt, how I chased after the car like a literal dog.

Now he's the mess, while my life is turning out perfectly. He's the one returning to me in the middle of the night, begging me to take him in.

"How much did you let him drink?" I hiss when they reach the bottom step.

"He needs to sleep it off," Maverick says. "He didn't drink that much, but he was already fucked up when he got there, and he said he didn't want to go home. He kept mumbling, 'take me to our spot.' I thought he meant his grandpa's, but he passed out in the car, and I don't know the gate code. So here we are."

“It’s better that you brought him here,” I say, joining them at the bottom of the steps, a chill of fear skimming up my spine at his words. I don’t show it. Colt’s too fucked up to know what he’s saying or even remember tomorrow. “I’ll take care of him, keep watch in case he needs to go to the hospital.”

“I would have taken him to the hospital if he needed to go,” Maverick says, looking at me the way Preston does, like he despises and distrusts me in equal measure. I’m the one who’s stuck by Colt all along, though, even when they weren’t around. The way they act, you’d think I’m beneath him.

It’s funny, because once, everyone thought that. Now, everyone thinks I’m too good for him. I’m glad he sees that, sees that I stick with him when I could have someone else. The messier he gets, the more he needs a constant like me in his life. The more I put up with, the more he owes me.

And I’m taking every single bit that I’m owed. I’m not the doormat everyone thinks I am. I’m just strategic, a mastermind who will get everything she ever wanted in the end, while they’re left wondering why they’re emptyhanded.

But though Colt’s come around, a few of his friends still see us the way we used to be, when he was the star and I was the dog. One day, they’ll realize how much they

underestimated me, but by then, it'll be too late. Then, I'll be the one shunning them, withholding invites to my exclusive, star-studded parties.

“I'll get him upstairs,” Maverick says, stepping around me and walking Colt up the three steps to the front door.

“I love you, man,” Colt says, hanging on Maverick's neck like he's one of his cousins and not a guy who got him into illegal activities. “You're so pretty.”

“You're drunk,” Maverick says flatly.

Inside, he waits for me to show him the way to the stairs. I glance at my parents' room, hoping they don't wake up and ground me or make Colt leave. I like him when he's all slurry and soft and sweet like this.

After a few steps, Colt falls to his knees on the stairs. Maverick curses under his breath in Spanish, then bends and drags Colt over his shoulder. Following my lead, he carries him upstairs and down the hall, dumping him onto my bed like a sack of potatoes.

“You're lucky I put up with your ass,” Maverick says to Colt, not even mentioning the fact that I've put up with a lot more for a lot longer. He drags Colt's shoes off his feet with

no care whatsoever, then stands back. “You’re more trouble than you’re fucking worth. And you owe me for the piercings.”

Colt slurs something about paying him back, and Maverick turns to me with undisguised resentment, like I’m the intruder who barged into his house in the middle of the night and left him with a guy who’s so drunk he can’t make it up a flight of stairs. Or maybe he’s mad that he can’t rob Colt since I’m here. He is a criminal, after all.

“How much does he owe you?” I ask, reaching for Colt’s pocket.

“My fucking life, that’s what,” Colt says, smiling up at us with unfocused eyes. “Mav’s my knight in shining armor.”

“Then let me pay him.” I tug at Colt’s pants, trying to get the wallet out.

“He just needs a princess,” Colt says, moving his hip so I can pull out his wallet. “Not a wall of sluts.”

“Not now,” Maverick says suddenly, plucking the wallet out of my hands and tossing it on the bureau. “I’ll get it later, so he remembers he paid me.”

He starts for the door but then stops, his unreadable hazel eyes moving from me to Colt and back. “He good here?”

“Of course,” I snap. “You think I’d hurt Colt? I’m his girlfriend. I love him.”

“Sure,” Maverick says, flashing me a peace sign. Or maybe it’s a gang sign. I can’t be sure since he’s already halfway out the door. I think about going after him to make sure he leaves, but a minute later, I hear the front door close and lock, and then the sound of his shitty old El Camino pulling away.

I climb onto the bed and snuggle up to Colt. “You got your nipples pierced?” I ask, seeing the little square bandages through his thin shirt. “Can I see?”

“Sure,” he says in the slow drawl he uses when he’s stoned. He pulls up his shirt and smiles down at me.

I tug up the tape and check one of the new piercings. It’s red, and there’s still some blood, like that jerk didn’t clean him up properly. And then he made a big deal about Colt paying, as if he’s not good for a couple little piercings. I bet the guy’s ripping him off because he knows Colt’s rich. And it’s not like Colt would even know, since he never goes to anyone but Maverick.

When we're married, I'll make the budget, and I'll make sure he goes to someone else, even if he has to go to Little Rock. Maverick's a bad influence, anyway.

"At least we can still do it," I say, running my fingers up his strong torso. "It sucked when you got the other piercings, and we had to wait."

"You think that sucked? Try being the one who couldn't even get a BJ," he says, still smiling down at me.

"True," I say, undoing his belt and sliding my hand inside. I'm more worried about him being pleased than me. I could've just had him take care of me during that time, but I'm not selfish like that.

I run my thumb over the four metal balls, warm from his body heat. He's had those for a year and a half, and we weren't technically together then, but it was still the longest we've gone without sex since my freshman year. And even though I knew he couldn't do it with anyone else either, it still made me worry. Like, what if he realized he didn't need me as much as he thought, that he could go without sex altogether?

Of course that didn't happen. He's a normal teenage boy, and as long as I keep giving him what he needs, and no one else is allowed to give it to him, he'll stay. I owe the Dolce

boys a thank you for ensuring that I was the only girl Colt could have for the past two years. If it weren't for them, who knows how long we would have lasted. I knew I'd wear him down eventually, though, and now I have.

The Dolces are certifiable, but they're also the reason for whatever power I've gained at school, as well as Colt's devotion. My freshman year, they were always getting in fights with the Darlings. Everyone would talk about it all day, bummed that they'd missed it.

By the time the gossip reached me, half the time I didn't know how much of it was true. So the next year, I started a blog using only eyewitness testimony to share the gossip, so everyone knows it's the closest to the source possible. People come to me to share stuff, trust me to have the real story instead of baseless rumors. Now, I'm practically popular. Even the Dolces don't mess with me.

"What are you doing?" Colt asks, his eyes drooping halfway closed.

"What do you think we're doing?" I ask. "I waited up for you, so I can show you how sorry I am about our fight. I knew you'd come back."

It takes a bit to get him primed when he's on pills, but I'm up for the challenge.

"I didn't come back," he teases. "Mav brought me."

"Well, there must be a reason you wanted him to bring you here instead of taking you home," I say, tugging at him in earnest now that I feel him starting to harden.

"I *was* horny," Colt admits, watching me with a dreamy smile.

"Then I guess I should thank him for bringing you home to me," I say, stretching my neck up to kiss his chin. "Though I don't see why y'all are friends. You have nothing in common."

"I don't know," Colt says, his eyes falling closed. "We both like to fuck."

As I climb on and ride him, I can't help but think of all the times he called me a dog.

I'm not a hot girl, the kind he'd tell Maverick he wanted to fuck.

I've been thinking ahead for so long, but it's hard to believe it's finally almost here. This is our last year of high school. What happens when we graduate and move away from

Faulkner? Even if we go to college together, I won't have the Dolce boys there to keep him in line. The most he'll have to overcome is the squeamishness people have about his missing finger and burned hand. And once girls find out he's loaded to the tune of eight figures, they won't care.

"I love you," I say, grabbing Colt's hand and bouncing harder.

"You too, babe," he slurs, not opening his eyes. A little smile plays on his lips though. He's always sweet after a few pills, after he loses his inhibitions and can admit he feels the same without his ego getting in the way and reminding him that he was ashamed to love me for so long. He's never said it first, even now, after years of me saying it.

What if I can't get the ring before we graduate? Will my love be enough to keep him when we leave Faulkner? Will his sense of duty and his desire to atone for how he treated me keep him loyal when there are other options?

I look down at him, his lids fluttering and his lips moving as he mutters incoherent encouragement. I'm being silly. He's a lot to deal with, more than most girls would be willing to do. And he lacks ambition. He hasn't applied for

colleges, and he wouldn't even *try* when I reminded him about football.

I have ambition. I'm going places. And even though sometimes it takes years, I always get what I want.

I double my efforts, determined to finish even though my thighs are burning. At least I'm getting a workout. My mind moves to a video I saw on *The Tea* app today. A hot girl smiled into the camera with the caption, "When you realize you could stop taking your BC and keep him forever." The comments were all full of girls saying, "I thought I was the only one who thought like this." It didn't give me any ideas—kids will get in the way if we have them now—but it made my blood boil.

If the girl had looked like me, people would have had a completely different reaction.

One day, when we're ready for kids, I don't want people to think that must be the reason, that I must have entrapped him, because there's no other way he would have chosen me.

And I want to be able to make jokes like that and not have people gasp with shock and horror. I want to be the type of girl that guys like Colt want to fuck—not just because he

loves me, but because he thinks I'm hot. The kind Maverick wouldn't look at the way he looked at me tonight.

Even though everyone at Willow Heights knows I'm semi-popular, a member of the dance team and their go-to for gossip, it won't last forever. Everything I've built over the past two years will cease to exist the moment we walk across the stage at graduation. If I can't get a proposal by then, I'll be back to square one for college, back to being the pathetic little freshman desperate to keep the interest of a hot guy.

I won't let that happen. I'm a force to be reckoned with. I know that, but all strangers see when they look at me is a fat girl.

For a minute, I imagine doing one of the diets my mom always nags me to do with her. I imagine being skinny the way I imagine pushing Gloria Walton off the Homecoming float so it runs her over and I win. I'd never do it—I'm not a bad person. I just like to play with the idea.

I finally got the hot, rich guy to love me, but what if I could have more? What if I could have *lots* of hot rich guys lusting after me? What if I could be not just semi popular, but popular all the way?

I could win crowns and dethrone Gloria at last. I could be a hot girl, one who turned down dates as often as she does. One who could give Colt a taste of his own medicine, make him jealous and desperate until he gets down on one knee to make sure he never loses me. Until he and all his friends realize that *I'm* the prize, and he's the lucky one who landed me.

I don't need to change to make that happen, though. They'll see soon enough. I'll get the ring every girl dreams of, with a diamond the size of a bird's egg and the brilliance to blind the haters. Everyone will wonder how I did it, but I'll never tell them.

I'm not giving up my secret weapon.

Everyone underestimates me. No one looks at me. They think I'm unimpressive. No one suspects me of the brilliant schemes that fill my mind. And that's how I'll win—because no one suspects a thing. They think I'm just a pathetic dog chasing after a guy who's out of her league.

If I was hot, other girls would see me as a threat. They'd question my motives.

And sure, guys might look at me too, but I don't need another guy. I have the one I want. I've spent too many years

changing him, molding him into the boyfriend I deserve, to throw it all away now that he's almost on his knees. Once he's there, I just have to use every weapon in my arsenal, secret and otherwise, to keep him there forever.

eight

Rumor Has It... Willow Heights' Queen is making moves with a new boy on the scene, one who looks a little different from the Kings she normally entertains. Can this be a case of opposites attract, or is it something deeper?

Colt Darling

Compared to the past few years, I'm downright popular this year. Everyone's pretended they don't see me for so long I might as well be a ghost. But so far the Dolces haven't bothered to cut me off from Josie, so I have a friend. Magnolia may be a freshman so we don't hang out, but she's also family, and I try to keep her close. And of course I don't have to pretend I don't know Dixie when we pass in the hall.

Three whole humans acknowledge my existence. If I'm not careful, I might get used to being seen again, and

that's a good way to get on the Dolces' radar.

Dixie makes it her mission to be seen with me, though. She walks around showing me off like I'm some kind of prize, her trophy boyfriend, something everyone should covet.

"Why don't you just put it on the announcements?" Gloria Walton demands after Dixie works it into yet another conversation that we're dating. She somehow manages to bring it up every five minutes, no matter who she's talking to.

"That's more of your thing," I point out. "Dixie has the blog. She doesn't need the whole school to fear her for her to know her worth."

"Are you actually speaking to me outside of class?" Gloria huffs like she can't believe I have the nerve. I should be scared of her, but I can't quite muster the fear this year. Emboldened by the three whole friends I have, and the fact that I've gotten to know her a little through our project, I no longer turn tail when I see her coming.

"You're at my locker," I remind her, since she stopped to talk to Dixie on her way to class before school.

"Why are you even here?" she asks. "Aren't you, like, twenty? You should have an order not to be within fifty feet of

children.”

“That’s only for predators,” I say. “Your boyfriends, for example. If you don’t like me being here, take it up with them. I’m only here because they bashed my head in and I had to drop out of school last year to get all my surgeries.”

“Your doctor should be fired,” she says. “You look like you got hit by a bus, not a fist.”

“At least I have an excuse.”

That’s a straight up fucking lie. Gloria is the furthest thing from ugly. In fact, she’s so fucking gorgeous it pisses me off. I know better than to think life is fair, but it goes against the laws of nature for someone that rotten to look like she does.

Her mouth drops open, and her big blue eyes blink rapidly, as if she’s actually hurt by my words. I know better than to believe it. Gloria Walton is the devil herself. That’s the only explanation I can come up with for why a girl would willingly join in with her own rapists and watch them do worse to someone else. The Waltons stood by while the Dolces bullied, tortured, and destroyed my sister until she tried to end her life.

Actually, they did worse than stand by. They gleefully participated in the downfall of my entire family.

At least the Dolces have a reason to hate us. Gloria and her sisters never even knew us.

“Put a leash on your slathering beast,” Gloria says to Dixie. “I can’t believe he thinks he can talk to me this year. The Dolces really did damage his brain.”

“Be nice,” Dixie says. “Now that Royal’s gone, Colt’s allowed to have friends again.”

“I know, I know, and a girlfriend,” Gloria says, rolling her eyes. “As you’ve mentioned like fifty times already.”

“The question is, why does it bother you so much?” I ask, closing my locker and slinging an arm around Dixie’s shoulders. “Are you afraid that now that Dixie has a boyfriend, she’s going to displace you as the most popular girl in school? After all, she doesn’t have to cut people off at the knees to get them to bow and kiss her feet.”

Dixie smiles smugly and cuddles into my side.

“You kiss her feet?” Gloria asks, gaping in horror. “Oh my god, just when I think you can’t get more disgusting.”

Please, keep your sexual perversions to yourself. I can feel my bubble tea coming up.”

“Or maybe you secretly fantasized about getting bent over under the bleachers by the bad boy, and now that Dixie’s locked me down, you’re pissed you won’t get the chance.”

“Oh god, where’s the nearest trash can?” Gloria blurts, covering her mouth. “I just threw up a little.”

Dixie protests, but I feel a laugh coming on, a reaction I sure as fuck never expected Gloria Walton to elicit.

“Aww, are you jealous that Dixie gets all of this, and now that Royal’s gone, the Dolces dumped you off on Machine Gun Kelly?” I taunt.

“His name is Rylan,” Gloria says, recovering from her heaving in time to give me a withering look. “Machine Gun Kelly is blond. He doesn’t even look like him.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say. “But they still pawned you off on the weird new kid. Bet you thought the twins would want to date you now that their brother graduated.”

“Rylan is a Montgomery,” she says, drawing herself up. “Which I’d think you’d know, since they’re your cousins.”

“How do you even know that?” I ask, since there’s no way a popular guy like Cotton Montgomery would go around telling people that he’s third-cousins with a golem like me.

“He’s a founding son,” she says. “I make it my business to know the important people in town. And for your information, Rylan and I are in love.”

She raises her chin and levels me with her frostiest Bitch Queen stare.

“So, should we be on the lookout for a headless carcass when you bite his head off like a praying mantis?” I ask. “Or are you more of the black widow type, and we’ll find him poisoned with a black tongue after one kiss?”

I don’t know why I’m even talking to her, since in the past, we avoided each other like the plague. In our few brief encounters, she scathingly cut me down and moved on with her day, as if to remind me that while I used to pull girls like her with no effort, I’m now nothing more than a cockroach for her to step on with her poison-tipped stiletto heels.

It was dangerous to talk to her when she was the Bitch Queen to Royal’s Demon King, but Dixie’s right. Things are more relaxed this year. Or maybe it’s just that I have secrets on the Dolces that give me at least a little room to breathe. More

likely, it's that I have nothing left to lose, nothing they can take from me.

What can Gloria Walton do to me that hasn't already been done? I'm not afraid of her, and if she's not dating a Dolce boy, I'm not afraid to talk to her. It's cathartic to hit back after taking her shit in silence for so long.

It pisses me off how much I'm enjoying it. It's easy, almost fun, like we're flirting instead of cutting each other down. I guess after two years of being in someone's orbit, you know them well enough for them to feel comfortable and familiar, even if you spent that time as the victim of their relentless bullying.

As I walk to class after talking to her, I realize I'm sporting a semi just from the interaction. Christ, what is wrong with me? Just because the hottest girl in school—okay, in the whole of Faulkner—talked to me, I get a boner like a thirteen-year-old?

But fuck, what I wouldn't give to be able to pull a girl like that again. I used to get the hottest girls as a matter of course, and now, I haven't touched anyone but Dixie in so long I've forgotten what it feels like. Not that Dixie's not sexy

as hell, but she ruins half of it by not believing it. She lacks the confidence that Gloria has, and that makes her half as hot.

And damn, what I wouldn't give to have my words be true, to have Gloria Walton want me to fuck her under the bleachers. I'd do it, too. Not because I want to fuck her, or because she wanted me to. I wouldn't do it to prove to myself that I've still got it, or to ruin her by telling everyone that their flawless queen spread her legs and begged for the gutter trash to wreck her in a way the kings of the school never could.

I'd fuck her to show her she's no better than me.

No one else would even have to know.

But we'd know.

I'd make her pay for all she's put me through, and I'd make her love every second of it. I'd fuck her so good she got on her knees and begged for more, for me to use her until there was nothing left of her but a mindless animal who believed her sole purpose in life was to suffer whatever pain or pleasure I wanted to inflict. I'd make her crawl in the dirt like I have for two and a half years. And then I'd walk away and leave her fiending like an addict for what she could have had if she wasn't such a soulless, sadistic cunt.

nine

Rumor Has It... The school outcast has been seen around town at the florist shop, the jewelry store, and the diner with his girl. Is he always so sweet, or is he working his way out of the doghouse? And if so, what did he do, and does he even remember?

Dixie Powell

“That’s it, baby, ride me like you mean it,” Colt says, grinding his hips up against mine and reaching back to slap my ass. “Let me see those gorgeous tits bounce.”

I obey, bouncing on his dick for a minute. He groans and pushes up on one elbow, grabbing my breast and bringing my nipple to his mouth. He starts sucking, sitting up further so he can slap my ass again, urging me to keep going. Wrapping his arm around my hips, he helps me move while he thrusts up into me, sucking so hard I squeal. I don’t pull back, though. It’s a personal challenge to finish him off.

Plus, I'm ready for him to finish so we can cuddle. He made me cum a while ago, and I'd rather collapse into a heap and not have to work afterwards. That damn tongue ring is a blessing and a curse. I swear that spiky silicone ball makes me see Jesus.

Now I'm feeling kind of inadequate that I can't get him there equally fast. My thighs are shaking, but I'm determined. It's flattering that he can't get enough of me, that he wants to keep going because he doesn't want it to be over. I'll admit, he used to be kind of selfish, but he's come a long way, and he always makes sure I cum first now, so how can I complain?

Sure, he might be a pariah now and bring my status down, but I'm sure he can work his way back from it. Walking around school this year, getting to hold his hand and show everyone we're together, only makes me want more. I want to show them that I didn't waste my life on some loser, that he's still the man he was before the Dolces, and that he's in it for good. I want them to be jealous that he chose me.

"Can we change positions?" I ask when I'm out of breath and he's still not there.

He flips me onto the bed and drags me to the edge, tossing me around like I'm one of the little cheerleaders who

used to ride his dick before I came along. Standing beside the bed, he rolls me onto my side, steps over my bottom leg, and shoves a couple pillows under my hips to raise them. Then he hooks my leg around his side and enters me from below.

The delicious sensation of his piercings inside the condom makes me wonder if I can't get there again. "That's it," he says, rolling his hips in a slow rhythm. "Feel how wet you are."

I reach down, touching myself and smiling up at him. Colt goes faster, his hips slapping my thigh. The sound makes me wince, remembering when his cousin slapped my thighs and called me names just to watch me cry. Colt didn't stop him.

For my entire freshman year, he fucked me like he was pissed that he was attracted to a fat girl and wanted to punish me for it. It wasn't until the middle of his junior year, when the Dolces really broke him down, that he stopped treating me like I was beneath him.

He almost broke me down, but I made my way through and emerged stronger than ever. Stronger than most girls. I love myself enough to know that the way he treated me had more to do with his insecurities than mine, so I forgive him for

that. But some part of me always wonders. If he could still get any girl in school, would he have chosen me? Or did I win by default?

I think of those tattoos on his arms, the ones I'd never seen before he got out of the hospital, and I know the answer.

I love all of me, but sometimes, I'm not sure Colt does. Suddenly, a moment of weakness takes hold, and my old insecurities rise like an ugly monster from the depths of my past. I grab the sheet and pull it up to my chest.

“Let me see you,” Colt says, pulling the sheet off again. “Look at you. So fucking sexy.”

He keeps pumping into me, and I prop myself on my elbow, giving him my most seductive look.

Once, sophomore year, he convinced me to put a pillowcase over my head while he and his cousin took turns fucking me.

I try not to think about that, try to come back to the moment and not overthink this. We're years past that.

“Can you cum again?” he asks.

I shake my head. I let my thoughts sink too low to feel sexy anymore. But I know when he rolls me over and finishes

that it's not because he doesn't want to see my face. He's seen my face for so long it must be burned into his brain, eclipsing and outlasting all the faces of all the girls who came before me.

I'm glad that almost everyone he slept with has graduated by now. I hate every single girl he's ever seen naked, every girl he might compare me to, no matter how many times he denies it. I wish he'd forgotten all of high school instead of just a few months of last year.

He rests on my back for a minute, then rolls away. "Fuck, that never gets old," he says, throwing an arm over his eyes.

I crawl up the bed to nestle in beside him, using his free arm as a pillow. "Do you think it will?" I ask.

"What?"

"Do you think you'll ever get tired of me?"

"Not this again," he says, bringing his other arm down to wrap around me. He toys with the mini key on my necklace. "I told you, I was a dumbass and an asshole. I'm sorry, for the one million and oneth time."

“Oneth is not a word,” I say, giggling and squirming closer, triumphant from his words. I run my fingers up the back of his arm, where the four crescent-moon tattoos mark his skin. They’re nothing special compared with the others. I didn’t even know what they were for a while. But then once when he was on top, I grabbed his arms, and afterwards, the indentations from my nails matched them almost exactly.

I push the thought away, slamming the door on it. “I love you,” I say, pulling his arms tighter around me.

“You too, babe.”

“You didn’t say it all the way,” I point out, pouting.

“I love you too,” he says. “Happy?”

“The happiest,” I say with a sigh, relaxing against his tattooed chest. I wrap my arms around him. It doesn’t matter who he slept with before. He’s mine now, all six-feet-and-more-inches of inked and pierced muscle. As much as I want to be popular, this is better than any crown. High school’s almost over, and none of this will matter then. I may not win Homecoming, but I’ll win at life.

My friends are wrong. If I started over now, it really would be like I’d wasted all of high school. If I don’t get the

guy, the past three years have just been one long humiliating mistake where I let someone walk all over me and acted like the dog he called me freshman year. If I don't end up with him, I let him hold me back, put aside what I wanted just for a guy. But it's not like that if I end up with the guy. It's a victory.

Plus, if I wasn't with him, I'd have to figure out who the Dolces would even allow me to date, and which of those guys wanted me. And let's face it, it's not like I'd have unlimited options. I have realistic expectations of high school guys. I'm not a Walton. I'm a Powell. I may have gotten a hot guy now, but that's only because everyone else has been brainwashed into thinking he's a troll. The Dolce Decree said he was untouchable, so people treat him like he is, spread rumors about him, and generally ostracize him.

I like that the Dolces treat me as the exception, that they let me be the only person allowed to associate with him, so he can see that they think I'm special too. In truth, I don't mind being his only friend besides a gay girl. That means he'll never be tempted, never look elsewhere like he did before.

My first thought when I saw the tattoos was that they were old, though I was sure I would have noticed them in the two years we were together.

Then, for a second, I imagined one of the nurses he shamelessly flirted with climbing onto him and riding him right there in his hospital bed. But when I asked, he said he didn't know when he got them, which means it was during the period he forgot. We weren't exactly together then, because he wouldn't officially date me, so I can't call it cheating. But the heart doesn't care about technicalities. It hurts like he cheated.

I go back to our last breakup. He ditched me during the game of hide and seek the morning of Bye Week, and Gideon ended up giving me a ride home. Later that day, Colt told me it was over for good, that he wanted me to move on and date someone else, that we weren't right and we'd never be together. It felt so final.

As final as if he'd decided he could get someone better.

I didn't know he'd hooked up with someone yet, though I had my suspicions.

After the attack, when he was in the hospital, they brought his dad the stuff that had been in his pockets. In his distress, Mr. Darling didn't pay any attention, so I slipped his phone out of the bin and took it home. I still remember the texts, the ones that made me want to die.

He sent the first text, just a few days after he dumped me, after Bye Week.

Squirring in your seat for me, Butterfly?

I lay in bed so many nights after his attack thinking about that text, even though she didn't answer. It had to mean they fucked, and she was sore the next day.

Her name was Butterfly. That's how he'd saved it in his phone. I looked through his call log and found calls between them, including the night he came over to get his stuff from my house and left to take a phone call. He was talking to her at my house. I wanted to simultaneously disappear from the humiliation and murder her from the rage it put in me when I thought of them together.

I'd never hated anyone more, not even Preston Darling, who took pleasure in humiliating me and taunting Colt for being with me. If not for him, Colt would have dated me sooner, but he had to look cool for his older cousin. After seeing Preston beaten down by the Dolces, it was harder to hate him. This Butterfly bitch, though?

Yeah, I hated her.

The day of the attack, he ignored a series of texts from her.

12:30 I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say.

3:53 I'm so sorry, Colt. Please text me back.

4:24 Please answer. Please, my king. I need to talk to you.

6:19 Okay, you're done. I understand.

6:35 What if I'm not done? Can I make it up to you? Can you let me try? I'll beg if I have to. Please please please? Just talk to me.

10:10 Meet me tonight, same time & place? Please? I don't care if we get caught.

10:12 Or we can meet in the treehouse. Whatever you want.

11:42 I'm going to our spot. I'll wait for you.

3:59 AM: K. I get it. You're not coming.

I never returned his phone, and his dad assumed it was lost in the attack. He got him a new one, one that wouldn't

have any texts from her in the history. Colt doesn't even remember, but I will never forget.

It doesn't matter that they obviously had a fight and broke up before that. She didn't even know him. She didn't love him. She was nothing, just a slut who wanted his dick, and he was dog enough to go chasing her tail, probably glorying in the fact that he could fuck a generic hot girl again.

But those texts haunt me like the fingernail marks he tattooed into his skin.

I knew he wouldn't risk it by hooking up with a girl who goes to WHPA, which meant it was someone from Faulkner High or someone who already graduated—maybe one of his old fuck buddies that he reconnected with or a college girl. She called him her king. Who would do that? I pictured a girl he'd known before, when he was one of the kings of Willow Heights.

Everyone at Willow Heights uses the *OnlyWords* texting app, which only confirmed my suspicions further—it had to be someone outside school. There were tons of Faulkner High kids at the Bye Week festivities, and I couldn't stop picturing him sneaking off into an abandoned building to hook up with some public school skank.

Over the next month, I scoured every single class at Faulkner High and Willow Heights in the yearbooks for the past five years looking for someone named Butterfly, but there was no one. I pictured a tiny, cute hippie chick named Butterfly Rainbow Sunshine, a girl with long flowy skirts who looked like a woodland fairy. A free spirit who would hook up with a tattooed stranger from another school, one Colt would want because she was everything his gossipy goth girlfriend wasn't.

At last, I figured it out. I know who he cheated on me with. It wasn't a hippie chick. It was the last girl seen with him before the attack, the one who skipped school for an entire day with him less than a week after he dumped me.

Harper Apple.

She left the Bye Week party in the morning, right before the game of hide and seek. Colt was already friends with her, as much as he was allowed to be friends with anyone. What if he saw her leave, upset about Royal? He hated Bye Week, anyway. He might have left the game and followed her home.

It took me a while to be convinced it was her. The texts didn't sound like her. They sounded more like... Me. But then,

I didn't know how Harper acted outside of school. How well do we really ever know anyone? I sure as hell didn't let on. I smiled at her at every game, used the polite smile my mother taught me to use when a stranger asked if I was sure I wanted fries with my burger instead of a side salad.

But I finally had to admit the truth. It all makes sense. Harper was from FHS. She didn't care about the Dolce boys' rules. She flaunted her defiance, throwing it in their faces that she wouldn't obey. Who else would hook up with Colt, if only to piss them off? And that explains why they almost killed him—she rejected Royal and then fucked his mortal enemy.

And then she sat in the bleachers with me after it happened, letting me cry about him. She even told me it was her fault because she and Colt “hung out.” I didn't know she'd fucked him. I offered to be there for her, to be her friend, and she let me.

Rage rears its head inside me at the memory.

That was her chance to come clean, to do what was right when I was already suffering. Instead, she made it worse, lying to my face like a cold-hearted viper. Afterwards, she kept asking me for updates about him over the coming months, even after everyone knew she was fucking Royal.

I didn't have proof it was her yet, but I was already suspicious and jealous of them spending time together. That's why I sent out the *Rumor Has It* update when they skipped school together that day. I knew the Dolces would be pissed and put an end to Harper and Colt's friendship.

I feel bad that they took it so far, but I had no idea they'd beat him like that. Of course I deleted my tea drop before I went through all my posts to fill him in on what he missed. No one else talks to him, and it's so long ago now that no one else is thinking about it, so he'll never find out. And in some small way, the beating was a blessing because it brought us together, and he doesn't remember that week with her.

And like Preston, she got what she had coming. Pretty sure the Dolces found out she fucked Colt and killed her. It's just a theory, but there's no way it's *not* their doing. Just like their sister, Harper disappeared without a trace.

My money's on Baron being a budding serial killer.

Either way, she's gone, and I don't have to worry about Colt because even if he remembers everything, she's not a threat.

Colt rolls toward me and uses his thumb to smooth the skin between my eyebrows. "What are you thinking about so

hard, my little creampuff?”

“A lot of things,” I say. “The past, the future, football...”

He chuckles and throws his leg over mine. “Some dude is coming his pants right now dreaming of a girl who thinks about football after they fuck.”

“Not you?” I ask, pouting up at him.

“I don’t play football anymore,” he reminds me.

“But remember when you did? You loved it so much. Being the center of attention, having all those people cheering... Wouldn’t you love that?”

“We went over this, Dix,” he says. “There’s no way Willow Heights is going to want me, let alone a college team.”

“You never know unless you try,” I say lightly. “Besides, it doesn’t have to be football. Now that the Dolces are just ignoring you instead of trying to destroy you, maybe you could do something else to be a star. What about theater? You’d have an audience there.”

“I don’t know if I could memorize lines,” he says. “My short-term memory isn’t too bad, but even studying for a test is taxing.”

“I just think you should try,” I press. “One day, I’ll be famous, and you’ll be famous for being my husband. But until then, don’t you want someone cheering for you?”

“I do love the sound of people chanting my name,” he says, rolling onto his back and pillowing his head on his arm, his eyes going distant and dreamy. “Nothing in the world can touch the thrill of the crowd.”

“We’ll find you something,” I promise, sliding my leg over his this time, holding him close. I don’t like when he remembers how popular he was before, when he didn’t need me. I want him to be happy, but I want him to find something now, when he’s with me, that will eclipse his memories of how much he used to be adored. “You just need to look. There’s something out there that you’ll love even more. You just have to be motivated to find it.”

“Not another lecture on my lack of ambition,” he groans, pulling his arm from under his head and throwing it over his eyes instead.

“No lectures,” I promise. “And even if you don’t do anything big this year, you’re still in a better place. You have me, and they even let you have a friend.”

He lets out a low, bitter chuckle. “They let me talk to Josie because she doesn’t like dick. They know that no one else is going to risk it.”

“Harper risked it last year,” I say, watching him carefully. I wish he’d move his arm so I could read his expression. “You remember her, right?”

He sits up and slowly pulls off the condom. “Sure, of course.”

“Did you think she was hot?” I ask, studying him for any trace of emotion or memory.

“She’s alright,” he says, then turns to me with a grin. “Want me to ask her to join us next time? It’s been a while since I had a threesome.”

“It took me three years to make you my boyfriend,” I say, securing the sheet under my arms. “Sorry, not sharing.”

“What if I don’t fuck her?” he asks. “You could have my dick all to yourself.”

“Then what would she do?”

“Sit on my face,” he says, like that’s obvious. “Or yours.”

“Pass,” I say. “Anyway, she’s dead, so...”

Colt gives me a funny look and slides back down beside me. “What?”

“She died,” I say. “Or disappeared, anyway. At the end of last year. I told you that.”

“Yeah, you told me she disappeared,” he says. “She’s not dead.”

My stomach does a funny little flip, like when you go over a hill a little too fast and dip down the other side. “How do you know?”

“Because I saw her.”

“What?” I squeak.

What if he remembers? What if he goes back to her and ruins all the progress we’ve made?

But no. If he remembered, he’d know better. The Dolces would kill him for sure this time.

“The first day of school. She’s with my cousin.” He sounds like it’s no big deal, like he knew all along. Has he been seeing her? Does he really not remember, or is he pretending the way I’m pretending? I search his eyes, but even after all this time, I can’t tell if he’s lying.

“Which cousin?”

“Preston,” he says, like I should know that.

“Was that the first time you saw her?” I ask, making sure to sound as casual as he does.

“Yeah,” he says. “Why?”

“No reason,” I say. “I’m just surprised.”

I don’t even know if she’s coming back to school. She missed a lot last year. She might go back to Faulkner High. And if she comes back to Willow Heights, this year I’ll work up the nerve to confront her. It will kill me to know with absolute certainty, but at least then I can decide how to proceed. I have the school’s gossip blog, after all. I may not be popular, but I have power—the power to destroy anyone who crosses me.

ten

Rumor Has It... The Kings' plaything from last year who mysteriously disappeared when they tired of her may not be gone for good. Will she return to Willow Heights in triumph? Or shame?

Colt Darling

On Tuesday, all three Walton sisters are gone, which should be a good thing but is oddly disappointing. Now that I can snipe back at Gloria when she stops by to talk to Dixie, which she does at least once a day, I look forward to our little exchanges. Since I didn't hang out with Dixie at school until now, I didn't realize they were such good friends. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was intentionally choosing times when we're together so she could get in a few digs at me.

Even so, getting in a few digs of my own breaks up the monotony of the school day. I thought she might go squeal to the Dolce twins after I insulted her the first time, but she hasn't said a word to them, which makes me bolder. Apparently it's safe to bite back this year. After two years of holding my tongue and taking it like a bitch, I never miss a chance to return fire when she starts shit with me.

But by the middle of the day, when I learn why they're gone, all the disappointment that I didn't get to trade barbs with Gloria turns upside down. A dark, cold heaviness creeps through my limbs, and I go and sit in my truck in the parking lot instead of smoking under the bleachers.

I reread Dixie's post on *The Tea* app.

Rumor Has It... Willow Heights' former kicker and member of last year's royal court posted a suicide note on this very app on Sunday night. Is today's absence of the school's three princesses proof that he completed the act, or is it just coincidence? Their sudden departure from school yesterday suggests the fateful truth.

I drop my phone and reach for my pocket. I fight the urge to swallow one of the bitter pills and settle for pulling out a joint instead. With shaking hands, I light up and then lean the seat back, closing my eyes and holding in the smoke until I can't help but cough it out of my lungs. My head is spinning as I try to comprehend how my girlfriend could have posted something so deplorable, like it's just another juicy bit of Walton gossip to follow up Friday's posts that Gloria was bickering with Rylan during halftime at the football game and Everleigh was seen leaving the post-game party with Duke Dolce.

I think about those posts now, how Gloria was cheering at the game thinking her brother was just in town to visit, not knowing he'd never visit again. How Everleigh went home with Duke, not knowing it would be the last Friday she'd ever have a chance to spend with her brother. I know the regret, the guilt, the what-ifs that crowd your mind until they start to eat away at it.

I don't know how it feels to lose someone that way, but I know how it feels to think you will. I know how it feels to read the note, the last words they'll ever write. To think, what if I'd skipped whatever I was doing to spend time with the

person instead? Would they still have jumped? I know what it's like to find them unresponsive next to an empty pill bottle, to call 911 with shaking fingers, trying to remember if that's the right number because nothing makes sense anymore.

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes until blackness spots the back of my eyelids.

“Did you see my Tea drop?” Dixie asks after lunch, appearing at my elbow as I open my locker. Her eyes are sparkling, and her face is flushed as she looks around in satisfaction at all the faces turned to phone screens. I want to knock every phone out of their hands and crush them under my boots so they'll stop reading her words.

“I saw.”

“Then why didn't you like the post?” she asks, pouting at me. The only reason I open the app is to like her post every day, since that's what she says a good boyfriend does. But I draw the line here.

“You need to take it down,” I say flatly.

“What?” she asks, gesturing at the hall. “Everyone's reading it. Look!”

I close my locker and turn to her. “Come on. That’s fucked up even for you, Dixie.”

“It’s the *Waltons*,” she says. “Dawson made your life hell. The girls treated your sister like shit and made her try the same thing. Why are you defending them?”

“Because I’m a fucking human being,” I snap.

She gives me an incredulous look. “You’re mad at me?”

I sigh and rake a hand through my hair.

“No,” I say. “I’m not mad. But that’s... It’s shitty, okay?”

“You know what I think?” she asks, crossing her arms in a way that makes her tits look ten kinds of distracting. “I think you’re jealous.”

I jerk my eyes back to hers. “What?”

“You’re pissed because you don’t have the guts to go ask Coach to put you on the team, and now your formerly-unpopular girlfriend is in the spotlight. You just can’t stand that you’re now a pariah while your pathetic little dog is outshining you.”

A snort escapes me. “You think that’s what you’re doing? *Outshining* me?”

A girl I vaguely recognize as one of Magnolia’s friends comes scurrying up, waving her phone. “Is this about Dawson Walton?” she asks Dixie, her eyes wide.

“I don’t name names,” Dixie says, with a smug smirk in my direction. When the girl hurries back to join my cousin and her other friends, Dixie turns to me and raises her chin. “See? People are paying attention to me. You just can’t stand that, can you?”

“I’m not fucking jealous,” I say, taking her elbow and marching her toward our class. “I’m embarrassed.”

“What?” She turns on her hurt look, her lip trembling. “You’ve been with me for years, Colt, even if it wasn’t official. I’ve always been big. Do you want me to lose weight?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I could be skinny if that’s what you want,” she says. “Just give me a few months. I promise, I can be hot by Prom. Then when people are looking at us, you won’t be embarrassed of me.”

I pull her to a stop, letting the other students flow around us. A tear trickles down her cheek, and I almost cave, like I always do when she cries. It's like instinct or a malfunction in my brain that says I have to relent when she brings out the waterworks.

Wiping it away, I force myself not to give in this time. "I'm not embarrassed about your appearance," I say, lowering my voice so only she can hear. "I've told you a million times, I don't care what you look like. You're the one who makes a big deal about it. It doesn't matter to me."

"You said you were embarrassed of me," she says, sniffing.

"Because that posts makes you look like a sociopath."

Her eyes widen. "What?"

"Dixie, you can't post shit like that. It's not a *rumor*."

"It is a rumor," she argues. "Until someone knows for sure if he did it or not."

I drop my head and grab a handful of my hair, searching for an angle that will make her see. At last, I settle for one that will at least make her reconsider.

“I shouldn’t have said I was embarrassed,” I say, lifting my head. “But the post makes you look bad. Gloria’s in dance with you. The other girls on the team are going to be there for her and support her. If you’re not her friend, fine. Hell, I’ll throw you a party to celebrate the end of your friendship. But if you’re going to pretend you like her, and then post this shit?”

“You’re right,” she says slowly, like it’s just dawning on her. “People will think I’m stabbing her in the back.”

“You kind of are.”

“No, I’m not,” she protests. “I just wanted people to hear it from me first. A lot of people already saw his post anyway.”

“So, you’ll delete it?”

“Yeah, I’d better,” she says, sounding a little reluctant. “Thanks for looking out for me.”

“Of course,” I say. “That’s what boyfriends do, right?”

“Right,” she says, taking my hand and starting toward class again. I resist the urge to pull away. People are staring. I used to like to be the center of attention, but when it comes like this, I can do without.

In class, Dixie deletes the post, but it's a little late. She has the *OnlyWords* app on her laptop, and I watch the little black box pop up over and over all through class as people ask where the post went and want to know the scoop. Everyone wants the gossip, the drama. No one seems to remember an actual human being died last night.

eleven

Rumor Has It... Last year's King may be gone, but his plaything is back! Will she demand the attention of this year's Kings? Or will she be content to let others have the spotlight?

Colt Darling

I've known Harper for a few years, even before she came to Willow Heights, since she participates in the underground fights I run at an abandoned warehouse. She hasn't shown back up at the Slaughterpen, but a month into school, she comes waltzing in like she's been there all along. I wasn't at school last spring, but Dixie says she disappeared without a word when she and Royal broke up. It doesn't surprise me. I know what Royal does to girls he's pissed at.

This year, she seems intent on making waves, grabbing a spot at the Dolce table, and proclaiming herself queen of the school. I don't have much hope of anyone ever replacing the demon twins, but it's fun to watch Gloria break a sweat at the

thought of being replaced. Harper doesn't give a fuck about cliques and staying within the lines. She'll be friends with the Queen Bitch and the school leper at the same time, and fuck anyone who tries to stop her.

I'm waiting at my truck after school that week when Harper comes striding over. "Hey," she says, tipping her chin at me.

"Appletini," I drawl, using the nickname I gave her for fighting. "You look like a girl on a mission. What's up?"

"I always look like this," she points out.

"Smoke?" I ask, nodding to the pack lying beside me.

"One day I'll start buying my own," she promises, helping herself to a cigarette.

"Don't worry about it."

She tosses her backpack in the bed of my truck and hops up beside me. "Actually, I am on a mission," she says, accepting the Bic I hold out. "A secret mission. Interested?"

"Why do I get the feeling you're going to get yourself in more trouble?" I ask, blowing a stream of smoke out the corner of my mouth. She's assured me that she's allowed to talk to me this year, but I'm still a little jumpy around her. I

don't blame her for getting my ass handed to me last year, but that doesn't mean she's not the reason it happened.

I watch her flick open the lighter, pinching the cigarette between her lips and tilting her head to let the flame lick the tip until it glows. She's hot as fuck, even with her thigh tats covered by ill-fitting khakis. I prefer her in the pit, with dirty knees and blood on her fists, but I'd fuck her in a heartbeat either way.

If I wasn't with Dixie, of course.

"I'm not afraid of getting in trouble," she says, tossing her wild, dark waves back and sucking on the cigarette. "I'm afraid of things going on the way they are. So I'm going to change them. Thursday night. You in?"

"Am I going to get murdered?" I ask, cocking my head and meeting her baby blues.

I hate Royal Dolce a little more than I did a minute ago. Not just because he got her, but because he ruined her the way he ruins every girl he touches. She may have come back, but she's missing something—the spark in her eyes that used to be there, the fire, the life. He's a succubus who leaves every girl a shell of what she was before he caught her.

“I wouldn’t put you in danger,” Harper says. “Myself, maybe. But what are they going to do about it?”

“What am I going to do about it?” I ask.

“I need your help,” she says. “As a friend. So what’s it gonna be?”

“You really going to pull that card?” I ask, leaning back on one hand.

“We’re friends, aren’t we?” she asks flatly.

“Yeah,” I say. “Or so I’ve been told.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Just can’t believe we didn’t fuck,” I say. “Though I guess I should be glad. I wouldn’t have wanted to forget that. The guys at the pen say you know your way around a dick.”

“True,” she says, and a smile ghosts over her lips. “But it wasn’t for lack of trying on your part.”

“So you turned me down for Royal?” I ask. “And now you’re fucking my cousin. Damn. You really do have shit taste in men. And friends for that matter, seeing as how you’re cozying up with Queen Gloria the Wicked again this year.”

Harper shrugs. “She’s okay. You just have to get to know her.”

“No thanks,” I say. “I prefer not to have my head bitten off after mating.”

“Okay,” she says, holding up a hand. “Not saying you have to be friends with her. Just that she’s not what she seems at first. She’s actually pretty badass.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Good,” she says. “And I didn’t turn you down for Royal.”

“So, if he hadn’t been in the picture last year, would you have hooked up with me?” I ask, grinning and nudging her foot with my toe.

“Colt...” she says, giving me some kind of look I don’t want to think about.

Just then, I see Dixie hurrying toward us, and I toss my cigarette butt. “You know what, don’t answer that,” I tell Harper. “Whatever you say, I’ll wish you’d given the other answer.”

“I’ll pick you up Thursday at eleven thirty,” Harper says, hopping down from my tailgate. “I owe you one.”

“What are y’all doing?” Dixie asks, rushing up so fast her cheeks are pink from the exertion and her hair’s coming loose from the pin on top of her head.

“Just having a smoke,” I say.

“What were you talking about?” she asks.

“Just bullshit,” I say, dropping off the tailgate. A wave of dizziness hits, and I steady myself on the tailgate. The fun surprises never end.

“What kind of bullshit?” Dixie presses.

I pull her in and kiss her hard, erasing the doubts I can see welling in her eyes. I push my tongue into her mouth, as if I can push away the thoughts that plague me too.

This is the girl I’m allowed, the girl the Dolces chose for me.

But even if she wasn’t, I’d probably be with her. Because she chose *me*.

Harper didn’t choose me. She chose Royal, even Preston, over me.

Crystal didn’t choose me. She chose Devlin.

Destiny... Well, she might have chosen me, but death chose her first, so I'll never know for sure.

All I know is that Dixie chooses me, every single time. And that's worth something.

So I take her to Boehner's Burgers, and then I make her cum, and then I go home and jerk off in the shower thinking about the last night I was a king, when a girl chose me to take her virginity in the dark in Cotton Montgomery's pool house. I don't let myself think about Crystal, or Harper, or Destiny. It seems like less of a betrayal to think about a girl I don't know, a faceless stranger, than a girl who didn't want me.

I don't tell Dixie about the girl at the party, or Destiny, or what Harper asked me to do. I don't want to hurt her or listen to her lectures. Which is how my dumb ass ends up in a car with Harper and Gloria on Thursday night, pulling up to a Midnight Swans meeting like everyone in the school's secret society wouldn't spit on my grave when they got done beating my head in. But Harper wants in the Swans, and she thinks I can help her get in somehow.

I want nothing to do with it, but I like the girl and I don't want to see them eat her alive, so I back her up. Still, I'm

not too eager to put myself in the Dolces' path or be seen with someone they've claimed. The Swans Nest—AKA, the basement under the school where the meetings take place—may have been a haven when I was a king, but now it's full of the memories of what happens when a king falls.

It takes about five minutes for the demon twins' inner circle to lay out the rules for joining. When Gloria hears she'd have to get sexed in, she promptly turns and walks away. I can't blame her, though I would have bet money she's already fucked all the Swans. Still, I have to give her credit for refusing to cheat on her boyfriend, even if he is a creepy little weirdo.

After all she's done in service to the kings, I wouldn't have thought the goblin queen had a moral left in her body, but apparently she draws the line somewhere.

I can tell Harper's torn between pushing through with her initiation or checking on her friend. Reluctantly, I tell her I'll go check on Lo. I can't think of many things less fun than hanging out with Gloria Walton. Hanging out with the Dolce boys themselves is about the only thing that could be worse, and that's the alternative.

Besides, Gloria's fun to fuck with since it's so easy to get under her skin.

When I reach Harper's Escalade, Gloria's already on her phone in the passenger's seat. I climb into the driver's seat, and the wind slams the door closed before I can even reach for it. It's midnight, and a fall storm is brewing low overhead.

"You're back," Gloria says, sounding about as thrilled with my company as I am with hers.

I sigh. "Seems so."

Though we still bicker at school, it's harder now that her brother died. I haven't been alone with her since running into her at Boehner's Burgers shortly after his death, and I'm not happy about Harper leaving me to babysit her. Not to mention Dixie would have my balls if she knew I was hanging out with a hot girl in the middle of the night, far more alone than we were at Boehner's.

"Worried I've gone off the deep end because I chose my boyfriend over your precious boys' club?" Gloria demands.

"I wouldn't waste energy worrying about you," I say. "But Harper would, and I'm her friend, so here we are."

“She dragged me out of bed on a Thursday night, when I need my beauty sleep before game day, didn’t tell me what it was for, and pointed out the fact that I’m basically a whore in front of the most popular guys in school,” Gloria says. “I’m not feeling so friendly toward her right now.”

“Hm, good point,” I say. “She also dragged me here without telling me what it was for, and I very well could have been beaten to death. In fact, we’re sitting right about where they made the attempt last time. I could be balls deep in Dixie right now.”

Gloria huffs. “Do you ever think about anything besides your dick?”

“You mean my super mega fine dick?” I ask, laughing at the words I used to describe it earlier to get a rise out of her.

She rolls her eyes and goes back to her phone. “If it was really that great, you wouldn’t have to talk about it all the time. Royal’s got like twelve inches, and he never talks about it. The guys who brag about their dicks usually don’t have much to show when the pants come off.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Yeah, you got me. Way to cut a man down, Bride of Satan. But should I be flattered that you’re thinking about my pants coming off?”

“Gross,” she says, giving me a dirty look and leaning away from me like I smell bad.

“What, shrimp dicks don’t do it for you?” I ask. “Not even if it’s one of those jumbo shrimp? It may not be twelve inches, but it’s got the curl.” I make a slightly sexual gesture with two fingers, demonstrating the way a shrimp might be shaped.

Gloria stares at my hand like it’s the one that’s scarred by fire and missing a finger, even though that one is tucked in my lap, where she can’t see it in the dark car.

“Is that really what your dick looks like?” she asks after a pause.

“So you *do* want to know,” I say, shifting in the seat and pushing my hips up just a little. I catch her eyes following the movement, falling to my lap. I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am. Gloria hates me. But then, she likes good dick. No one in the entire school would dare say it to her face, and when they whisper it, it’s behind her back. But I’ve heard the rumors like everyone else. They say she lets the Dolces run trains on her, that they let their friends join. They say that’s how she keeps her spot at the top.

Still, I know better than to believe the shit that gets passed around school—half the school thinks I don't even have a dick. Maybe that's the information Gloria's fishing for, confirmation of whether I'm not only missing a finger, but also my dick. I don't care about any of it, but my girlfriend is the gossip queen, the one who controls what goes out to the masses and what gets hushed up, collected in a file for evidence to be used when the time is right. She doesn't cross the Dolces or their whore, but that doesn't mean she lacks the ammunition to do it. As her boyfriend, I get the gossip unfiltered, whether I want it or not.

“Can we stop talking about your dick for two minutes?” Gloria says.

“Sure,” I say. “Want to talk about your pussy instead?”

She huffs indignantly, like she's scandalized by my very words. It's funny, for a girl with the reputation she has. “I have nothing to say to you about that.”

“Don't be shy,” I tease. “It must be pretty good to keep you in the number one spot on the demon kings' rotation for the third year in a row. When the Darling name was king, we never let a girl claim top spot for long. Not even Devlin's girlfriend.”

Gloria gives me a smug little smile. “It’s been known to make a man beg.”

I cock a brow. “You made the Dolce boys beg? Damn. I’m impressed.”

She raises her chin and gives me a look. “Who said it was the Dolce boys?”

“Ah, right,” I say. “The boyfriend? I didn’t think that sounded like the guys I’ve affectionately nicknamed Lucifer and Satan.”

“Like you’ve never begged for pussy,” she says, rolling her eyes.

Now it’s my turn to scoff. “I don’t have to beg.”

I did once, at the last party where I was a king. I begged the girl who let me take her v-card in the dark. But that’s my private jerk-off fantasy, and I’m not about to share it with this evil bitch. I don’t even share it with Dixie, mostly because it would hurt her feelings to be reminded, but partly because it’s something precious to me, something that means far more than the sexual aspect. Dixie wouldn’t understand that.

twelve

Rumor Has It... The Knights are gearing up to play our cross-town rivals for Homecoming weekend. Can the new team pull off another win, or will they crumble without the star power of last year's QB?

Colt Darling

While Gloria taps at her phone, I stare out at the parking lot, abandoned now that the Midnight Swans have gone down to their nest to initiate Harper.

After a minute, Gloria looks up. "So, how long do you think we'll be here?"

"A while," I say. "The meetings take an hour or so, and with a new member being initiated..."

She chews at her lip and slides her hands under the outside of her thighs, staring out the windshield at the parking lot. "You think she's okay?"

“Yeah,” I say, surprised that Gloria Walton actually cares about someone other than herself. “I think if anyone can take care of herself, it’s Harper.”

“She is pretty badass,” Gloria agrees.

“Yeah.”

“Do you like her?” Gloria asks, still staring out the windshield.

I chuckle at that. “You’re not trapping me into saying something stupid.”

She gives me a funny look. “You asked her if y’all fucked during your memory loss. You must think she’s hot.”

While it’s true that I did ask her that when she returned to school, I know a trap when I see one.

“You’re the Dolces’ bitch who would love to see them finish the job they started last fall,” I point out. “Not to mention friends with my girlfriend, and you never miss a chance to tell her to dump me. You must think I’m brain damaged if you think I’d answer that.”

“Aren’t you?”

I shrug. “I mean, yeah. That’s what the memory loss is. And clearly, if I’m associating with you *or* Harper, I’m dumb

as fuck and didn't learn shit from the last attempted murder.”

She kicks her feet against the floormat and stares down at her knees. “I’m sorry.”

“Wait, hold up. Is the demon queen apologizing to the gutter trash?”

She looks at me, and there’s something there... Like she’s for real being vulnerable and I hurt her feelings. “I don’t think you’re trash, Colt.”

Suddenly I have a flash of *déjà vous*, and I remember Dixie covering my hand with hers and saying, “I don’t think you’re a loser.” I’m not sure why Gloria saying something similar impresses and shocks the hell out of me, but when my loving girlfriend said it, I wanted to smash my fist through a wall.

Probably because Gloria’s incapable of pity.

“Whoa,” I say, twisting around and pretending to check the back seat. “I must be dreaming. What the fuck is happening right now? Are there hidden cameras in the back?”

“Forget it,” she snaps, turning her face to the window.

We sit in silence for a minute, and as I do way too fucking often, I find myself feeling like the asshole once

again.

“Sorry,” I mutter.

She shakes her head, her face still turned away. “It’s probably better if we don’t talk, anyway.”

I sigh, but I can’t sit there in silence for two fucking hours with this girl. “Look, I know I sound like jackass, but it’s just a little hard to trust people when you can’t remember stuff.”

“But it’s not like your memory is wiped clean. You knew who you were all along.”

“I didn’t know shit when I woke up,” I say. “It’s like my consciousness came back, but I didn’t even know I was, like... Human. It’s sounds weird, but I was like a baby. I had to learn to walk again, eat, everything. But yeah, everything came back eventually. Or almost everything.”

She shrugs. “So... All you’re missing is October of last year? Homecoming, Halloween, and Bye Week. Nothing happened. There wasn’t even a football game.”

I can’t help but chuckle again. This bitch’s life is so fucking simple. She thinks school politics, football games, and her social circle’s dramas are the only things that matter.

“It’s just weird, not knowing,” I admit, not sure why I’m telling her this. “There are gaps. Dixie filled me in, but I can’t shake the sense that I’m missing something.”

She picks at a rip in her jeans. “Like what?”

“Dixie told me we broke up a week before the attack. She says it wasn’t about another girl, that I told her I couldn’t let her give up her chance to have everything she wanted just to stay with me. That sounds legit, right? I’ve told her that’s why I can’t be her boyfriend before, not that it did much. She never dates anyone else.”

“I don’t get it,” Gloria says. “How could anyone waste their entire high school years on a shrimp dick loser?”

“Right?”

“But you don’t believe her,” she prompts. “You think you broke up over Harper?”

“Maybe. My dad said he caught us together a couple hours before the attack, and that I’d just come out of the shower. And the maid found some... Evidence. That sounds like we fucked, right? And he said I’d snuck out late a couple times that week, which I usually only do on weekends. I lost my phone in the attack, so I can’t check my calls, but I went

through my *OnlyWords*, and there wasn't anything. Guess I'll never know for sure where I went. It fucks with my head that I can't remember, though."

"And you think Harper's lying about it because she's with Royal now?"

I force a laugh. "I sound like Preston's paranoid ass right now. I'm sure I was just meeting Maverick. I got some new ink sometime in the month I can't remember."

"It sucks not being able to trust your friends, though."

"Yeah," I say. "I'm sure Harper and Dixie didn't form some elaborate plan to fuck me over. Dixie loves me, and she could have told me we never broke up, but she was straight with me. And if Harper's lying, it's probably to keep Royal from murdering me."

"You don't think it's fucked up that she won't tell you what happened at your house before the attack?"

I shrug. "She says we didn't fuck. I guess she's not interested, so I'm going to take her word for it. I just wish I could tell somehow. That's the kind of thing a guy deserves to know."

“I’d like to forget a few names on my list,” she grumbles.

“Same,” I say, grinning and leaning on my door. “Christ, I used to be such a whore.”

“Explains the diseases.”

I just shake my head. “Anything I have, you have it too.”

Eyes wide, she whips around so fast I can’t help but chuckle. “What?”

I shrug. “You don’t think we’ve ever sampled from the same pot?”

She scoffs. “Nice try, but I don’t like girls.”

“You really think the D-boys have never taken my sloppy seconds?” I ask raising a brow. “I’d already fucked all the hot girls at this school before they showed up.”

She could throw that day in the basement in my face, but for reasons I can’t explain, she misses the opportunity to shame me and instead lets me look like a stud who could pull the hottest girls in school once upon a time.

“Is that because of the girl who died?” she asks instead.

Now it's my turn to jerk around toward her, too surprised by the blinding flash of pain to comprehend what she said for a second. So that's why she didn't rub it in that we've both depthroated a Dolce. That's old news. She went for the killing strike instead.

“How do you know about that?” I demand.

She shrugs. “I don't know.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head slowly. “Fuck no. You don't get away with saying that shit without explaining yourself.”

She shrinks against the far door and watches me warily, like she thinks I might grab her and choke her out if she doesn't answer. “I... Dixie must have told me.”

“Yeah,” I say through clenched teeth. “Except I never told Dixie. So how the fuck do you know?”

“Then it must have been the Dolces,” she says. “Baron knows everything about your family.”

While that's true enough, it doesn't sit right with me. Destiny was my first everything, and though the kind of love I felt at that age was simple, it was also pure. Her death left a rip

in the fabric of my life, our group, our school. So it's not like a secret that no one knows.

But when the Dolces stormed Willow Heights and took it over, when they broke us in a matter of days after their sister and my brother died, everyone turned against the Darlings. It was like they'd never known us, never known our family. As the only remaining Darlings, Preston and I clung together like the lone survivors of a blast that left us too stunned to feel even the aftershocks. That's when Destiny's death became something precious, a rare hurt that belonged only to us.

In my selfish moments, I was glad she was gone. Glad their touch couldn't bruise her skin, that their twisted games couldn't infect her mind. She'll forever be the only girl I loved, a wild girl who wanted to fuck around instead of get serious but somehow she made it seem fun and not like a rejection; a girl who'd wrestle the game controller from my hands and kick my ass in *Call of Duty*; who ran from the bathroom waving her pregnancy test over her head and screaming at the top of her lungs, "It's negative!" like she'd just won the lottery before she jumped into my arms and kissed me so hard my head spun and said, "You better have condoms this time."

A girl who wanted to play spin the bottle, and change the world, and have threesomes with me and my cousin and then me and her friend. A girl who drove too fast, and laughed too loud, and jumped off swings.

She'll never be a girl who turned against me when everyone else did. I don't know if I could have survived her looking at me the way Gloria does, with revulsion and scorn. But I would have wanted her to. I would have wanted it because I couldn't have lived with what they'd do to her if she didn't.

I know her death hasn't been forgotten, but no one else in school talked about it after the Dolces took over. They didn't want to remind the psychos that they used to be our friends and could still defect to our side. It was safer to pretend Preston and I had always been the scarred lepers, that they'd never begged for our attention, a place at our table or in our beds.

But I have no doubt that Baron dug through our history for anything he could use against us. The sicko probably has a spreadsheet to keep tabs on who talks to me every week so he can punish them accordingly.

I shake my head and grip the steering wheel of Harper's car, reminding myself not to go down that road and get lost in paranoia like Preston or caught in a storm of rage like the Dolces. The first finger of my other hand fishes absently in my pocket, finding a little pill. I slip my thumb in and pull it out, closing my eyes and putting it on my tongue before swallowing it dry. I let the calm wash over me, the sharp, cutting edges of my life going soft and blurry. When I open my eyes, Gloria's watching me, her expression guarded.

I go on like the whole Destiny hiccup never occurred. "Harper's my friend, and if she's lying about fucking me, it must be to protect me. The less people who know, the less people who could let it slip, right?"

"She's probably embarrassed to admit she fucked a troll like you," Gloria says, letting me change the subject without comment. "Then everyone would know she has STDs and stuff."

"You're a bitch, you know that?"

"Of course I know," she says, lifting her chin in a defiant tilt. "That's my brand."

A raise a brow. "You have a brand?"

“Everyone has a brand. Yours is, like, festering sewer leach. Mine is Queen B. And we all know what the B stands for.”

A text comes through on her phone, and even though I have a girlfriend, it annoys me that she’s texting her boyfriend. I’m not texting Dixie. Gloria’s an evil demon from hell, but it was cool to sit and talk to a hot girl for a minute. Fucked up as it is, I like that she’s still a bitch to me. She doesn’t treat me like I’m some damaged, broken little man.

Sometimes Dixie’s concern feels more like suffocation than love.

“Does the Ice Queen like ice cream?” I ask, trying to draw Lo away from her boyfriend.

She ignores me. The clicking of her set of nails on her phone is the only sound in the car for a second. A gust of wind rocks the vehicle, sending dry leaves skittering across the lot. I reach over to the rip in her jeans and wiggle my fingertip over her skin. It’s just to get her attention, and I’m only touching an inch of skin just above her knee, but my cock stirs in my jeans at the sensation of her incredibly smooth, soft skin. It’s been a long time since I touched a girl like her.

I'm ready to jerk my hand back because I fully expect her to slap the shit out of me for daring to touch her, but she doesn't even move her leg away. Her fingers clench around her phone, and when I lift my gaze to her face, she's dropped her head back against the seat. Her eyes are closed, her nostrils flared a little.

What the fuck?

My finger slows, stroking over the cool, exposed skin. It wasn't a sexual touch... Until it is. I picture a naked Gloria Fucking Walton straddling my lap while I lean her back on the steering wheel, sucking her perfect tits while I fuck her from below. My cock is *definitely* responding now.

"Gloria," I say quietly.

Her eyes fly open, and she stares at me like she doesn't know where she is or how she got here.

"Put your phone down."

"What?" she asks, not quite managing the sharp tone I think she was going for. "Why?" Her voice is a little breathy, like she's as hot from the outwardly innocent touch as I am. She drops her phone to the floor at her feet.

"Because he's not here."

She swallows, and then her diamond-hard shell snaps back into place as suddenly as it vanished. She jerks her leg away and huffs. “You don’t tell me what to do.”

“If I told you what to do, you’d do it,” I say with a smirk. “And trust me, you’d like it.”

I want to add a pet name—it’s right on the tip of my tongue—but I can’t quite grasp it. Bitch Queen seems too generic.

“First of all, ew,” she says, giving me a disgusted look. “I’d never let a weak man control me.”

“Only a weak man would try to control you,” I point out. “But weak or not, I’m driving, so I am in control right now.”

I start the car, and Gloria grabs for the door handle like we’re at the quarry and I just told her I’m driving into the pit.

“Let me out,” she cries, yanking at the door.

I tap the brake. “Jesus Christ. Calm the fuck down. I’m hungry, not a kidnapper. I’m going to get food. If you don’t want to go, you can get out of the car. I have no interest in you, Gloria.”

She turns to me, smoothing her hair and looking all collected, like she didn't just freak out over absolutely fucking nothing. "You're going to leave me alone in a parking lot at one o'clock in the morning?"

"No, I'm going to take you to get ice cream. I think we could both chill the fuck out right now. But if you're going to scratch like a cat in a bag, you can stay here. This is Harper's new car. I don't want to explain the slashes in the leather seats when she comes out."

"You're so weird," Gloria says, flopping back in her seat and pulling out her seatbelt.

A flash of annoyance goes through me that I can't buckle it for her, but I know she'd slap the shit out of me if I tried. "You sound surprised by that," I say, shaking my head.

"Where are you taking me?" she asks. "The gas station?"

"It's a surprise."

"I don't like surprises," she says, crossing her arms and glaring at me. "How do I know you're not taking me somewhere to rape and kill me?"

"Because I'm not a violent person."

“You just groped me.”

I shoot her a look. “You’re dating the Dolce boys. You can’t think me tickling your knee was violent.”

“It was a violation,” she says, pursing her lips.

“Fine,” I say. “I’m sorry I touched your fucking knee. But it wasn’t violent, and I have no interest in hurting or killing you.”

“Just raping then?”

“What the fuck, Gloria,” I say, shaking my head.

“I’m a small girl in a car with a big man who hates me and just told me he was in control. We’re alone, and no one knows where we’re going, including me. All things considered, I think I’m being pretty reasonable to assume that.”

“I told you, I’m taking you for ice cream,” I grit out. “Now shut up and put some music on.”

She huffs and picks up her phone from the floor. “Fine, but Harper and everyone knows you were the last person seen with me, and my whole family has the locations on our phones shared.”

“Jesus.”

“What?” she demands.

“Nothing,” I say, glancing at her. “It must really suck to be girl.”

“Thank you,” she says, setting her phone down and turning up the volume on the radio. For a minute, we listen to the song she put on, and I try to remember where I’ve heard it. Is it something lost, something from the missing month?

Then it hits me, and I wish it hadn’t. It’s like someone just drilled a hole through my sternum with a dull bit. “What is this?” I ask.

“Jill Sobule,” she says, pointing at the display.

“You know this song?”

“I like girlie music.” She shrugs. “What about it?”

“Can you text it to me?”

“Why?” she asks, giving me a funny look.

“Just do it.”

“Can’t you just look it up like a normal person?”

“I’m driving, and I don’t want to forget it.”

“My phone might get a disease if I text yours.”

“Will you just fucking text it to me?”

She sighs. “Why would I have your number?”

“Are you always this fucking stubborn? I can give you my number. Christ.”

For thirty whole seconds, she glares at me, not moving. Then she heaves another dramatic sigh, like I asked her to copy the lyrics by hand with a quill pen on goldleaf. “First tell me why you want a song so bad if you’ve never heard it.”

I glance at her and back to the road. I’ve never met a more infuriating person in my life. “I’ve heard it.”

“During... That time you forgot?”

“No. My mom used to sing it to annoy my sister. Mabel thought ‘hip’ was the cringiest word ever.”

The air in the car turns heavy, the silence between us weighted with the guilt of a thousand evil deeds. She knew Mabel. She watched the Dolces destroy her. I wonder if she even remembers that she jumped off the same bridge her brother did.

Gloria certainly never offered condolences, let alone an apology.

I’m every bit as much to blame as she is, though—even more so.

I don't like to think about that day in the basement, but it's always hung between us, bound us no matter how hard we try to pull apart, no matter our mutual hatred. The cords of that secret shame pull us together like two ends of repellent magnets. We circle each other warily, but until this year, she's never looked me in the eye. It's not just because of what we've both seen. It's because of what we both chose afterwards.

That's why we never had a conversation in the two years we went to school together. She hurled insults my way, but a conversation would be too hard. Then she might have to acknowledge what I did, what I sacrificed for her, even unwittingly. She might have to explain to me why she joined forces with devils and continued to enable them and even date them.

She shouldn't bother. No matter what she said, there's no explanation that could excuse what she's done. No words could undo her actions.

Maybe she knows that. That's why she's never spoken to me either. I'm not the only one who was humiliated that day when I walked into the basement at school, where the Midnight Swans meet.

It was at the start of my junior year, and I was just naïve and optimistic enough to think the worst was over. The Dolces had moved there a year before, and after their sister and my brother drowned together, they blinded Preston and beat me up and broke my sister's heart.

When summer came, they left us alone, though. I thought maybe it was over. I went to the annual back to school party, and even though it wasn't held at Grandpa Darling's estate as it had been for as long as anyone in town could remember, I still had hope. I thought they'd moved it to prove they were the big dogs now, that we weren't running the show. That was the last party where I was a normal guy, the last Willow Heights girl I ever fucked besides Dixie.

A week later, I walked into the basement, thinking I'd be a Swan again that year. Instead of finding a meeting, I found a nightmare scene involving the Dolces and the Walton girls.

I try not to think about that day. That scene.

Three girls. Three men.

I'd seen plenty of people having sex before—Darling parties were notorious for the orgies—but this wasn't sex. This was rape.

I try not to think about that day for a lot of other reasons too. Not just what I saw.

What I said. What it caused.

Something worse than all the things I've done to Dixie put together. I'm not just paying for my sins against her. I'm paying for my sins against my family. Because whatever they've done to my sister, I caused it.

That's why she left without a word. That's why she never comes home, not even when our dad thought I'd die. Why she never even sends a text.

They told her. I know they did. They told her that I'm the reason they tortured her for that entire year instead of moving on to the Waltons. I opened my big mouth, and it cost everything.

Because standing there at the bottom of the basement stairs, halfway in shock at the scene before me, I said what I did.

“What the fuck are you doing? Are you just a bunch of rapists now? Those girls aren't even Darlings.”

They all stared at me. Duke looked guilty that he'd been caught. Royal looked nothing. And Baron... Baron

smiled.

“You’re right,” he said. “*You’re* a Darling.”

Which is how I ended up on my knees in the dirt with his brothers holding me still while Duke fucked my mouth until I vomited. While the Walton girls were right there, trying to put themselves back together after their own attack. Whatever else the Dolces have done, no matter how much they all enjoyed my humiliation, I will always hate Duke Dolce most for that.

And I’ll always hate myself just as much, for redirecting their rage and sickness back onto my own family instead of letting three strangers suffer. I didn’t even know those girls then. It was their first week of school. I’d never even seen them before.

It’s not like I expected them to thank me, like I think I need a reward for doing something anyone else would have done. Something I said on impulse, without thinking, and that I wish every fucking day of my life I could take back. I wish I had known the power of words before the ones I spoke ruined us all.

I wish I could forget that month instead of the one I did. I wish I didn’t have to remember the party where a hot

girl still wanted to fuck me. I wish I didn't know that the reason I never found out who she was is because she was ashamed instead of proud to admit she fucked a Darling.

I wish I didn't remember going back to school the next week and seeing the Waltons being violated that way. That I didn't know they'd seen me that way, on my knees in shame. I wish that I didn't know that I was the one who spoke the words that sentenced my sister, my mother, and my entire family to the next two years of suffering.

If I could take back those words, I would, even knowing that the Dolces probably would have targeted a lot more girls if they weren't focused on us. I'm a selfish dick, but that's the truth. I would let them have the Waltons if it meant my family was spared. Especially after everything that's happened since.

Especially knowing that the Walton girls would not only fail to thank me but would go on to join the Dolces in destroying us. I will never understand what happened, how they could have done that after what I saw the Dolces doing to them and what they saw the Dolces do to me.

But by the next week, they were parading around school on their arms like they'd passed the gauntlet and were

now Midnight Swans themselves, even though the secret society didn't allow female members until tonight. They had been initiated into something far more sinister than the Swans, some unholy alliance that defies the laws of morality and man alike.

I jokingly call them the demon squad, but there's nothing funny about it. It's the only way I can make it bearable, though, the only way I can go on without losing my sanity. Make a joke of it, make light of it, so it doesn't drive me out of my mind. And never, ever think about the things I've seen them do.

I may have been a member of the old secret society until that day, when they made it clear I was no longer a Swan. So I wasn't a member of the new order, wasn't privy to whatever sick rules they hatched in their twisted minds. I was a target, like everyone else in my family.

But unlike everyone else in my family, I'm the one to blame for it.

thirteen

Rumor Has It... Willow Heights' self-proclaimed queen is gunning for the throne, and she doesn't just mean to take it from the current Queen. She means to topple the Kings as well. Can she pull it off? Or will the established royalty put her in her place?

Colt Darling

After a long silence, Gloria sighs and takes my number to text me the song. She sets her phone down and turns to me afterwards. "I'm sorry," she says. "About your sister and your mom."

"Little late to apologize," I say. "They're both gone."

"I know."

I'm reminded a second too late that her brother just jumped off a bridge. That he's more gone than my mother or

my sister. There's still a chance for them, no matter how distant. She'll never see Dawson again.

Now she thinks I'm the asshole who threw that in her face because I'm pissed at her for her part in my family's demise.

I'm not.

I've accepted that I will never understand, and that this is the way she is. I have no feelings about her whatsoever. But I don't want to be the person who hurts a girl who's grieving for her brother, no matter how much she deserves to hurt.

Yeah, usually it makes me fucking hard to think of hurting Gloria Walton, but not in this way.

"Fuck," I mutter, pulling into the empty lot in front of Two Scoops of Love. "That was shitty."

"It's fine," she says stiffly. "You already know. Everyone knows."

"It's not fine," I say, reaching over and giving her hand a quick squeeze. I pull away before she can accuse me of groping her again. "It fucking sucks, and we both know it."

"What are we doing here?" she asks. "It's obviously closed."

“Not for me,” I say, flashing her a grin.

“You... Work here or something?”

“Sure,” I say, climbing out. I circle around the car and pull open her door. “Come on.”

“Are we breaking in?” she asks. “Because if I get arrested...”

“Your cheer career will be over?” I ask, smirking and holding out my good hand to her.

“No,” she says, scowling. “If I get arrested, and I’m with *you*...”

“People will wonder what you were doing with me in the middle of the night,” I finish for her, my voice flat. It’s not a question. Of course that’s what she’s worried about.

“Well, yeah,” she says, widening her eyes at me.

“You’re more worried about being seen with me than having a criminal record?”

“Yes,” she says. “So what’s our story if we get caught?”

“We’ll tell them we were fucking our brains out on every surface of the place,” I say. “Now stop being so uptight

and let's go make root beer floats. Everyone knows you'd never touch me, and I know I'd never touch *you*."

She snorts. "You would if I let you."

"You'd let me if I wanted to," I challenge.

"Oh, you want to," she shoots back, fluttering her lashes and laying her dainty little hand in mine. "But if it makes you feel better about yourself, keep pretending you're the one who's not interested. You're never going to convince anyone else that the school's sad little loser wouldn't give his right hand for a chance with the queen."

I pull her down from the tall seat. She stumbles against me, and maybe I'm an egomaniac, but I swear it's on purpose. This thirsty bitch is here telling me I want her, but she's the one rubbing up against me to cop a feel. It brings back a pang of nostalgia. I remember a time when girls used to do that shit, falling into me so I'd catch them, or tripping so they could grab onto me and giggle to their girlfriends about my muscles.

I catch Gloria, sliding an arm around her and steadying her on her feet. I don't lift her up against me, though I could. I leave space for the Holy Ghost between us—just enough. I smile down at her, aware of the heated tension crackling

between our bodies that makes me have to think of a cold shower so I don't pop a boner and prove her right.

She gazes up at me, her sapphire eyes wide and dewy, and I'm pretty sure she's manipulating me, though I can't imagine why she'd bother.

We're so close I could kiss her if I had a death wish.

"Not interested," I murmur. "If I were, you'd be on the back seat right now, and I'd be licking you instead of ice cream."

She sucks in a breath, her gaze dropping to my lips. "Is your... Tongue pierced?" she whispers, staring at my mouth.

I grin and flash my tongue to give her a peek. Then I lean in, releasing her and resting my forearm on the door frame, just above her head. She could move away if she wanted. I don't cage her in.

I don't have to. She's not going anywhere.

"Now you're wondering what it feels like," I say. "Aren't you, Queen B?"

"No." She scowls up at me. I can't tell in the scant light in the parking lot, but I think she's flushed. I can feel the heat of her face kick up a notch even from a few inches away.

“I’m wondering,” I murmur, letting my gaze drop to her plump pink lips.

The words hang in the air between us, and she swallows so hard I can hear it.

“Wondering what?” she prompts, her voice barely a whisper.

I run my knuckle up the side of her throat, where I can see her pulse fluttering like a trapped moth. “I’m wondering if your cunt’s as cold as your demeanor, and if your cum comes out as ice cream,” I murmur. “But that doesn’t mean I ever want to find out.”

Gloria’s hand flies up to slap me, but I snatch her wrist out of the air and pin it to the car beside her head. “I’m not violent, but I’m no one’s punching bag,” I snap. “I’d think long and hard before throwing hands.”

“You’re a disease,” she seethes. “Just when I think you can’t sink any lower, now I know you hit girls.”

“I’ve never hit a girl in my life,” I say, releasing her wrist and stepping back. “But go ahead and hit me and see what happens.”

She looks like she's considering it, but then she tosses her hair back instead. "Fine. But touch me again, and *you'll* see what happens."

"Fair enough," I say, turning and heading across the lot. I unlock the door, unsurprised that she followed.

When we step inside, Gloria pulls her hands up into the sleeves of her light jacket and crosses her arms. "Who gave you the key to this place?" she asks, glancing around.

"Who said anyone gave it to me?" I turn and head behind the counter before she can answer. She follows me across the small room but waits in front of the counter, like she expects me to serve her.

"So, you stole it."

"What do you want?"

She rocks back on her heels. "I want to know where you got the key, and if we're going to get arrested."

"We're not going to get arrested."

She purses her lips and waits, tapping her toe on the black-and-white tile floor. "And?"

"I'm a Darling," I say smugly, as if I'm still beloved by the whole town and that's the only explanation needed. "I'm

making a root beer float. I'll make you the same unless you tell me what you want."

She bites her lip and eyes the glass case with a dozen different flavors behind it. "I can't eat ice cream in the middle of the night," she says at last.

"Why?" I ask, plucking two cups from the stack.

"That's when your metabolism is lowest. Do you know how many calories are in that?"

"Nope," I say, pulling the lever for the root beer.

She leans on the counter and picks at the edge with one of her long nails. "Must be nice not having to worry about your weight, or what you look like, or what anyone thinks of you..."

"I'd never have chosen it in a million years," I admit. "But I can't complain about that part."

"You know, sometimes I'm jealous of you," she says, staring at her nails.

I set the two cups of root beer on the counter. "Not Dixie?" I ask. "She's the one who gets my super mega fine dick every night."

"You mean your crooked micro peen?"

“Right,” I agree, scooping out a nice round ball of vanilla ice cream and setting it carefully into the root beer.

Gloria watches me from the corner of her eye. I wonder what she’s thinking, why she doesn’t want me to know she’s checking out my arms as I work. She probably thinks she’ll lose face if she admits she feels the attraction too.

Between all the insults she’s hurled at me and the time I’ve spent seeing her because she’s in the spotlight and I can’t help it, we almost have a relationship, even if it’s based on mutual hatred. Add in the fact that I used to hook up with girls like her all the time, and there’s something comfortable about her. I know her type, know how to relate to girls like her. In truth, it makes me feel like my old self, the one who used to win.

A king, not a beaten down loser who hangs out alone under the bleachers like a golem.

“You don’t really have a shrimp dick, do you?” she asks, her voice laced with accusation, like it’s a personal affront that I could have an above average cock and no interest in using it on her. Yeah, she’s hot, but I like my girlfriend—and my balls attached to my body.

“Guess you’ll never know,” I say, licking the back of the ice cream scoop. Her eyes laser focus on my tongue, so I tap my ring on the metal scoop and then give the tip of the spoon a quick suck. Just in case she likes what she sees.

Gloria visible squirms, tearing her gaze away and picking up one of the cups, now filled with root beer and ice cream and topped with a lid for the car ride.

I chuckle and set the spoon in the sink. “Must be embarrassing for the queen bee to admit she gets wet for a lowly peasant like me.”

“Shut up,” she protests, and I swear I see her cheeks go a little darker under her makeup, but it’s hard to tell in the shadowy ice cream shoppe. “I was only staring because... I’ve never seen someone with a tongue piercing.”

“Sure you were—” Again, there’s a nickname I want to give her right on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t quite grasp it. I pick up the other float and hand it to her. “Hang onto that for me, and try not to poison it with your venomous hatred for me. I want to eat it when we get back to school.”

“We’re going back?” she asks, and I could swear she sounds a little disappointed.

“We should probably be back before they leave the meeting,” I say, tucking a twenty under the cash register and flashing her a grin. “And before the cops show up.”

Her eyes widen. “You said you were allowed to be here.”

“I said I had the key,” I correct her.

“You said we wouldn’t get arrested,” she hisses as we step out into the gusting wind.

“And we didn’t,” I point out as I wrestle the door closed and lock it. “Now let’s go.”

We hurry across the lot. Brown leaves are tumbling over the pavement, and the town is quiet so late. I open the passenger door, and Gloria climbs in with the two floats. Before she can get situated, and since her hands are full, I pull the seatbelt out, reach across her, and buckle her in. We’re so close I have to force myself not to let my hands linger, not to let my touch brush over her taut middle. She doesn’t breathe until I step down.

I close the door and remind myself I have a girlfriend.

When we’re back on the road, she looks at me and grins. “Guess I can cross that off my high school bucket list.”

“You have a high school bucket list?”

“Yep.”

“Hm. What else is on there?”

“Lots of stuff,” she says, gripping my cup between her thighs while she holds the other one, dipping into it with a long-handled plastic spoon. “I add to it every year. Just girl stuff.”

“Like?”

“I don’t know,” she says, taking a tiny bite.

“Why don’t you want to tell me?” I ask, giving her my most wicked grin. “Is it all sex stuff?”

“Do you ever think about anything else?”

“Occasionally,” I say, resting my left hand in my lap so I can hold the wheel at the bottom, where my mutilation is cloaked in shadow. I’ve gotten used to my hand, and so has my family and even Dixie. But hanging out with a girl who’s a solid ten makes me hyper aware of all my fucked up parts.

“So, what’s the kinkiest thing on your list? Anal?”

Gloria shudders. “You’re a pig. See, this is why I don’t want to tell you.”

“I’m joking,” I say, shaking my head.

“It’s not a sex list, anyway,” she says. “You’ll just laugh at me and say I’m basic.”

“What’s wrong with being basic?”

“I don’t know,” she says, sounding frustrated. “It’s an insult?”

“Oh, because you think you’re supposed to be special, not like other girls, and all that shit.”

“Isn’t that what guys want?”

I snort. “You’re asking me?”

“You used to be a man whore, didn’t you?”

“Pretty sure I just wanted a hole to stick my dick in at that point in my life.”

“Gross.”

“Not denying it,” I say with a shrug. “I wasn’t a very nice person back then.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she says, stirring her ice cream into the soda. “But Dixie seems to think you’re the shit, and she knew you back then.”

“Can’t explain that one either,” I admit. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“I have a guess.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, turning to her. “I’d love to hear this.”

“I’m sure you know what I’m thinking.”

“That it’s my super mega fine cocktail wienie?”

Gloria giggles, then stifles it. “Shut up. I knew you’d laugh at me.”

“Doesn’t count,” I say. “You’re laughing too.”

I turn back into the school parking lot and realize I’m fucking happy that the meeting hasn’t ended. I really must have brain damage, because I’m actually eager to spend more time with Demon Barbie.

“You’re awfully concerned about me laughing at you,” I say, snagging the cup from between her legs. My fingers brush her thigh, and my idiot cock stirs in my jeans again. Fuck that dude. He has less brain cells than my other head, and that’s saying something.

“I’m worried about everyone laughing at me,” Lo says.

“I have to be. It’s exhausting.”

“Thanks for not flash freezing my root beer with the vapors coming out of your ice cavern vagina.”

“You’re insufferable.”

She hands me the other spoon, which is warm from her lap. So she is alive. I bet her cunt’s not cold. I bet it’s hot as fucking lava. My cock stiffens as I slip the spoon between my lips to hold it while I pop the lid off my cup. The plastic is warm on my tongue, and all I can think about is where it was before my mouth.

“So, tell me about this kinky bucket list,” I say, pretending I’m not sporting a semi from licking an empty spoon. “Is getting railed by the rebel under the bleachers on it? Because that seems like a quintessential high school experience.”

“It’s not a sex list,” she insists. “It’s a basic bitch bucket list. It has stuff like breaking a law, and staying up all night talking on the phone, and winning Prom queen.”

“Well, I have your number now,” I say, fishing my phone out of my pocket. “I could help you knock out another one, even if it’s a lot less exciting than banging under the bleachers.”

“Don’t you dare,” she scolds. “You can’t call me. That’s why I didn’t want to text you that song. Now that you have my number, you’ll probably stalk me like some kind of creeper.”

“Better keep the curtains drawn.”

I thumb on my phone and open the app. I tug on the text a few times, like something will magically appear above it. But it’s just one text.

“Did you fuck with my phone while I was driving?”

“No,” she says, looking at me like I’m as crazy as I sound right now.

“Who’s Butterfly?”

“What?” she asks, her voice sharp.

“Your text came through with that song,” I tell her, opening the link to make sure it’s the right text. “But it says it’s from *Butterfly*.”

“Oh my god,” she says. “You’re such a freak.”

“Why is your number in my phone under the name Butterfly?”

“How would I know?” she asks. “It’s your phone. Why do you have my number at all?”

“I have no idea,” I say, looking at her hard. “Do you?”

“Why are you blaming me for this?” she asks. “You’re the creep who has my number when I didn’t give it to you. I was joking when I said you might stalk me, but now...”

She gives me a look and scoots away from me in her seat. The fucked up part is, I don’t blame her. I have no idea why her number is in my phone or why it’s hidden under a fake name. There are no messages on the thread, but that’s not surprising. When my dad just got me a new phone, my contacts were pulled from the cloud, but any messages I might’ve had are gone.

“Did we text last year?”

I look like a fucking creep right now, but I’m more interested in the truth than what Bitch Queen Walton thinks of me. Yeah, she’s so damn pretty it makes me want to put a fist through the window at the unfairness of life, but I’ve learned to deal with that kind of sting. My brother used to say all was fair, but the truth is, nothing’s fair, and that’s just the way it is.

“Why would I text *you*?” she asks, looking me up and down the way she does at school. “In fact, why am I even in a car with you? The stink of your gutter must be drugging me. I’m going to get some fresh air.” With that, she hops out of the car and flounces around to climb up onto the Escalade’s hood.

I sit with my float forgotten in my lap, watching her sitting there, her shoulders pulled up against the wind, her long blonde hair blowing out with each gust, her narrow hips snug in a pair of tight jeans. She’s so fucking pretty, even from the back you can tell she’s a girl worth talking to—and a girl who knows it.

I don’t feel like my old self anymore. I’m only reminded more than ever that I’m not that guy and never will be again. I can’t afford to go lusting after what I can’t have, playing with fire like I did last year. I have Dixie, and I’m lucky for that. The Dolces would never have allowed me to walk around school with a girl last year, even a girl they didn’t want. Dixie thinks that’s because she’s a bigger girl, but I know it’s not that. There are other big girls at school. It’s because they made some promise to their dead sister that they wouldn’t fuck with her friends, and apparently that’s still in effect posthumous.

She won't believe it's not about her looks, though. I tell her she's pretty, but she doesn't hear it because she doesn't feel it. She worries about me leaving all the time, even now, when I'm officially her boyfriend for the first time. Maybe it's my fault, for the things I did to her, the years I'd fuck her but refuse to call her my girlfriend because I wanted to have options. Or maybe it's her thing to work through. After all this time, shouldn't I have been able to help her do that?

Or maybe I did something to make her not trust me. Something I don't remember.

With a sigh, I grab my float and get out of the car. I climb up on the hood next to Gloria. The flirting was fun, but now we're back at school, back in reality. Now it's time for the hard stuff.

"I have to ask you something," I say. "Just tell me straight, and I'll never mention it again."

She fits the lid back onto the cup I took from the ice cream shoppe and sighs. "Fine. Anything that'll make you leave me alone."

"Did something happen between us during Bye Week last year?"

She scoots away like I might give her leprosy from two feet away. “That’s disgusting, Colt. How could you even ask me that?”

“Did it?” I stare her down, not letting it show that her disgust makes me want to crawl away like the cockroach she thinks I am. It doesn’t make me feel worthless, but for the first time, it bothers me that she thinks I am.

“No,” she says, her face twisted up in horror. “The thought of you hunching away with your tiny, crooked dick is revolting. I would never touch you. I literally might vomit if you keep talking to me.”

“Okay,” I say, sliding off the hood. “Thanks for clearing that up.”

I told her I’d leave her alone, so I climb back in Harper’s car to wait and wonder why the fuck Dixie put Gloria’s number in my phone. She’s jealous enough that I can see why she’d disguise it. Maybe her phone was about to die at some point, and she needed to contact Gloria about something dance related, so she put her number in my phone and forgot to delete it. It doesn’t make much sense, but it’s the best explanation I can think of until I can ask her for a better one.

fourteen

Rumor Has It... The Kings' former plaything has had enough of being the mistress and proclaimed herself Queen! Will the reigning monarch fall after more than two years on the throne? Or will she fight back this time and destroy the usurper for good?

Gloria Walton

Harper drops Colt off first, probably because she's tired of us bickering. I'm glad when he's gone, when the guilt of the whole of high school and all the evil shit I've done isn't weighing on my chest like an anvil, crushing me one breath at a time.

When we're back on the road and it's just the two of us, I turn to Harper. "I can't believe you tricked me into getting in a car with that guy. He's horrid."

She shrugs. “He’s not that bad. You just don’t know him.”

She’s right. I wish I’d never known him at all, that I could forget like he has.

“How well do *you* know him?” I tease, so she won’t notice the battering of wings inside the cage of my chest.

“We’re friends.”

“I know that,” I say, rolling my eyes. “But was it more than that? Even for a one-time thing? I mean, the guy’s not *my* type, but I could see the appeal.”

“Oh, yeah,” she says, glancing at me. “You asked for Maverick’s number once. I guess everyone likes a tatted up bad boy on occasion.”

“I mean, Royal was obviously into you, and I didn’t like him that way anymore,” I say. “My sister was already trying to get with him that night. And I was in a good mood after Bye Week. So yeah, I might have been interested in slumming it if the D was good.”

Harper grins. “So now that Colt’s out of the car, we’re done pretending to be a lady?”

“I’m not going to give him ammunition,” I point out.
“He hates me. He’d find a way to use it against me.”

“That you think he’s hot?”

“Ew, no,” I protest. “That I think *Maverick’s* hot, and they’re sort of the same type. But I’m more into the individual than the type. As you can see from Rylan.”

My boyfriend. The one I should be thinking about instead of worrying what Harper and Colt did together an entire year ago.

“Maverick’s my type,” she says. “Or he was when I went to FHS.”

“Well, then I guess it’s good that I didn’t go out with him,” I say, pulling a face. “It’s one thing to share one ex, but two is getting a little incestuous.”

“Haven’t you and your sisters all been with the twins?”

“Yeah,” I admit, wrapping my arms around myself to hold back a shudder. “But that’s different.”

Harper makes a noncommittal sound. It’s funny to see such a little girl behind the wheel of a huge SUV like this. I’d picture her in a sports car, but I can tell she loves the Escalade, even if she doesn’t know where it came from.

I know it's from Royal. Giving a girl a ridiculously expensive car when he fucks up is exactly the kind of thing an emotionally stunted guy like him would do rather than saying sorry like a normal person.

Harper can't admit it yet, though—not even to herself. She's in the middle of hating Royal. I know she still loves him too, though. Hell, I still love him, though not in the same way. It's hard not to love someone you know is hurting, to understand that's why they hurt others. I hope they get back together, but then, I know how hard it is to repair something once it's broken.

I wanted so badly for things with Rylan to be like they were back in Savannah, but they just aren't.

I push the thought away. “So, if Maverick's your type, and Colt is the same type... I'm only asking because he asked you if you'd hooked up. And tonight he said he found some ‘evidence...’”

I can barely get the word out. I don't want to picture what happened the day he was attacked, but I have to know.

“You're awfully concerned about me and Colt,” Harper says. “You sure you're not interested?”

“God, no,” I say, forcing a laugh. “I have Rylan. I’m just looking out for you. You should probably get tested if you did anything with Colt. He’s like a walking disease.”

She gives me a weird look. “Do the twins wear protection?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’m not with them.”

“Well, I’m not with Colt,” she says. “And we didn’t fuck. We just fooled around a little.”

I turn my face away and squeeze my eyes shut, trying not to imagine what that means. Trying not to reach across the seat and choke the shit out of her. Trying not to think about his pierced tongue and what it would feel like...

But no. His tongue wasn’t pierced then.

That’s new.

“I bet he’s big, though,” Harper says, giving me a sideways grin.

“What?” I ask. I’ve never had a girlfriend like her, someone so brash. My sisters don’t talk about guys’ dicks with me. We’re more reserved in my family. Or maybe there’s just too much trauma to share sex stories.

“You know,” Harper says. “He’s got that BDE thing going on.”

“Royal’s big,” I point out. “I don’t think it’s humanly possible to be any bigger.”

I’m secretly glad that she said that because if she doesn’t even know how big his dick is, not too much happened between them.

“I didn’t say he was bigger than Royal,” she says. “But I still think he’s big.”

“Why?” I ask. “Because he was bragging about his dick?”

“Because he was *joking* about his dick,” she corrects. “I don’t think guys with little dicks joke about it. Plus, he’s got that chill thing going, you know? Like, Royal’s got a big dick, but Colt’s got the big dick *energy*. I wish I’d known him before the Dolces got to him.”

I shrug. “I heard he used to be a player.”

“I bet he never chased a girl in his life,” she says. “He’s the kind of guy who lets the girls come to him. He wouldn’t try to control you or get jealous like Rylan. He

knows he's got it going on. Just putting that out there in case *that* doesn't work out."

"Well, don't," I say. "I'm perfectly happy with Rylan. And Colt's with Dixie now, and he seems perfectly happy with her."

The thought makes my blood boil, but I force myself to remain cool.

Harper smirks over at me. "And she's been obsessed with him for like five years when she's popular and could date someone closer to her level. Haven't you ever wondered why?"

"I've definitely never wondered about Colt Darling's dick."

"Why not?" Harper asks incredulously.

And then we're both laughing, and it's the best thing that's happened to me during this whole nightmare year, to feel like I have a friend who I can be real with. I haven't had that since we left Savannah, maybe not even then. Harper's everything my mother would hate, which only makes me love her more. I wish I could see the scandalized look on Mom's face if she heard our conversation right now. She'd tell me

proper ladies don't talk that way, probably forbid me from hanging out with Harper at all.

Just as I'm thinking how much I needed this, the pain hits me like a brick wall.

My brother just died.

I shouldn't be laughing. I shouldn't be thinking about some guy's dick.

The rest of the way home, we listen to the *Harlow & the Honeybadgers* and *Riot Grrrl* without talking. I try to breathe because I can't speak through the pain.

"You okay?" Harper asks when we pull up to the side of the road where I had her pick me up. She doesn't even seem tired, though it's three in the morning.

"Yeah, fine," I say, forcing a laugh. "I'm just exhausted, and some people have to cheer tomorrow night. If I'd known you were dragging me to school and forcing me to spend time with a piece of infectious human waste like Colt Darling, I'd never have come."

"And that's why I didn't tell you."

"Asshole."

“Seriously, thanks for coming with,” she says, reaching over and taking my hand before I can get out of the car. “I really appreciate the support. I know I fucked up by not staying in contact last year, but your friendship means a lot to me.”

“Me, too,” I admit.

She gives me a sly little grin. “Also, did you just quote *Fight Club*? Because I thought you didn’t like girls, but if you’re going to talk dirty to me...”

I pull my hand from hers. “It’s a good movie.”

“No disagreement here,” she says. “I just didn’t expect you to know it.”

I shrug. “I have a brother.”

A tense second of silence hangs between us, and then I get out of the car. I *had* a brother. I had a father. Now it’s just me and my sisters and Mom.

“Just us girls,” as Mom would say. It sounds cute when she says it, but it feels more like a group of survivors huddling together, wondering who will be next as life picks us off one by one.

After crossing the lawn, scaling the tree outside my house, and climbing back through my window the way Rylan does every evening, I run a cold bath even though I'm tired. Tonight is too fraught, and I know I won't sleep with the thoughts churning inside me.

I can't stop thinking about Colt. I force myself to stay in the cold water even when I'm shivering so hard I can hardly breathe and my hands turn blue. Despite everything that's been taken from me, I have power over my body. I'm stronger than my instinct to escape. I won't climb out until I'm ready. I won't cry.

My heart is trembling in my chest, though, a butterfly threatening to lift its mangled wings and beat at the inside of its cocoon until it shatters. I was destroyed that day. I barely remember it, though I must have acted normal at school. That's one good thing about putting on a face, about being a big fat fake all day long. Sometimes, it becomes so easy you don't have to try because being fake becomes real. It's who you are.

He found just the right angle, delivered the blow that broke open my armored cocoon. I thought he'd patch the broken wings of the creature he found battered and almost

dead inside. I let him in. And he was careful that when he walked away, the fractures he left in the surface were so tiny no one noticed.

They couldn't see the utter devastation he'd left inside.

No one said I was acting funny. No one even called me out when I subtly defended Colt, telling Royal that Harper was probably skipping school to hang out with him because he treated her better than Royal did.

I risked Royal's wrath when he was raging about Colt. I defended him.

And what did he do? He hooked up with Harper that day. Maybe not full sex, but other stuff. Not that I thought he cared about me. But even the bitch queen manages to feel some stray beat of her rotten heart every now and then, some ache of betrayal instead of nothing.

I sink back in the tub until my head is under water except for my face. The cold seeps in, aching in my skull. I hold onto it that, anchor myself to the pain. When you've felt nothing for so long, even pain can feel good.

But it can't disguise the truth. It's all coming apart. I can feel it, no matter how desperately I try to hold it all

together. One day, I'll explode into a million fragments, like someone took a sledgehammer to the diamond cocoon in my chest where a heart should be.

That Friday is burned into my brain like a brand. The despair I felt. Sending the texts and not hearing anything back. The disaster of the game.

The Dolce boys didn't show up, and without them, it was a bloodbath. More than ever, the fans needed the cheer squad to keep their spirits up. But my heart and head weren't in it, and I fucked up so many times that our own fans, already angry about the slaughter on the field, started booing me.

I was humiliated.

I cried in the locker room, and the other girls—the ones who weren't mad at me for screwing up—thought it was because of my terrible performance. I let them, because how else could I explain it?

How could I tell them that I was slowly dying, that my heart had been ripped from its safe cocoon, and it was now hardening back into a jagged chunk of steel? How could I begin to explain how bad that hurts? How could I explain to girls who thought I was lucky to be the Dolce boys' favorite, who envied my status on the throne? How could I tell them I

would have given it all up to lay in the gutter just one more time with someone they saw as trash?

So I just cried, and I felt the ache of a cold blade slicing deeper into my raw heart. I wanted so desperately to feel it beat again, to feel alive, to feel my heart as a living thing, molten and churning and messy like lava inside its flawless diamond cage.

I didn't care if it was desperate, pathetic, or reckless. I called him, but he didn't answer. I told everyone I didn't feel good and was going home. Some probably thought I was sick—it explained why I looked like shit and couldn't cheer any better. Others figured I was hiding from the shame of doing so badly, but they still understood why I'd want to go home instead of facing a party. No one thought it was strange for me to skip it.

So I went home, and I sat outside Cotton Montgomery's pool house, in a chair in the shadows, where no one would see me from the house. I sat there, and I sent one more text, even though it made me look desperate. For once in my fucking life, I didn't care about losing face, about maintaining an image. With every beat of my heart, I willed

him to come, to save me from the Dolce boys, from myself, from the villain taking me over.

But he never came.

I sat there until I couldn't anymore because I was so cold I thought I'd die, and I had to admit he wasn't coming. It was getting light by the time I crossed the lawn and fell into bed, too exhausted to stay awake after not sleeping for two nights in a row.

I found out the next day that Royal had almost drowned, but I didn't find out until Monday that he'd almost beaten Colt to death before that.

Not for touching me.

For touching *her*.

He almost killed Colt for being with Harper, but I knew the truth. It wasn't her fault.

It was mine.

He wouldn't have skipped school that day if he hadn't been looking for an excuse to avoid me. He wouldn't have taken Harper to his house and "fooled around a little." He wouldn't have spent weeks in a coma, months in the hospital having his face reconstructed.

He would remember.

fifteen

Rumor Has It... The Mayor's wife will be crowning this year's Homecoming Queen. After a tumultuous few weeks, will last year's Queen be able to pull off a repeat, or is this a sign that new royalty is in the making?

Dixie Powell

Last year's Homecoming Queen is supposed to place the crown on this year's. The school even flies in college students to do it if they can get away that weekend. Sometimes, they have to call in the Queen from two years ago, but even that won't work now. Gloria Walton is on the stage with us already, gunning for Homecoming Queen for the third year in a row, trying for a record set over two decades ago—by Preston's mom, weirdly enough.

In a twist of fate that makes me hope harder than any number of people who have walked by and told me they voted for me, the school chose the mayor's wife—my aunt—to

crown this year's winner on the ten-year anniversary of her win.

The headmaster announces her and steps back from the microphone.

My heart hammers wildly in my chest as I watch her walk across the stage with the bejeweled crown displayed on a black velvet pillow. The crowd holds their breath in collective anticipation, waiting for her to place the sparkling tiara on the winner's head.

My aunt spares me one disdainful look as she sweeps past me in her own gown, and suddenly, I don't just feel nervous that I might not win.

I feel angry.

Every year, some hot blonde cheerleader with a spray tan wins.

Every single time.

Same with Prom.

When is it my turn? This is supposed to be *my* year.

I *earned* this.

Gloria hasn't earned it. Sophomore year, she was a new girl and would've had zero chance of winning if not for Royal Dolce. He was the king of the school, not just Homecoming, and he walked around like they were dating all that month, publicly asked her to the dance, and campaigned alongside her.

By Homecoming last year, everyone knew they weren't together, that he didn't do girlfriends. But again, he campaigned for her like it was his personal mission to make sure I didn't win. The Dolces had already made her the queen of the school, anyway. No one else could have won.

This year, Gloria's boyfriend isn't even popular. He sat at the elite table until their recent breakup, but he never fit. He's not a football player. He fits in better next to Colt at the rebel table Harper organized when she came back.

Even though I know it's a long shot, a tiny part of me keeps hoping that people are tired of voting the same every year, just like they're tired of the Dolce reign. A lot of people cheered for our rebel group yesterday when a fight broke out. Maybe this year, they'll be a little daring, think outside the box, and choose someone else.

Maybe, despite my unpopular escort, they'll finally pick me.

I've been dreaming of it since the first day of school, though I didn't even tell my closest friends. I told them of course Gloria would win. But as this year has started playing out, everything's gone my way. Would it be too much to hope it goes my way tonight?

I can't hide my giddy grin as the headmaster tears open the black envelope containing the winner's name. They brought my aunt to crown one of us, and even if she doesn't like me, that must mean that I won. They love doing things like that, making it meaningful somehow. Just like they would have chosen Preston's mom to do it if Gloria was going to win again, tying her record of winning three years in a row.

"And this year's winner," the headmaster says into the microphone, looking down as he slips the small black card with gold foil lettering from the envelope. He lifts his eyes to the crowd below the stage, standing frozen as they hang on his every word. The music is off, the dance paused for the big reveal.

The anticipation of the crowd swells, sending shivers of excitement crackling up my arms. I squeeze my eyes shut, cross my fingers behind my back, and whisper under my breath.

“Please please *please*...”

The headmaster holds up the name. “Gloria Walton.”

A hard seed of envy and resentment sprouts inside me when everyone cheers. They should be cheering for *me* this year. Besides a thigh gap, what does she have that I don't? She doesn't even have a boyfriend. They broke up after I let it slip at the post-game party last week that she'd slept with Royal. I mean, Rylan deserved to know. He was her boyfriend. And I like the guy. Us goths gotta stick together. That's what I told him when I spilled the tea about Gloria.

But it's too late now.

My plan failed.

She still won.

Again.

Once again, I stand at the end of the line of girls, always a runner up, an also-ran. Like everyone else, all I can do is watch her shine like a diamond. I clap politely, wishing they were watching me this time. It's my senior year, my last chance.

And I lost.

No more chances.

My aunt places the crown on her head, and the gemstones shimmer in the stage light as it narrows to spotlight the flawless queen, standing poised and regal in her shimmering white dress. The rest of us are nothing, plunged into the dark, like we don't exist.

“Thank you,” Gloria says into the microphone. She beams, waves, blows kisses. Then she turns, primly picks up the hem of her dress, and waits for Baron Dolce to step from the line of escorts to join her. He shakes his head when the headmaster offers him the king's crown. He doesn't even want it.

Colt would have taken it. He'd love to be king. Baron doesn't even appreciate it, though he's never won before.

He takes Gloria's arm and escorts her as she floats back across the stage, her head held high, crown sparkling like a thousand diamonds.

Right then, I vow to win Prom. I will not stand in this line and be ignored again. Gloria is my friend and my teammate, but she's won enough. And she's not allowed a repeat win at Prom, which means I actually have a chance. If she tries to sabotage me so one of her sisters wins, I'll show her that two can play that game.

After all, I didn't even tell Rylan everything, that she's slept with a more guys than Royal. One was enough to break them up. But if she tries to stop me from winning Prom, I can destroy her with the rest of what I know. If she and Rylan get back together, I can break them up again. If they don't, I can turn the whole school against the Waltons. I'll do it slowly, one drop of tea at a time.

After all, I have the gossip blog. I have the power to make people go from saying they must have magic pussies to keep the Dolce boys' interest for so long to saying they're sluts who let the Dolces pass them around for years.

Both things can be true. At the end of the day, it's just a matter of how you spin it.

I walk down the steps from the stage with the other losers. They all go back to dancing, but I head for a table in the corner. If I'm going to get what I want, the way I always do, I have work to do.

Someday, everyone in Faulkner will clamor to be my friend, and I'll shun them all until they die of regret for the way they treated me. One day, I won't just report school rumors on my blog. I'll leverage my social media presence to become a journalist for *Your Celebrity Eyes*, where I'll get to

meet everyone from Billie Eilish to *Meadow of Bones*. When people in town ask about the Kardashians or the Wilder brothers, I'll just smile even though we're on a first name basis. They'll have to watch my show because I won't treat them any more special than they treated me in high school. They didn't vote for me, so I won't do them any favors either.

“What's the star of the show doing hiding in the corner?” asks a male voice five minutes later. I glance up just as Gideon Delacroix slips into the seat beside mine. He pushes a cup of punch across the table to me. Even though everyone in town “knows” the founding sons, this is the first year I've really talked to Gideon. He's only two years younger than me, but I've always thought of him as a kid.

Those two years make a whole world of difference. He was reading comic books in Grandpa Darling's treehouse at the New Year's Eve party my freshman year, while I was letting Colt strip me naked and lead me around on a leash in the infamous Den of Iniquity in the manor house.

“Thanks,” I say, setting my phone down but leaving the screen on, so I can watch the likes roll in on *The Tea*. “But I wouldn't call myself the star of the show. Gloria won again.”

Despite my best efforts.

Gideon makes a noncommittal sound and sips his punch. “You should have won.”

“Thanks,” I say again. “You’re sweet. Where’s your date?”

“I don’t have a date,” he says. “I came with friends.”

“I thought you were taking Harper.”

As much as she doesn’t deserve him, I’d feel more secure if she was dating someone, in case Colt’s memories come back. During the past week, we’ve all been sitting together at lunch, and I’ve realized Gideon is all grown up now. But like me, everyone underestimates him. He’s on the football team, and he organized a bunch of girls to protest the Dolce reign yesterday. That takes serious guts.

I have no idea what he sees in Harper, but maybe I’m biased.

“Nah,” Gideon says, leaning back in his seat. “She decided to take Royal.”

“What a bitch,” I blurt out. “She just ditched you as soon as her ex came back around? And don’t try to defend her. You asked her in front of the whole cafeteria, and she said yes.

We all saw it. So she basically stood you up after she'd already told you she'd go with you."

"As friends," he says with a shrug. "I shouldn't have put her on the spot like that anyway."

"You're too nice," I say, bristling that he's trying to excuse her behavior. "You shouldn't let her treat you that way."

I know better than anyone what it's like to be not just underestimated but pushed aside, treated like you don't matter. Suddenly, my kinship with him makes me want to protect him at all costs. He's a gem in a school full of pirates.

He smiles shyly before dropping his gaze from a group of girls dancing and flicking their hair, trying to get his attention.

"What about you?" he asks, resting his elbow on the table and turning away from them slightly so he can focus on me, like I'm the only girl in the room. "Where's your date?"

"He's here," I say. "I'm just taking a break. Besides, I have to post about Homecoming."

He cocks his head to one side. "Why?"

“Because,” I say, defensiveness creeping into my voice. “It’s the second biggest dance of the year, probably the biggest event, if you count the parade, the Faulkner High and college games, the dances... Everything is this week.”

“So?”

“So, people want to read about that.”

“But they’re here,” he says, reaching over and taking my phone. “And *you’re* here. Why not enjoy it now and post about it later?”

My heart starts hammering, and I reach for my phone. I think again about the video on there, an incriminating clip Magnolia took during the fight in the café yesterday. I know I shouldn’t post it, that she might get in trouble for it, but it has so much viral potential. I’m not sure what I’ll do with it, but I don’t want anyone to know I have it. I was supposed to delete it.

“Give it back,” I say sharply, holding out my hand.

Gideon gives me a funny look that says he’s never had someone mess with him in his life, let alone take his phone and toss it around the room laughing at him while he pointlessly chased its path. Of course he hasn’t. He’s a

founding son, as much a star now as Colt was when he was a sophomore like Gideon.

“Sorry,” he says, handing my phone back. “I wasn’t going to take it. I was just saying you could put it away and enjoy yourself now.”

I stare at him, my thoughts whirling back on themselves.

He’s as popular as Colt ever was.

He’s a founding son. He plays football. He sits at the premier table at lunch.

Or he did before this week, when he left the elites—by choice, not because he got dumped or cast out—to sit at my table and help protest the Dolce reign. He stepped out of line with the popular guys to join us and make a statement. Again, it takes some serious balls to do that.

It hasn’t hurt his status, either.

If anything, it’s made him even more popular. He’s brave enough to take a stand for what’s right instead of going along with the Dolces when it would have benefitted him more to do that. Now, he’s not just popular with the few elites. He has something better—the loyalty of the many. He’s beloved

by the whole school. Right now, he's the *It boy*, even more popular than Baron Dolce, though no one would dare say such a thing.

If he'd been my escort instead of Colt, I would have won.

The realization hits me with equal amounts of regret that I didn't see it sooner and guilt at the disloyal thought toward Colt.

But it's true.

I should post a drop of tea about Gideon's rising star. But I think this boy might deserve a whole blog post, not just a tidbit on my gossip account.

I pick up the paper cup of punch. "You know, if you were anyone else, I wouldn't take a drink from you."

"Glad to hear my reputation precedes me," he says with a little smile.

"It does," I agree, taking a sip. "You're a nice guy. A good guy."

"Or maybe I'm just a normal guy, and your barometer's off. It can get skewed if you leave it for a few years without recalibrating it."

“Is that right?”

“That’s right.”

We stare at each other for a second too long, and a funny little flip happens in my belly. I push the traitorous feeling away. I have never even entertained the thought of dating someone besides Colt. After working so hard on Colt, I could never start over.

“Are you saying Colt’s not a good guy?”

Gideon shifts, looking uncomfortable, like he knows he said too much. “Of course not,” he says. “I just... I’ve heard about how he treated you. You know. Before I was here.”

“And how would you have treated me?”

The words slip out before I can stop them, and Gideon goes pink enough that I can see it even in the dimly lit room with the lights swirling slowly as a love song plays. I wonder where Colt is, if he’s dancing with a girl. Most of the people dancing to slow songs are couples. I crane my neck to find my boyfriend. When I don’t see him, I have to be content with the fact that I can see Harper dancing with Royal.

“Not like that,” Gideon mutters, bringing my attention back to him.

There's an awkward pause, and then I sit up straight and offer him a smile. "Congrats on the game yesterday."

"Thanks," he says, taking the hint and sitting back, the tension between us broken. "DeShaun's so good I'm not really needed at QB, but he's also good enough to run up the score so I can usually hound Coach into putting me in for a few plays."

"You'll definitely be QB1 next year," I say. "You threw some pretty good plays already, and you're only a sophomore."

"You looked great out there too."

"Thanks for noticing," I say, beaming at him. "My mom made me go on a diet when she found out I was on the court, and I lost five pounds this week. Plus, she took me to get my nails done because I was biting them. See?"

He glances at my nails, looking confused. "Well, you looked great already. When you walked onto the field with the court, you stole the show."

I know Gideon's only being nice, but for a second, I let myself imagine walking on his arm instead of my surly boyfriend's. Baron is still the most feared, and definitely the King, but Gideon is the most well-loved. I imagine the cheers

we'd get from a crowd that was cheering for both of us, not just me.

Since I'm on Homecoming Court, I had to have an escort to walk me onto the field during halftime. You'd think Colt would be thankful to be on the field and getting attention again, even if he wasn't playing. But instead of being grateful, he was pissy the whole night, saying it was dangerous to make himself such an easy target for the Dolces, and he'd had to make another deal with the twins to assure they wouldn't touch him. He refused to do anything fun to get attention and extra votes, like dip me and kiss me in front of the crowd.

Maybe that was part of his deal, because Duke is the one who stole the show, making out with one of the Walton twins until someone blew the whistle to break them up. After that, we looked boring.

But at least Colt got to escort me. I try to be happy with that. We even hung out with the court for a few minutes afterwards—the three Walton girls, escorted by the Dolce boys and DeShaun; another cheerleader, escorted by Cotton Montgomery; and Colt and me.

I got changed with the girls, all of us helping each other in and out of our dresses, and when I came out of the

locker room, I saw Colt coming out of the boys' locker room talking to Duke like old friends. Whatever deal they made, it didn't look like it could have been that bad. Maybe he really could have played this year if he'd tried.

“Hey, I was wondering where you disappeared to,” Colt says, interrupting my thoughts when he appears through the crowd of Gideon's fangirls, leading Magnolia and a Beckett girl who's somehow distantly related to me, since her uncle married my aunt. She's limping and moaning, having apparently turned her ankle while dancing. I'm not too happy to see Harper dragging Royal Dolce and Gloria over as well. Gloria's trailed by Rylan, who's glaring at her like he's ready to pounce if she so much as blinks wrong. I smile to myself as the whole crowd surrounds our table, talking and getting the girl with the hurt ankle into a chair.

My friends come over to the table too, and Colt leans over and kisses my temple. Suddenly, I feel horribly disloyal for imagining going to the dance with anyone else. “I was just posting some tea,” I assure him, waving my phone for emphasis. “And we were talking about the game last night.”

“Oh yeah,” Colt says, nodding at Gideon. “Good game.”

“Can’t take credit for that,” Gideon says, finishing his punch.

“You can take some credit,” I say, then turn to Colt. “He’s only a sophomore, and with DeShaun at QB, anyone else wouldn’t get a minute on the field. But he talks your coach into putting him in almost every game.”

Colt grunts in response.

I give him a meaningful look. “Isn’t that cool?”

“Drop it,” Colt mutters, shooting me a dark glare.

“I just think it’s awesome to see someone who isn’t afraid to go after what he wants,” I say lightly. “You know. Someone with so much *ambition*.”

Colt grinds his teeth. “If that’s such a turn-on, then maybe you should date someone with more ambition.”

“Hey, man,” Gideon says. “That’s uncalled for.”

“I’m not interested in dating someone else,” I assure Colt, laying my hand on his. “I’m just trying to motivate you.”

“You know what?” he says, sliding his hand from mine and pushing back from the table. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should join the team again. I got all the pussy I wanted when I played, not just one.”

Suddenly, all the air is gone from the room. Everyone is staring, but it's not in the good way. I welcome the sting in my eyes. They're not staring at me. They're looking at Colt like he's the kind of boyfriend who just told his girlfriend he wants to sleep with lots of other girls, and after she just lost Homecoming.

"Surprise," he mutters to the group. "I'm still an asshole."

"Don't even bother apologizing," I say, blinking the tears off my lashes. They roll down my cheeks, and I jump up and shove through the crowd, hurrying away.

I hear Colt call after me, just like I wanted, but I don't stop. He can sweat a little after that horrible thing he said to me. I'm just glad he said it in front of everyone, so they can see what I have to put up with. I wanted him to be able to escort me to the dance, but I don't want everyone to forget that he's only here because of me, and that I'm practically a saint to still love him after all he's done.

I run to the bathroom and fix my makeup. Quinn and Susanna come in and comfort me and assure me that I did nothing wrong and that I shouldn't let a boy ruin my last Homecoming. We go back out and dance because they're

right. I'm not letting anyone spoil my senior year's Homecoming, even if I didn't win. I dance with my friends, have fun, and ignore the tension between me and Colt for now.

After a while, people start to scatter. Colt goes off to smoke, Harper and Royal leave together, and Gloria and Rylan get in another fight. I'm a little smug about that. At least she got in a fight with her boyfriend too, which makes me feel better about the little tiff I had with Colt. And I know Rylan won't make it up to her later the way Colt will make it up to me. Rylan doesn't have a tongue piercing that he got just for her, after all.

Gloria's no better than me. Even her boyfriend is lame. She only won because she's hot, she lives in the elite, old-money neighborhood, and she had Baron Dolce for an escort. Since our escorts help us campaign for Homecoming queen, I was hoping that if I broke up her and her boyfriend right before the vote, she'd lose this year. But I only made it worse. I should have realized Baron would dump his date and go with her instead. He's way more popular than Rylan.

Hell, maybe I wouldn't even need Gideon to win. Gloria might have lost if her date was the weird, emo new kid. Instead, she went with the king of the school, and I went with

the social pariah. Of course I lost. What was I thinking would happen? I need to be more strategic if I'm going to win Prom on my own merit.

I need to keep my eye on the prize. That means patching things up with Colt. Yes, I want to enjoy my senior year, but I want to do something so much bigger than high school. And if I'm going to do that, I need to stop worrying about plastic tiaras and focus on diamond rings.

When the crowd dwindles to a half dozen couples lost in their own world and a handful of seniors who want to wring every last memory from the night, my friends and I finally leave the dancefloor. Exhausted from dancing, we flop into chairs with cups of punch from the bottom of the bowl.

“You okay?” Quinn asks.

“Yeah, fine,” I say, glancing around. I haven't seen Colt in a while, but then, he hates this kind of thing. He's probably chain-smoking in his truck, and my dress will stink by the time I get home, and my parents will have questions.

“You sure?” Suzanna asks. “I can't believe he said that to you.”

“It was rude,” Gideon agrees.

“I’m just so tired of fighting for our love,” I say with a sigh. “I wish he’d fight for it sometimes instead of just assuming we’d both be happier with someone else.”

“Well...” Quinn and Suzanna exchange a look.

“Don’t even say maybe we would,” I warn.

“Maybe you’re not fighting for y’all’s love,” Gideon says. “Maybe you’re fighting for him to love you the way you want to be loved.”

“But I want to be loved by him,” I say with a groan, slumping back in my chair and closing my eyes. “Why does he make it so hard?”

“Maybe he can’t love the way you want,” he says.

“Don’t say that,” Suzanna scolds him. “Dixie, you know anyone worth their salt will love you just the way you are.”

“I didn’t mean you weren’t worthy of it,” Gideon says, touching my hand. “You deserve to be loved the way you want, whether it’s by him or someone else. Everyone deserves to find the person who sees them the way they want to be seen.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I demand.

“It means... Maybe I asked the wrong girl to Homecoming.”

I pull my hand back. “Oh, Gideon... You’re sweet, but you know Colt’s my boyfriend.”

“I know,” he says, holding my gaze. “But maybe you asked the wrong *boy* to Homecoming.”

Suzanna and Quinn exchange wide-eyed glances, fighting to hide their giddy grins.

“I’m gonna go,” Gideon says, pushing back from the table and standing. “But think about it.”

I do think about it. I think about it for the last song, as I sway in a circle with my friends, our arms around each other’s shoulders.

I think about being loved the way I want, about being the only girl someone saw on the field, about being seen the way I want to be seen.

I think about being crowned Prom Queen.

I think about it all the way out to Colt’s truck, already knowing it’ll contain only smoke, not an apology for what he said to me or for leaving me alone at the dance.

And for the first time in three years, I think about what it would be like to be going home with someone else.

sixteen

Rumor Has It... Willow Heights' King is attending Homecoming with the school's Queen on his arm. It seems fitting, but can they last? Or does her heart still belong to the boy she lost at last weekend's post-game party?

Colt Darling

I step back into the café after a quick smoke, my gaze sweeping the place automatically. When I don't spot Magnolia with her friends, a cold stone of dread drops into my chest and refuses to budge. I double check the dancefloor, cursing the dim lighting of the room which is now decorated to look like a fairytale for the girls.

After checking the crowd, the few tables at the back, and the bathroom, I duck back into the hall.

Fuck. I had one job. Make sure my cousin didn't fall prey to the Dolces.

The twins are on the dancefloor, but Harper brought Royal, and I didn't see him in there. And he's the one I talked to last. I replay our short conversation after Dixie ran off, looking for reasons I could have pissed him off. He sat down at the table with us when Harper dragged him over.

"So, is this the night you're going to go ahead and murder me?" I asked, because I've gotten used to clawing out a few more inches each day.

"Just give me a reason," Royal growled.

"Ah, so Harper's bullshitting? She says we're supposed to be friends now or some shit."

"Or some shit," he grumbled, glaring at Harper, who was, surprisingly, having my back against Gideon, who was dogging on me after the shitty thing I said to Dixie.

"Yeah, well, that's never gonna happen," I said to Royal. "Unless you really are a god like everyone says, and you can turn back time and undo what you did to my sister."

"Or what you did to mine," he gritted out, glaring at me now.

I could have argued, told him that I didn't do anything to his sister, but it wouldn't have mattered. Royal blames

every person in my family equally.

Besides, I would have done things to her in a heartbeat if she'd been interested. She was a hot new girl, and all three Darlings wanted her. Preston was hung up on Dolly, and he would have just fucked Crystal to ruin her in the eyes of her mafia family, who still think virginity is the dowry their daughters bring to a marriage.

But it was different for me and Devlin. It's the first time we ever liked the same girl. The first time since Destiny I thought maybe I could want more from a girl than to fuck her. I was pissed that Devlin wouldn't back off when he knew that, but now I get it. If she'd been just a fuck to him, he would have backed off. But for him, she was more than that. She was worth the tension it caused between us.

At the time, it pissed me off that he got her, and I got Dixie. I wanted Crystal that night. I knew her better than Devlin. We had lit together and flirted through every class. I took her to Homecoming. I kissed her. But he was the one who took her upstairs to bed.

Sometimes I imagine what things would be like now if she'd ended up in my room that night. Would she still be

alive? Or would I have ended up at the bottom of that river instead of Devlin? And if I had, would we all be better off?

But it doesn't really matter, because she didn't choose me. She chose Devlin.

Pushing those dark thoughts away, I focus on finding Magnolia. Hurrying down the hall, I check every empty classroom. When I spot the heavy wooden door to the library, the stone crushing my ribcage grows to a fucking boulder. The door to the basement is in there.

I know exactly what Royal Dolce does to girls in the basement.

I throw open the library door and step through, not thinking about or caring what happens to me next. If I can stop Royal from destroying the one member of my family they haven't touched, it's worth any price. I've survived everything they threw at me, and if this is the one I don't survive, so be it. It only matters that Maggie survives it.

I blink into the darkness, jumping when the door thuds softly into place behind me. The spacious room is lit only by a dim security light in the far right corner, and a pale glow coming from the crack under a bookshelf in the back left, where the basement door is concealed.

I hear a slight rustle of movement and jerk in the direction of the sound.

Gloria Walton freezes next to a shelf, her hands tucked behind her back.

“Have you seen Magnolia?” I ask, too busy panicking to worry about the bully queen’s wrath. Homecoming weekend has been a turning point in my life too many times—usually for the worse. I should know better than to leave anything up to fate on this night more than any other. If my family’s not cursed, this night definitely is.

“No,” Gloria says, scowling. “Now get out.”

“She didn’t come through here?”

Gloria glances at the back of the library. “I’ve only been here a few minutes, and the only people who came through were Royal and Harper.”

“Fuck,” I mutter. But then her words sink in, and I could fucking kiss Harper for that. If she’s with Royal, they’re probably having makeup sex after their little argument on the dancefloor. The twins are dancing, which means wherever my sneaky little cousin went off to, she won’t be in any real danger.

“Go away,” Gloria says, and I take her in again, more slowly this time. Her hands are still tucked behind her back, and though I can’t see her face clearly in the dark room, I can make out the telltale tracks of mascara on her cheeks.

“What are you doing hiding out in here, Queen B?” I ask, tipping my chin at her.

“Nothing,” she snaps.

“Are you sneaking off to read in the middle of your big night?”

“No,” she says, scowling at me. “I don’t read.”

I chuckle and step into the stacks, running my fingers along one of the long, low shelves. “You’re afraid that will ruin your reputation? That you like to read?”

“I’m not a nerd,” she says with a huff.

I shrug one shoulder. “Too bad. I could get into that sexy librarian thing.”

A gleam of the usual cruelty enters her eyes, and she smirks at me. “Mr. Delacroix *is* pretty hot. I can’t argue with that.”

“Was that supposed to be a blow to my masculinity?” I ask, arching a brow. “I can agree when another guy is

attractive. But that's not who I was talking about."

Gloria glares at me, clearly annoyed that I didn't get defensive when she questioned my sexuality. "Well, go away," she says at last.

"Still pretending you're afraid of me, Butterfly?"

"I'm not scared of you," she says, raising her chin and not moving when I reach her. "I just don't like you, and I came in here to be alone."

We stand across from each other in the narrow aisle between shelves, the air crackling with tension. "What are you hiding from?" I ask. "Seems like you should be back there celebrating your win."

To my surprise, her lower lip quivers, and fuck if it doesn't have my cock twitching in my pants. God, if I could make her weep...

"I don't feel like celebrating," she says, turning away and lifting the crown from her meticulously styled updo. She sets it on top of the shelf and takes a shaky breath.

"Fighting with Fallout Boy again?" I guess. "Or is it Baron this time? Hey, throw in Duke, and you've got all three of them slathering like rabid dogs after your ass. Maybe I can

open the Slaughterpen one night, and they can fight to the death to be the one chosen by Her Royal Highness.”

She thumbs one of the jewels on her gaudy crown. Then she turns to me, her voice dripping with scorn when she speaks. “You really think Baron or Duke would fight for me?”

“Ah, that’s right,” I say, sliding my hands into my pockets. “They like to share you.”

“Why don’t you run back to your swamp, you scum monster?” she snarls.

“Am I in danger if they find us alone together?”

“They won’t come looking for me,” she admits, turning back to her discarded crown. “They don’t care.”

I can’t tell if she’s about to cry about that or not, and I really don’t care. She deserves every tear she’s ever cried—ten times over.

“Aww, is the Prom queen crying that her date didn’t chase after her when she flounced off in a pout?”

“Fuck you, Colt.”

“Huh, look at that, you do know my name.”

“Of course I know your name,” she snaps. “And I don’t give a single fuck if Baron comes looking for me. I just know that he won’t. He’s not interested in me that way. If he was, he wouldn’t have allowed me to date Rylan.”

I just shake my head, amazed that she can say that with a straight face, like it’s ordinary for someone else to choose her dating partners. But then, I let them choose for me too, in some fucked up way, so I’d be a hypocrite if I gave her shit for it. At least she’s in their group and gets something out of it.

“Then it’s Rylan you’re waiting for?” I ask.

“He dumped me,” she says, blinking rapidly, like she’s trying not to cry. “I thought we’d get back together but...”

“Then shouldn’t you be the one going after him?” I ask. “Maybe if you get down on your knees and beg real pretty, he’ll take you back.”

She scoffs and straightens from her dejected position into the fire-breathing dragon queen I know. “I do not beg,” she says, sounding thoroughly offended by the idea.

“If it’s not worth begging for, it’s not worth staying for.”

“You beg for sex with Dixie?” she challenges.

“Nah.” I lean my elbows on the shelf behind me and smirk down at Lo. “She begs for me.”

“Gross,” she says, wrinkling her cute little nose. “Did not need to know that. And no offense, but your girlfriend’s pathetically whipped. I’d never beg for dick.”

“Agree to disagree,” I say with a shrug.

She lets out a huff of frustration. “You think I’m going to get down on my knees and beg the school’s filthy sewer rat to put his creepy little paws on me?”

I give her a cool look. “You might.”

“Then make me,” she challenges, planting her hands on her hips. “If you’re so powerful, make me beg. Prove it—right here, right now.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “That’s not how it works.”

“Oh yeah?” she asks. “Then how does it work?”

“I won’t make you beg,” I say, letting my gaze drift lazily down over her tits, pushed up in the tight top of the dress, then to her slender waist and the curve of her hips just hinted at before the skirt flares out. When I bring my attention

back up her body to her face, goosebumps have broken out over her skin. “I’ll *let* you beg.”

“Let me?” she splutters, looking absolutely incensed. Her fingers clench like she’s trying to keep from taking a swing at me.

“When you’ve earned it,” I say, crossing my feet at the ankles and giving her a hooded look as I relax back against the shelves.

“And how do I do that?” she demands.

I cock a brow and rustle the hem of her dress with the toe of my shoe. “You earn it when I give you permission to.”

She scoffs and drops her arms. “All talk, like I thought.”

This time, I give her a more appreciative once-over. “I bet you’re good at it, too.”

“Guess you’ll never know,” she says, tossing her head and smirking back at me with her pink, glossy lips.

Suddenly, all I want to do is to put her on her knees by force, to shove my cock between those lips so deep she begs me with her eyes instead of her mouth, begs for mercy instead of more. I want to watch the tears drip from her eyes for me

this time, make tracks down her cheeks as she fights for breath, for air, for life. I want to be the one who gives it to her, who gives her permission to breathe, not just to beg.

Before I get too carried away on that fantasy, a pop echoes from somewhere in the school. It's muffled and faraway, the sound faint but unmistakable.

Gloria's eyes widen. "Was that...?"

"A gunshot," I finish for her, on high alert now.

For a moment, all I can hear is my own heartbeat. No screams. No more gunshots.

"Oh my god," she says, her fingers going to her throat. "My sisters are back there."

"Maggie," I say, shoving off the shelves, fear lancing through me.

I trip on Gloria's skirt, and she grabs my arm. "Someone's coming," she whispers urgently.

I hear it then, footsteps echoing from below. That's where the gunshot must have come from. Without thinking, I grab Gloria and drag her to the floor, shoving her under me. I blame instinct, since there's no fucking way I'm willingly

taking a bullet for anyone outside my family, especially the Queen of Hell herself.

The door to the basement scrapes open, and I clamp a hand over Gloria's mouth to hold back any bitching about how she'll get STDs from being so close to me. Her eyes widen, but I turn away, straining to see through the shelves. Royal and Harper emerge from the basement, arguing in hushed tones. They hurry across the library and out into the hall. Royal's holding his shoulder, and I get the briefest glimpse of his hand clamped tight, his fingers glistening with dark blood, before the door swings closed.

Relief floods through me. I'll never be sorry to see Royal Dolce take a bullet, and if it was just one of their usual lovers' quarrels, then Magnolia wasn't involved.

"Get off me," Gloria hisses, wrenching my hand away from her mouth.

I can't help but grin, realizing our compromising position now that the fear is gone. "But it's so much more fun to be *on* you," I say, shifting my hips against hers.

She lifts her hand like she's about to slap me, but I grab her wrist and pin it to the floor. "I told you what would happen if you hit me," I warn.

She bucks under me, thrusting her hips up against mine in the most maddening way, her thighs parting to give her leverage. I watch her struggle, amused by the fury in her eyes. The harder she fights, the harder I get. She has to feel it even through the filmy layers of her dress. She's grinding so hard against me I could swear it's on purpose, that she's fucking with me and not just pissed that for once, she's lost the upper hand.

"Let me go," she growls, yanking furiously against my grip.

"I've never pinned a butterfly and watched it wriggle," I murmur, stroking her hair back with my free hand. "Now I see the appeal."

The smell of her shampoo invades my nostrils and swirls down my spine like a cold corkscrew, piercing some tender place that's hidden by the veil of amnesia. Suddenly, I know. It's not a memory. But there's not a trace of doubt in the sharp certainty of the scent.

I know that scent.

As if she sensed a shift, suddenly her sparkling sapphire eyes are blinking up at me with such intense vulnerability that I forget she's a liar, a poisonous butterfly

who kills when its devoured. Her lips part, her breath coming fast from her struggle, her cheeks flushed in the darkness.

“I’ll scream.”

I smirk down at her, the certainty making me bold.
“No, you won’t.”

Her chin juts out and she glares up at me, but she stops struggling. “How do you know?”

“Because then I’d stop,” I say, leaning closer. I pull her hand above her head, lacing our fingers before pinning it to the floor again. “You don’t want me to stop, do you, Butterfly?”

“Of course I do,” she says, but her voice is weak, and I can see her pupils dilating when I move in, skimming my nose over hers in the lightest touch. Her lids flutter and fall closed, her long lashes stark against her cheeks.

I brush my nose against her jawline, inhaling the sweet, feminine scent of her skin, as familiar as her hair. A shiver visibly quakes through her. Her knees clench involuntarily around my hips, as if she can trap me the way I’ve trapped her, and her chin tilts just a fraction, as if she’s still fighting herself, not wanting to admit her desire but not quite able to

keep from seeking the kiss she so desperately craves. I move back, keeping a whisper of space between our mouths.

“Colt,” she breathes out.

I let my lips brush the soft skin at the corner of her mouth.

“Tell me the truth,” I whisper against her lips.

I settle my free hand over her throat, stroking my thumb over her pulse point that’s fluttering like the wings of a butterfly, betraying the secret she’s trying so hard to keep under wraps.

“I do,” she whispers. “I hate you.”

I skim my lips over her heated skin. “Are you wet?”

A shudder wracks her body, and her knees grip me tighter. “Yes.”

I pulse my fingers tighter for a beat, warning her. “Now the other truth.”

“Please,” she gasps, panting against my lips as she begs for relief.

I draw back, denying her again. “Have we done this before?”

I don't remember Homecoming last year, but since I fucked—and lost—Destiny during Homecomings past, and I fucked Dixie the first time on a Homecoming night, my track record speaks for itself. Fucking the wrong girl and fucking up my life on this night is the standard at this point.

Lo's lids flutter open, her crystal gaze searching mine, as if I'm the one with the truth locked away, as if I'm the danger.

“They'd kill you if we had,” she whispers.

Before I can answer, footsteps scuff on the stone steps of the basement, and a sob echoes in the cavernous room below. A girl stumbles through the door, steps on the hem of her dress, and falls to her knees. Blonde ringlets obscure her features from view, but I don't need a face to recognize my cousin.

“Maggie,” I shout, jumping up and leaving Gloria lying in the aisle between the stacks.

I race for Magnolia, panic spearing through me in sharp spikes tipped with guilt. I grab her shoulders and drag her to her feet. Her face is streaked with tears and snot, and her eyes are swollen and bloodshot. A trickle of blood seeps from the corner of her mouth, and the unmistakable mark of a hand

is imprinted on one of her round cheeks. “Colt?” she asks, her voice high with tears.

“What the fuck happened?” I demand. “Did Royal hurt you?”

She nods and opens her mouth, but the only sound that comes out is an ugly sob. She throws herself into my arms, clinging to my neck. Scooping her up in my arms, I carry her to the chair behind the desk and sink into it, holding her the way my sister never let me. Rage seethes inside me, hot and blind, and I’m grateful that I have to take care of her right now, because if I didn’t, I would do something that would make me a worse monster than the Dolces.

I wouldn’t just hurt them the way they hurt us.

I would kill every last one of them.

“Mags, I’m so sorry,” I murmur, kissing her damp, ruffled hair.

I was here. I was right fucking here. I was almost to her, but I stopped just before I reached her.

I stopped because Gloria Fucking Walton was here.

I look up and see the Homecoming queen standing in the stacks, staring at me over the sparkling crown she set down

earlier. The high and fun of our little flirtation is gone. The distance between us has never been more apparent. She's not just some bully bitch I can fuck with.

She's lethal.

"Did you plan this?" I grit out, holding Maggie's head to my chest.

"What?" Gloria asks, her eyes widening, as if she'd never do such a thing, never stall me so her sadistic boyfriend could ruin a Darling. As if she hasn't done worse.

She's as much the cause of my sister's disappearance as the Dolce twins.

"No," she blurts. "I would never! Magnolia, are you okay?"

She rushes toward us, leaving her crown discarded. I hold up a hand before she can even come close.

"Get the fuck out," I growl. "Go back to the sadistic predators you belong with."

"I want to help," she says, her eyes welling with tears.

"I don't need your help," I snap. "I don't need you to beg or cry like a little bitch and pretend to care. Leave us the fuck alone. If you really want to help, never speak to anyone

in my family again. In fact, never even look at us. Just pretend we don't exist. That's the only thing you can do to help."

"Please," she whispers, her lip trembling. "I'm sorry. What can I do?"

I glare at her with all the fury and guilt burning a hole through my stomach and eating away at my bones. That's what it does, a hatred this deep. I've watched it eat my enemies alive. I won't let it do the same to me.

"You've done enough."

She stops, staring at me like a queen who's just realized that the peasants don't all love her and worship the ground she walks on. It never mattered before. But suddenly she seems to have comprehended that I'm a human and not the diseased mongrel she proclaims me to be. Suddenly, she wants my admiration and devotion, and she looks devastated by the knowledge that she can't have it.

I hope that's what eats her alive slowly, one day at a time, poisoning her from the inside like the Dolces' hatred does to them. I'll visit her grave just to walk across it and laugh before I kneel at the foot of Destiny's headstone—the only queen I'll ever worship.

After a pause, a fat tear spills down Gloria's cheek, tracking from her eye to her chin in a moment, dripping off so quickly I'm not sure it was there at all. Then she turns, grabs up her skirt with both hands, and hurries from the room, her head bowed low.

"What happened?" I ask Magnolia when the door closes and we're alone. A cold emptiness is churning in my gut. I know what they do, but I'm still praying it's not true. Harper would never allow it—unless she got there after Royal, when it was too late.

"He took my gun," Magnolia chokes out. "He shoved it down my throat and said—" She breaks off, a sob wracking her body. Her hand clutches her throat, as if reliving the trauma that bastard caused.

"Did he rape you?" I ask. "Or force you to do anything?"

She shakes her head. "I was just looking for the Midnight Swans notebook. I wanted to know what happened to my brother. But then he came down, and then Harper showed up. I tried to get them to leave, but he tackled me, and the gun went off..."

I lean away, holding her by the shoulders. “You shot Royal?”

She nods, sniffing and wiping her nose on the back of her hand.

I stare at her a second, then drag her closer and hug her so hard the breath huffs out of her lungs. “You’re not the family jewel,” I say, laughing with the sudden onslaught of emotions inside me. “You’re a fucking treasure.”

Relief wars with fury that he hurt my little cousin, and I can’t help but be impressed by her, and yet, I know there could be deadly consequences for what she just did.

“We better get out of here,” I say, setting her on her feet and standing. I grab a handful of tissues from the box on the checkout desk and hand them to her.

She mops her face clean and tosses them, then follows me toward the door. “What about Dixie?”

“I’ll get you to Preston so you’re safe, and then I’ll come back for her.”

I know it’s a dick move and I’ll be making up for it for months. That’s how things work with Dixie, how they’ve worked since I made the mistake of fucking her three years

ago on this very weekend. Considering she thinks this is some kind of anniversary for us, leaving her for any reason is going to get me shut in the doghouse with my guilt for a good long while.

But my family comes first. *Always.*

I step out, checking the hall to make sure no one's coming for Maggie, then hold the door for her. "What were you doing in the library with Gloria?" she asks.

"Nothing."

I slip off my jacket and wrap it around her before we step out into the chilly October night.

The moment my gaze sweeps over the lot, my blood freezes. The demon twins stand not ten paces off, the earthy smell of marijuana giving away their purpose. I send up a prayer that they're only out here to smoke. But if there's a god, he doesn't answer to men like me. The only higher power in my life is the wicked hand of Fate.

"Well, would you look at that?" Baron says, dropping a sucker stem to the pavement and stepping toward us. "We were just talking about what to do with you bastards. Thinking

you can just show up at school events and be immune to consequences.”

“We had a deal,” I say, gritting my teeth and glaring at Duke, who stands puffing on a joint with no concern for the public surroundings. And why would he be? They nearly fucking killed me in broad daylight. Rules and consequences don’t apply to their family.

“You and Duke had a deal,” Baron clarifies, a gleam in his eye as he takes in my cousin. “I don’t make deals with subhuman scavengers.”

“Go,” I whisper under my breath, nudging Maggie’s back. “Key’s in the pocket.”

Without waiting for further instruction or putting up some valiant protest about leaving me behind, she kicks off her heels and takes off across the lot in her bare feet.

Smart girl.

Baron’s eyes light up with the fire of his psychosis, a true predator coming alive when he sees his prey making a mad dash for her life. He watches her for a second, and that gives me enough time to jump into his path before he pursues her. I don’t even want to think about the spark of admiration I

just saw in his eyes when he saw how fast she could run in a dress.

“I’m not here to fight you,” I say, holding up both hands. “But if you’re going after Maggie, you’ll have to go through me first.”

Duke snorts. “Like that’s fucking hard.”

Baron lunges, tackling me around the middle and slamming me to the ground.

The air rips from my lungs, and my head hits the asphalt in a way I’m pretty sure Dr. Swift has warned me could be the last time.

Perfect. If Baron’s on me, it’ll give Magnolia time to get in the truck. I’ve never been more thankful for my family’s obsession with cars. Magnolia may not be old enough for a license, but like everyone in my family, she’s known how to drive since she had to sit in someone’s lap to reach the pedals.

“You know what they do with dogs when they get too beaten to fight?” Baron snarls. “They put them down.”

“There are two of you,” I point out. “Fighting just prolongs your fun.”

“Never stopped Devlin,” he says, shoving his forearm down on my neck until I start choking.

“And look where it got him,” I manage, wrestling to keep his arm from crushing my windpipe. “Dead at the bottom of a fucking river.”

“The only question is, should I make you watch what I’m about to do to your feisty little cousin first, or should I put you out of your misery now?”

The sound of Magnolia gunning the truck’s engine interrupts us, and Baron glances up, his glasses reflecting the headlights. For a split second, I think he’s not going to move, and Magnolia might just be crazy enough to run us both over. But Baron jumps to his feet as the truck hops a curb and roars toward us, showing no sign of veering off course.

I’m pretty sure she’s going to run me over if I don’t get up, so I scrape my carcass up off the asphalt, ignoring the heavy pain thudding in my skull. The tires squeal as she tries to stop in time to miss us. The twins dart aside, and the truck swerves to miss me by inches, then skids to a stop, shrouded in a cloud of noxious rubber smoke.

I reach for the door handle, yanking it open as Baron yells something behind me. I glance back in time to see him

diving for me, and I know that if he pulls me out, he's going into the truck in my place. My heart stops. He's going to drive away with Magnolia, and that'll be the last time I see my cousin—at least the version of her that exists now.

I also have one sickening moment of realization that he's too fast, too close, to keep that from happening.

I can't haul myself up in and get the door closed in half a second.

And then he stumbles, crashing against the back door of the truck with a savage curse. "What the fuck?" he yells as I grab the oh-shit handle and propel myself into the passenger seat.

"Sorry," Duke slurs, holding up both hands. "Guess I tripped."

My gaze snags his for a split second before I slam the door on Baron's words—"You said you weren't drinking so much tonight."

Magnolia lets out a bloodthirsty war cry and gasses it. The tires squeal again, then catch their grip on the pavement, and we shoot forward. I wait for the thud of a body, but Baron fell away from the truck before he got caught under. As much

as I like the idea of him being crushed like an assassin beetle under the big tires of my truck, I also know it's just as well that he wasn't. Royal would end us all if we hurt his brothers.

In the side mirror, I see Duke helping Baron up from where the truck knocked him, brushing him off.

"That was *awesome*," Magnolia crows, pumping her fist, her earlier upset forgotten.

My head is pounding, my heart is pounding, and my thoughts are racing. It's great that we got away, but I know how the Dolces operate better than she does.

It's not over. If anything, Baron will come after us harder now.

I reach into my pocket and take out a pill, tucking it under my tongue. I don't breathe easy until we're well away from the school, driving through the darkened streets of Faulkner. Still, I keep glancing in the rearview, sure I'll see one of their cars in pursuit at any moment. They weren't hurt. They could give chase. And as well as Maggie drives, this truck isn't built for a high-speed chase.

I glance over at my cousin, who's grinning like a lunatic as she sits ramrod straight just to see over the steering

wheel.

I've got to convince her family to take her out of Willow Heights. No more tempting fate. Now that Baron's decided to move on her, there's no way to keep her safe. I can't count on Duke to stick his neck out for us again.

No, not for us.

For me.

Now I owe him another favor. Hell, I owe him my fucking life. Maggie's too. I should be grateful, but I'm just pissed that he put me in his debt and that he'll come to collect whenever he fucking feels like it. He may take his sweet time, let me sweat a little, but the demon always takes his pound of flesh.

But even if he wants me to rack up my debt and cash in big, he can't take a risk like that again without being obvious to his brother. He can't protect us.

In that brief, half-second before I closed the door, I saw the truth reflected back in his gaze. We connected in one of those rare, raw moments of knowing, where no words are needed because his eyes said enough.

He didn't trip.

He tripped Baron.

He may be able to play it off as being drunk, but his eyes were clear—by his standard, anyway.

I know I won't get lucky like that again.

I can't afford to lose focus. My job is to protect Magnolia. Nothing else.

I curse myself for letting her out of my sight, for pursuing the truth when it doesn't matter. My memories don't matter. Hell, I'd like to forget the entirety of high school, so why am I trying to get back that one month? Whatever happened, it's in the past. Magnolia is here now, and she needs someone to keep her here. If I have to live without the truth, then at least it can't hurt me.

What Gloria said in the library is true. The Dolces would've killed me if anything had happened between us. They didn't, which means nothing happened.

Of course it didn't. Even if she's weaker than she lets on, if she's nothing but a fucking fake who doesn't actually find me repulsive at all, I'm not. Even if she creams her jeans for the bad boy and thought it was Bye Week so she could

slum it with me for a night and indulge in whatever shit she's into, I wouldn't have fallen for it.

I know how fucking treacherous she is, how dangerous it would have been to touch her.

So I didn't.

I touched Harper.

They tried to kill me because I was with Harper that day, not Lo. Dad told me as much. Dixie and Harper backed up his story.

Which means the Queen of Hell is just doing what she does best—using psychological warfare to try to break my mind the way her male counterparts used physical brutality to break my body.

But I won't break. I'll put it behind me, and I'll keep walking, and I won't let it change me. Whatever happened that month, and whoever it happened with, it's better left forgotten. It didn't affect me. I'm still me, and she won't change that any more than the attack did.

Nothing good can come from exhuming whatever's locked inside the grave of my memory. Because whatever the truth is, I have a feeling it's awful enough that it might be the

thing that finally succeeds in changing me. And I'll never give anyone the power to do that again.

So I'll drop off Maggie, and I'll go back and get my girlfriend, the one girl who's never asked me to change. The girl who would rather I was still the guy I was before the Dolces came, before anything at all had changed. I'll take her to the jewelry store and let her pick out whatever she wants because she deserves it after the way I acted tonight. I'll fuck her the way she likes, the kind of fucking she calls 'making love.' I won't think about Gloria Walton, or Destiny, or the last girl I fucked the way I wanted, in Cotton Montgomery's pool house.

I'll think about Dixie, and how I can be the man she deserves, a better man than I am. She's the girl I should be changing for, the girl who's been with me all along, who searched for the truth with me when I wanted it and will leave it behind when I tell her I'm done looking. With her, I don't have to worry about ulterior motives. Besides my family, she's the one person in the world I can trust, the one person who loves me and would never lie to me.

seventeen

Rumor Has It... A showdown between the school's usurping queen and the established royalty turned physical on Friday, and this girl got all the tea on camera! Video speaks for itself.

Colt Darling

I'm relieved when Homecoming weekend is over, only to be greeted by another obligation.

"Colt?" Dad calls from the den when I walk in after taking Dixie out to a fancy dinner at Cliff's to make up for being such a belligerent asshole at Homecoming. Usually that only happens when I'm blacked out, like I was the night I got my nips pierced. I've just gotten out of the doghouse for that, but now I'm right back in.

This time, I didn't even have an excuse. I'd been a good boy since the night I went to see Maverick, taking Dixie out for ice cream, buying her the flowers she wanted, and

ordering her a diamond bracelet she picked out from the jewelry store. She said I was a nasty son of a bitch after Maverick brought me home that night, and apparently he also disrespected her, so I had to go down to the tattoo parlor and have a talk with him when I picked up Grandpa's car and got squared away with the money I owed him.

And now I'm right back where I started, thanks to being a dick at the dance.

This being a better person thing sucks balls.

"What's up?" I ask, heading into the den and loosening my tie.

"Family dinner tomorrow at six," Dad says.

Before my rational mind kicks in, a thought of my sister darts into my mind. But of course she's not home. She changed her name and disappeared as soon as she graduated. I try not to let it hurt. I try to understand. She had good reason to want to escape after the Dolce twins got hold of her.

"Dad," I groan, pulling out a barstool opposite him at the island and straddling it. "Do we have to? That was Mom's thing. Is she...?"

A bubble of hope expands in my chest before I can stop it. Dad's lips tighten, and he gives the slightest shake of his head.

Pop.

And just like that, the hope is gone like it never existed.

“Right,” I say, slouching to rest my elbows on the island. “So it's just us. Don't we say whatever we have to say to each other every day?”

Dad runs a hand through his thinning blond hair, now threaded with white. He's not even fifty, but every year has aged him a decade since the Dolces came to Faulkner. I guess that's what happens when you lose your nephew, your wife, and your daughter. Now it's just the two of us, and a family dinner seems an empty tradition at best, a cruel reminder of all we've lost at worst. I can't imagine a more depressing idea than sitting across the table from him, both of us pretending we don't see the two empty seats.

“Not our family,” he says, sitting back on his stool and swirling the ice cubes in his glass. “It's a Darling family dinner.”

“Really?” I ask, even more surprised by that than the idea of the two of us sitting down for a pre-scheduled heart to heart. Though I wouldn’t say we’re close, we don’t make a big deal of it when we need to have a serious talk. Mom was big on what she called family meetings, but Dad and I don’t need all that ceremony. We’re straight with each other.

“Yes,” he says. “It’s not optional. So don’t make plans.”

“Okay...” I watch him as I go back to my tie, undoing the knot and pulling it through my collar. I let it fall in a puddle on the island. “Is that really a good idea? All the remaining Darlings in one place? Seems risky.”

“Do you think Tony Dolce is going to bomb the Darling manor?”

“Probably not,” I admit, standing and going to the bar. “But the demon twins? Absolutely wouldn’t put it past them. And since Maggie shot Royal...”

I snag his glass on the way, then fill another glass with ice. I pour us each a shot of gin before filling the rest of the glasses with tonic water. No blackout nights happening anytime soon.

“We’ll be at your grandfather’s estate,” he says. “You know he has excessive security already in place, and Preston hired guards to patrol the property.”

“How do we know the guards aren’t bought off by the Dolces?” I ask, giving him his drink along with my skeptical look.

“You sound more like Preston every day,” he says with a wry smile, raising his glass toward me.

I clink mine against it and take a sip. “I guess if Preston signed off on it, it’s probably safe enough.”

“He used a security company out of Little Rock,” Dad assures me. “And we’ll each have instructions on what to do in case of an attack.”

“Look at us,” I say, shaking my head. “We sound like we’re in the fucking mafia, not Arkansas.”

*

Grandpa Darling used to host dinners monthly before the Dolces made us question the wisdom of all being in one place at one time. Now, they’re more of an annual thing.

The next evening, we pull up to the gate at the ostentatious Darling estate just north of town where Grandpa Darling is holed up behind ridiculous amounts of security. We have to get a retina scan just to enter. Once inside, it's the same as it's always been—hundreds of acres of forest and pasture lined with neat wooden horse fences; nine holes of golf, a catfish pond, a gazebo, a pool with a lazy river, landscaped gardens; the giant treehouse where I lost my virginity during a game of seven minutes in heaven; several outbuildings including a giant shop filled with go-karts, side-by-sides, four-wheelers, and other fun toys we played with growing up; and the manor house itself. We park in the gravel area behind the twelve-car garage, and Dad turns off the Benz.

“Ready?” he asks. We don't talk a lot, but there's not much unspoken between us, either. We're both comfortable with our relationship, with the silences between us. We have our routine, and it's easy, so neither of us are eager to change it. We were always a quiet family, even when Mom and Mabel were here. We always kept to ourselves at home.

It wasn't until I left the house and joined my cousins that I could really be free, be myself. That's when I really lived. I miss those times now that I spend most nights eating

dinner in front of the TV with Dad, letting the games or shows do the talking for us. Some days, it feels like we're just two more ghosts haunting the big house.

By contrast, tonight's dinner is a five-course ordeal that includes all the Darlings left in Faulkner. Aside from Magnolia, who's the baby of the family and therefore we've all done everything in our power to give her a normal life, we tend to lie low. None of us have accomplishments to brag about. I spend most of dinner trying to convince my uncle to pull Maggie out of Willow Heights.

The only big news is that her brother Sullivan is moving back from the mental institution where he's spent the past few years.

"Can I sing?" Magnolia asks as the dessert plates are cleared. She wiggles with excitement in her chair, her blonde ringlets bouncing around her shoulders. "Mrs. Fox said I was the most talented student she's had in her forty years of teaching. She says I've already progressed so much in the first month of school that she's looking for a voice coach to work with me one-on-one to make sure I reach my full potential."

"And that's why we sent you to Willow Heights," says Grandpa, smiling at her fondly, the way he does all his

granddaughters. He takes a more tough love approach with the grandsons.

“So, can I?” Maggie pushes.

“Of course,” says her dad. “Why don’t we make our way into the sitting room for drinks. Dad, can we have Jules bring a microphone?”

I roll my eyes at Preston, but he’s watching Magnolia with a little frown while her father uses the intercom to call a member of the staff to bring the desired equipment. I don’t know why they don’t text it to her like a normal person, but that’s my family for you.

“See?” Magnolia hisses to me as she darts past my chair on the way to the sitting room. “I told you I’d be fine staying at school.” She sticks out her tongue at me like she’s four instead of fourteen, then flounces off. I sigh. It’s easy to say she’ll be fine when she is. She doesn’t know how quickly that can change, and how little I can do to protect her. I’m sure Baron Dolce is already planning what sick tortures he can inflict on her that he hadn’t yet invented when my sister was his favorite victim.

After the entertainment, I finally slip away from the group and head out to the gazebo at the edge of the catfish

pond to smoke a cigarette and watch the last of the light fade from the pink sky. Lightning bugs blink over the field, suspended in the heavy September heat, and the familiar chorus of insects and frogs fills the evening. The noises drown out the sound of footsteps behind me, but when I take a seat on the bench, I see that Preston's followed me.

“Guess we escaped the family curse for tonight,” I say, folding one leg up and draping the other over it, letting the toe of my boot skim the floorboards. “No one choked on a fish bone and died.”

“You think we're cursed?” Preston asks.

I let out a single bark of laughter. “Nah, man. We're blessed. Fate fucking loves us. Everyone's always telling me how lucky I am.”

He crosses his arms and leans back against one of the supports of the gazebo, watching me. “I get that too.”

“Let's see,” I drawl, dragging on my cigarette. “The girl I was supposed to marry is dead. My mom might as well be dead. My sister ran away and changed her name trying to escape the curse. I'm missing a finger and a month of memories. Sounds pretty lucky to me.”

“That’s from the Dolces, not a curse,” he says, adjusting the silver mask he wears over his face to hide the scars they left on him.

“Destiny died before they even came to town,” I point out, my chest going hollow at her name. Maybe it wasn’t love. Maybe it was just the first crush of an innocent kid who was so grateful that a girl let him fuck her that he thought he loved her.

How would I know what love is? I can’t believe that dumb kid was me at all.

Whatever I have with Dixie is real, lasting. It’s endured shit my love for Destiny never could have imagined.

“You still think about her?” Preston asks.

“Sometimes,” I admit. “You think about Dolly?”

“All the time,” he says, pushing off the support and hopping up to sit on the railing with his feet hanging down. “I’m moving in here, and one day, she’ll move here with me.”

I shake my head. “I thought I was the one with brain damage.”

“I’m moving here now to get ready for that day.”

I tap my cigarette on my boot and narrow my eyes at him. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

“The Dolces found out where my apartment is, so I have to move anyway,” he says. “And I’ve been keeping an eye on things here for years.”

“Certain things more than others,” I say with a smirk.

“I’ll inherit the place when the old man kicks the bucket, so I might as well get a jump start on it,” he says, ignoring my comment. “And the guy could use someone younger around here to look after him and run the estate. He’s past his prime. Not to mention I’ll be here in case Maggie needs a safe place to hide. I’m not about to leave her alone with the old pervert.”

“You’re not just moving in for the hot granny?”

Preston’s always had a special relationship with Grandpa Darling’s third wife, a barely legal girl who divorced the old geezer after only a few years. No way am I letting a chance go by to give him shit about it, either.

He winces. “Don’t call Kamlai that. She’s married to the gardener now. She’s not a Darling anymore.”

“Right,” I say, unable to keep the shit-eating grin from spreading over my face.

“You really want to go there?” he asks, giving me a haughty look instead of returning the smile. I know he’s talking about my girlfriend, so I change the subject.

“You notice how Uncle Jerry said he was checking Sullivan out, not that he’d been discharged?”

He shrugs. “How bad could he be?”

“Probably no worse than us,” I admit. “I wonder what he’s like after living on Shutter Island so long.”

We sit in silence for a while, thinking about our cousin who left town before the Dolces could get their hands on him. Our grandfather did plenty of damage to the kid without them adding to it, but he’s supposedly getting the best care in some remote island institution up north.

I finish my cigarette, and we walk back toward the manor house. After Baron Dolce tried to murder him, Preston’s gotten a tad paranoid, so we don’t spend much time together. We’re all broken in our own ways, and we don’t always see eye to eye on the best ways to deal with our brokenness. Devlin was the glue that held us together, the

leader that made the final call when we argued. But Preston's still my cousin, and I'll always love him more than anyone has a right to be loved.

Before we leave, I open my arms for a hug, which is a big deal for Preston, since his dad is a homophobic piece of garbage who brainwashed his son into thinking any kind of physical affection means he's not a man. He lets me give him a shoulder hug with a pat on the back, and that's progress from where he was a few years ago.

"Try not to suck any Dolce dick at school this week," he says, pulling away.

"Try not to die this week," I shoot back before climbing into the Benz. Then I remember he's also in school, taking online classes at Thorncrown U, the local Catholic college. "Or convert to Catholicism. Same end result, if Grandpa Darling finds out."

He shakes his head and closes my door for me, patting the top of the car and stepping back when Dad shifts into gear.

"That went better than expected," Dad says as we pull up to the gate.

“No one got murdered, so I’d have to agree,” I say, watching the Darling manor disappear in the rearview with the same complicated mix of emotions I always have when it comes to our family patriarch. When we’re almost to the bridge, I lean the seat back, closing my eyes.

“Something you want to talk about?” Dad asks quietly.

“No,” I say, tensing when I feel the car lumber onto the one-lane wooden bridge. Even with my eyes closed, I can feel the hungry abyss below us, the drop that makes my stomach rise up my throat and my balls shrivel. I hate this place with every cell in my body, and I will never get used to crossing it.

We drive in silence for a few minutes before I dare to open my eyes again. “Someone jumped off the bridge,” I say quietly. “Did you hear?”

Dad makes a noncommittal sound.

“A kid who graduated last year. One of the Dolces’ friends.”

Dad shifts in his seat and glances at me before turning his attention back to the road. “Guilt is a hard thing to carry,” he says.

I don't know if he's talking about Dawson or one of us. I probably wished Dawson Walton dead a time or two, and now he is. Or maybe he's saying I know because I treated Dixie like shit, and now the guilt eats away at me as I do my penance. He's probably not talking about me at all, but about Mom or himself, how they couldn't protect us or how they cheated on their marriages to be together.

Hell, maybe he's talking about all of us. Our name means something in Faulkner, but our family has done terrible things here for two hundred years. Maybe the shit we've endured for the past few years isn't a curse or the fault of a cruel Fate. Maybe it's karma catching up to us at last.

*

"Preston's moving to the manor house?" Dixie asks, picking through her salad. "For how long?"

I shrug. "Off the record? Maybe forever. He's going to inherit the property anyway, and it's a big place to redecorate to his tastes. Might as well start now."

"He gets the whole estate?" Dixie asks, gaping at me.

“Well, yeah,” I say. “He’s the favorite son now that Devlin’s gone, and even before that, he was the one our family chose to carry on the Darling legacy. The practice, the manor house, the land... It passes through him.”

“But... That’s not fair,” Dixie protests. “Can’t you split it or something?”

I give her a look. “Why would I want to? I’d have to build another house somewhere on the property. Don’t get me wrong, I love my cousin, but I don’t think we need to be neighbors.”

“I just thought...” She swallows and gives me a guilty look. “I mean, one day, if we got married, I always pictured we’d live there.”

I drop my half-eaten burger onto my plate, trying not to choke at her words.

Of course she thinks about those things. She’s been in love with me for years, and I finally said I loved her and that I’d be her boyfriend. Showing her how much it freaks me out would turn into a fight, though, so I choose my words carefully. “There’s no love lost between you and Preston,” I point out. “Why would you want to live on his property?”

“I wasn’t thinking of it as *his*,” she says. “What do you get? The antebellum house in town?”

“Mabel gets that.” I can’t seem to swallow right. I raise the tall, transparent, red plastic cup to Scarlet to get her attention from across the diner.

When I turn back, Dixie’s mouth is hanging open with obvious indignation. “That’s not fair,” she bursts out. “She’s not even here!”

“She could come back,” I say, handing my cup to Scarlet for a refill and thanking her before continuing. “Grandpa’s not going to cut her out of the will just because she moved to Tennessee.”

“But... What do you get?” Dixie asks, looking wounded on my behalf.

“I’m lucky I get an even cut of the money,” I point out. “Being a child of scandal and all.”

“Okay,” she says, taking a bite of lettuce and nodding thoughtfully as she chews. “So you get what? Ten million? We can work with that.”

“Besides,” I say, not answering the question she’s asked a dozen times over the years about the number in my

trust fund. Sweat is already breaking out on my forehead at the direction this conversation continues to go, and I don't intend to make it worse. I reach in my pocket for a pill. "I don't even know if I want to end up here, and if I do, I don't want to live in a house where bad things have happened."

"You're so superstitious," she teases, smiling again. "A house can't be haunted if no one died there."

I take a long drink of my new soda to loosen my constricting throat, but I don't argue. I tried to explain it before, but she thinks I'm being silly. She lives the simple life of a middle-class straight girl who dreams of popularity and is scared to let go of her high school sweetheart and try to find someone better. She doesn't believe in things like Fate and ghosts.

She'd laugh at me if I told her about the bad feeling that hangs over all the Darling houses in Faulkner, the one that makes me question whether some scorned lover or unfairly treated employee laid a curse on us in centuries past.

She wouldn't understand a little boy lying awake in a guest room in the looming, monstrous house, listening to the wind howl like a tortured soul. She didn't feel the dread pooling like cold blood in his limbs as he got up to search for

his sister in one empty room after another, each beckoning with dark menace; or the panic of becoming so lost in the maze of rooms that he was sure his family had left him there alone and would never come back, so he curled up in a corner and fell asleep, only to be found and scolded by the nanny for being out of bed the next morning.

Or the pit of despair that punches into my gut when I see the blackened skeleton of Devlin's house crumbling to ash next door to the Dolces', reminding me that every day is a day when I'll never see my brother again.

Or the seething fury that rises in my chest when I see the Dolce house with the double staircase that Mom always said made the house welcoming like a hug. That's why we took family pictures on those stairs when I was growing up in that house, right next door to my brother. I wonder which man who destroyed my sister's life with sadistic relish now sleeps in her bedroom in a twist of fate too cruel to call irony.

I wonder if they ever wake to the sound of her screams still echoing in their ears, the way I do in the house outside town where we moved when my parents decided that living next door to the man my mother cheated on, my father's own brother, was a bad idea.

Dixie could never understand all the things that can
haunt a house besides a ghost.

eighteen

Rumor Has It... (Just wanted to pop in and say a quick thanks to my MILLION followers! The tea drop with the vid of the fight in the café put us on the map! Real change is happening thanks to my posts. XOXO, may your tea always be hot!)

Colt Darling

I stare at the ceiling of Dixie's bedroom, but I'm dreaming at the same time. A pair of dainty feet with shell pink nails dances across hardwood floor toward me. I know it's a dream, but in the next second, I grab control of it and steer it upwards.

I have to see who the feet belong to. The urgency borders on desperation as I drag my gaze up her toned legs, the dip of her belly button, her long blonde hair falling around her shoulders. Even though I don't normally see faces in dreams and simply know who the person is, I see this one—the face of my enemy.

Instead of being twisted with scorn and haughtiness, her mouth is smiling, and her blue eyes sparkle with joy, like they did in the picture at the tattoo parlor.

I reach up and take Gloria's narrow hips, pulling her onto my lap the way I did Maverick that day. Her pink lips twist into a smile, and she drapes her arms around my neck, leaning in to brush a kiss over my mouth. Her nipples graze my bare chest, and I groan, my cock bobbing between us. It stands straight up, hard as a rock, and I can already feel precum beading on the tip just from looking at her.

"Let's get out of here," I say impulsively, pulling her in, trying to drag her close enough to give my straining cock some relief.

"Where do you want to go?" she asks, pulling back and giving me that teasing smile.

"Anywhere we can be together," I say without hesitation. I don't just want to fuck her. I want to hold her hand, buy her shit, watch her hair blow in the wind. "Out of Faulkner."

She slides backwards off my lap, the movement slow and sensuous, then leans forward to rest her hands on my thighs so her ass is exposed. God, I'd die to see the view from

the back right now. She gives me a mischievous grin before bending and planting a chaste kiss on the very tip of my cock. Lifting her head, she licks her lips, tasting the salt of my precum. With a growl, I reach for her, but she darts away, across the short space to the counter along the windows where her phone sits next to a remote control.

I don't know where we are, and I want to look around, but I'm afraid if I do, I'll lose control of the dream, of her, and she'll disappear. All I see is hardwood and barstools along the counter that runs under huge windows, with darkness outside.

All I know is that I don't want it to end.

She changes the music and turns back to me, swinging her hair around her bare shoulders and singing along to the song. "Let's get out of this town..."

She dances and sways as she returns to me, every inch of her body bare and glorious. My fingers twitch to touch it, to mark it, to possess it. My mouth waters to taste every inch of her skin, not just the smooth, bare flesh between her thighs. Ambient light glimmers along her limbs, over her golden hair. I've never seen something so beautiful, never been so captivated.

If only I could get Dixie to dance like that—
unashamed, confident, sexy.

Gloria returns to me and places one knee on the bed,
pushing me back. I let her, pulling her down on top of me. She
stretches herself out along my body's length, our bare skin
pressed together in a way that makes me nearly explode.

“Nothing lasts forever,” she whispers against my lips,
still in tune with the song. She smiles and kisses me, and I
know she's trying to keep things light, that she's saying no but
she doesn't want to hurt me.

I want to hurt her.

Not for saying no, but for ever having said yes.

The urge to destroy her in even the smallest way for all
the hundreds of ways she's destroyed me comes on as quick as
a switch being flipped. Rage rises inside me like a roar of
applause, slowly building until I have to deliver.

I wrap my hands around her neck.

“Colt?”

Dixie's freckled face looms over mine, and I blink a
few times, trying to come back to reality. I'm in her bedroom,
not a room with big windows and hardwood flooring and a

ceiling fan over the bed that, now that I'm awake, I'm pretty sure was Cotton Montgomery's pool house.

It's a sunny Saturday morning, the day of the Bye Week race and Halloween party, not a back-to-school party at Cotton's house, where I haven't set foot since that night.

That girl was a shy virgin, the exact opposite of Gloria Walton, and we never had lights or music on like the dream I just created. Why did my subconscious ruin that perfect night of innocence by splattering it with the blood of what happened next, replace the blank face of the girl whose name I never knew with the face of a demon?

I guess that's how nightmares work—mining your favorite memories and taking them on a spin through hell before returning them to you like nothing's changed.

“Oh my god, you scared me,” Dixie says, pressing a hand to her chest. “Your eyes were open, but I could tell you didn't see me. Were you sleeping?”

“I think so.” I shake my head, still out of it from that weird dream.

“Are you on pills again?” she asks. “Because I told you how you acted last time.”

I sit up and rub the back of my neck. “No, and I made that up to you.”

“For a second there, I thought you were dead,” she says, dropping onto the bed beside me and wrapping her arms around my torso. I don’t want to do this when I was just dreaming about some other girl, a girl with pink toes and girlie playlists and all the confidence in the world. I’ve tried to put her out of my head since Homecoming, but the more I try, the harder it becomes. I swear I can still smell her skin every time I close my eyes.

I untangle Dixie’s arms and stand, raking a hand through my hair and combing out the tangles. “I think I was having a... I don’t know. A lucid dream I guess?”

Her eyes widen in alarm. “What happened?”

“At least, I think it was a dream...”

We stare at each other for a second. “Did you remember something?” she asks carefully.

“I don’t know,” I mutter, sighing and sinking onto the edge of the bed again. I rub my temple where the metal plate starts. I can feel it through my skin, this foreign part of my

body. “It couldn’t have been a memory. When did I start liking Taylor Swift?”

“You just liked her one day. Why?”

“When?”

She shrugs. “We were in my car, and one of her songs came on. You said you liked it, and you asked me who it was.”

“And I said I must really have brain damage.” I remember that day, soon after I came home from the final surgery, before I was cleared to drive. I was ready to do something normal, something that wasn’t shrouded in the sickly glow of fluorescent bulbs and the smell of antiseptic, so Dixie took me out.

“Maybe your musical tastes changed,” she says. “Or maybe a nurse played it in the hospital when you were in the coma, and you don’t remember, but it sunk in subconsciously.”

“I don’t think so,” I mutter.

“What do you mean?” she asks. “Why are you asking all these questions?”

“It was playing in the dream.” I know I should stop talking, that I don’t need to tell her everything. But she’s always so honest with me, even telling me we broke up during

the time I can't remember. No one else would have known that, since we kept everything secret back then. She could have told me that I was her boyfriend already, but she didn't. She sat by my side and waited all year for me, and then this summer, she asked if we could be official.

I don't want to hurt her more than I already have or give her anything to worry about. She's already insecure enough.

And fuck Gloria Walton. It's bad enough I have to watch my back all day at school thanks to her and her fuck boys. I don't need Demon Barbie haunting my nights.

After the fight in the café, which Magnolia filmed and Dixie posted online, the Dolces are pissed. My uncle finally pulled Maggie from school on Friday, so I won't have to worry about her paying the price if I fuck up and lose focus again. Now I just have to worry about the Dolces murdering me if Gloria snitches about the library incident. That must be what brought this on. The tension between us bled over into my dreams.

The media attention caused by the viral video has protected Dixie, who's become a bit of a celebrity. She was on the local news, and she's basically taken over the anti-Dolce

movement from Harper. I expected Harper to fight for her spot in the rebellion, but she doesn't seem to care who leads it as long as it's alive. Besides sharing a friend in Harper, I want nothing to do with Gloria.

But my fucked up brain does not agree.

I'm sure it's just guilt bubbling to the surface. I may not have fucked Gloria last year or even kissed her in the library last week, but I know Dixie would be devastated if she knew the thoughts in my head, even if they're more about degrading the queen than any desire on my part.

"What's going on?" Dixie asks. "Are you remembering something? Was the dream about Harper?"

"No," I say slowly. "It was about Lo."

"Gloria?" she asks, blinking at me with as much confusion as I feel right now.

Somehow, I've halfway convinced myself it was real. It felt so real, I can almost feel her slender neck in my hands...

"What were you doing in this... This dream?" Dixie asks, her eyes wide with some mixture of dread and... What?

Guilt? Betrayal?

“Nothing,” I say. “It’s just... I wouldn’t have been hanging out with Gloria during Bye Week last year, right? I mean, she hates me. We hate each other. I don’t even know her. But...”

Dixie gulps, looking as scared as if I told her the Dolce boys were coming for her. “But what?” she whispers.

“Did you put her number in my phone?” I ask, turning to her.

“What?”

“Did you put Gloria’s number in my phone,” I repeat. “Under the name Butterfly?”

“What?” she chokes out, her voice barely audible.

“I don’t know,” I say again, because there’s so fucking much I don’t know, and I can’t seem to let it go. I sigh and lean my elbows on my knees. “She was playing this song the other day, and I asked her to text it to me. I gave her my number, and she sent it, and it came through under the name Butterfly. I thought you must have put it in for some reason, maybe to contact her about a dance routine or...”

“Oh, yeah,” Dixie says quickly, sitting up straight. “Sorry. I must have texted her when you had your old phone,

before the attack, and that's why you can't see the texts I sent. With everything that happened, I'd forgotten. Did you delete it?"

"Why Butterfly?" I ask.

"I..." She looks like she's trying to remember, but then she brightens. "Because of her tattoo, obviously. She has that butterfly tattoo on her arm."

I have to admit that makes sense, and it's the kind of thing Dixie would do, not wanting me to know I had another girl's number. But I can't help but feel like every fucking person in this town is lying to me, keeping some ugly truth from me for reasons I don't understand.

Especially since, as I go over the conversation a few minutes later while showering off, I remember that Maverick told me that Gloria got that tattoo last November, which was after my attack.

nineteen

Rumor Has It... After a week's suspension due to their involvement in the café brawl, WHPA's Kings will be back in action tonight! What happens at Bye Week stays at Bye Week, so be there or die of FOMO. It's sure to be the tea party of the year, but not one drop will be spilled on this app!

Dixie Powell

I waited two and a half years for Colt to realize he loved me. I endured my freshman year, when he bullied me and called me his dog, led me around on a leash, and let his cousins degrade me in unspeakable ways.

I endured sophomore year, when he refused to publicly acknowledge me and convinced me to let him share me with Preston.

I endured junior year, when he came home from the hospital with his whole head wrapped like a mummy, and

when he got the casts off, he had to leave every few weeks for reconstructive surgeries all over the world. Even when he was home, he had to walk with his hands out in front of him like a zombie because he had such bad double vision he kept bumping into things.

He thinks he's the only one who changed in that time, that I'm the same girl I was freshman year, the girl who let him strip me naked and lead me around on a leash on the infamous New Year's Eve when Devlin died. I was desperate to gain access to the inner circle, and Colt said that to enter the exclusive room called the Den of Iniquity, the beating heart of every Darling party, I had to sign a waiver saying I'd do whatever the Darlings wanted. I didn't know that Preston would put me on a stage on all fours and shove a bottle of vodka in my ass and order me to stay like that so everyone walking by could laugh at me.

Colt doesn't see it, but I'm no longer his pathetic little dog. I'm a wolf waiting to be unleashed, like Fenrir chained in his cave, waiting to bring the end of the world.

At first, it bothered me that he didn't see my evolution. Then I realized that he sees us as tied together so completely that he thinks his demise was mine, that it brought me down

instead of lifting me up. When he grew weak, I let him think I was weak. But I grew stronger every day. I made my own goals, and I learned how to achieve them despite his waffling and lack of ambition. He may be reeling and confused and without direction, may not know what he wants so he breaks up with me and then comes back over and over.

I always knew what I wanted. I wanted him. And I did what I needed to do to keep him. I faked tears and insecurities when it was all I had to make him stay. I made blog posts that subtly nudged the Dolces to put him back in line if he started to stray. I wasn't about to let it all be for nothing when he broke up with me last year. I knew he'd come back. He always does.

He's the dog, not me.

He's the one who went sniffing around some other bitch.

And now I know who it was.

I was wrong all along.

It was never Harper.

It was Gloria.

I want to vomit as I sit there, listening to him humming in the shower. I think I'm in shock.

Like I first thought, Butterfly is everything I'm not. But she's not some cute hippie chick. She's the exact opposite of that, too. She's the last person on earth I would have guessed.

Harper, sure. She's into tough guys. She's got lots of tattoos like Colt. She fights in his illegal boxing ring. They make sense in some way that makes me want to puke. But I can comprehend them together. Harper's the kind of girl that guys like Colt think is cool.

Gloria though... She's not just the opposite of me.

She's everything Colt hates.

And she's everything I stand against, the popular-skinny-blonde-perfect-cheerleader.

Despite all that, I made an effort to be her friend because we're on the dance team together. I never cried on her shoulder the way I did Harper's, but somehow it's worse to know it's her. How could he do that to me?

How could *she*?

She danced beside me on the football field at every game last year. We might not be close friends, but we're close in the way teams are close. We share a locker room, borrow tampons from each other, help do each other's hair before the games, put temporary tattoos on each other's cheeks, check our tights before a routine. She's had a thousand moments to tell me that she slept with my boyfriend.

She was probably scared I'd use the power of my gossip blog to destroy her.

Which is exactly what I'm going to do.

It's all I have, but it will be enough. We're in high school. Gossip can destroy someone, make them want to die as much as I do when I think about them together, about Colt's dick inside her.

Why him?

She had the Dolce boys, the three kings of the school, wrapped around her finger. She could have gotten with any of their friends once Royal dumped her, could have hooked up with Cotton or DeShaun or Gideon. They're founding sons, rich, popular.

She has everything.

But that wasn't enough. She had to spread her legs for the guy she bullied for years before that, the guy she *still* calls gutter trash.

They obviously knew it was dangerous. That's why they used a code name. He doesn't remember it, doesn't remember why. I'll never know, either. Why Butterfly? Thinking about them coming up with some inside joke makes me want to die.

No, it doesn't make me want to die. It makes me want to commit murder.

Another shock goes through me. Is *she* the reason they almost killed Colt?

I remember finding out that he and Harper left together, skipping school to hang out. It was a week after he dumped me. I already thought it was because of another girl. I remember the jealousy burning inside me that day. I remember wanting the Dolces to find out because they'd already taken an interest in Harper. I wanted them to put a stop to it.

It didn't make sense afterwards, that they'd react that harshly over a girl they hadn't even known for more than a month.

But if they found out he'd been sleeping with Gloria, their perfect queen, Royal's long-time arm candy... That makes sense. They must have confronted him with Harper, and he told them. Sometimes he gets tired of being their silent punching bag and opens his mouth, usually at the worst possible times. I can just imagine them finding him with Harper and giving him shit, and him not being able to resist telling them.

Not only had he hung out with their latest victim, he'd fucked someone after they told him I was the only girl he could have. And not just anyone. A cheerleader. Not just a cheerleader, but the head cheerleader, the Homecoming queen, the most popular girl in school. The most forbidden of all the girls he could have chosen.

Their favorite.

I'm seething with fury and humiliation. If I'd had this ammunition last year, I could have destroyed her. I would have been Prom Queen last spring. I would have been Homecoming Queen this year. Instead, I clapped for that lying snake. I had to watch her walk across the stage yet again. I had to watch everyone adoring her when they should have been adoring me. I had to watch her fawn over the Dolce boys, never knowing

she'd whored herself out to my boyfriend too. Only she knows.

But soon enough, I'll make sure everyone knows what kind of person she is.

I can't tell people that she slept with Colt. If I put it on the blog, he'll know. And if he knows, he might remember. He might start to see whatever he saw in her then.

He hates her right now, and I'm going to keep it that way.

I'm going to be Prom Queen, but I won't stop there. I'm already way more popular than I was last year thanks to the video I posted going viral on a national scale. Now I'm the queen of the commoners at Willow Heights, the People's Queen. With a million-follower army behind me on *The Tea* app, I'll take down Gloria Walton, the royal's queen. I'll be unbeatable. I will officially be on the top of the pyramid, the undisputed queen of all of Willow Heights.

Freshman year, when I set my sights on Colt Darling, becoming the most popular girl in school seemed an impossible dream. Now, only one thing stands in my way—one person.

But I've defeated worse enemies than the simpering little princess, the Dolces' bitch. I can do this. I just need to think rationally, to pick my moment. Just like with Colt, it's all about timing. I have to think it over, come up with a plan. I can't look like a mean girl who's just jealous. I have to gain everyone's sympathy, so they know I'm one of them, not someone who fits the same mold as the last queen. I'll choose my words carefully, make sure everyone knows she's a complete slut, not fit for the throne. Then, once I've destroyed her, I'll take her place.

I know I can do it. It will be hard to be around her without letting on that I know. But I did it with Harper last year, and I can do it again. I can fake a smile with the best of them, just like Gloria Walton. And thanks to three years of waiting for Colt to get on one knee, I'm a patient girl.

If I play my cards right and don't rush into things like a hotheaded bitch ready for a girl fight, I can get everything I've ever wanted without breaking so much as a nail.

On Prom night, I will win the crown. Before graduation, I will get the diamond ring. I will move away and get famous. And one day, when I move back here, the Darling

name will once again mean what it used to, and everyone in town will know who I am.

Gloria Walton will be nothing but a miserable old drunk at the end of the bar who can't get a man to go home with her because they've all been there, done that.

When I run into her in town, I'll let her know that I knew it was her all along. I'll make sure she has something to regret, that she knows it was her fault and not mine. That I was only dealing out justice, and if she hadn't been such a treacherous bitch and tried to steal my man, I wouldn't have destroyed her so thoroughly that no one could ever love her again, no matter how pretty she looks on the outside.

I know how rotten and ugly she is on the inside.

And soon, everyone in school will know too.

Colt will never want to be with her no matter how hot and blonde she is. Just to make sure, I bought myself a little insurance policy.

After listening to make sure the shower is still running, I open my bottom drawer and pull out the little jewelry box where I keep my secrets stashed. Using the key I keep around my neck, I unlock it.

Colt's old phone stares back at me, the screen black. I pick up the small, velvet box beside it and flip it open. I hoped I wouldn't have to use this, but what I found out today changes everything.

It's a last resort, but I'm prepared to use it if I need it.

All I have to do is wait for the next time Colt takes too many of those pills he loves so much. He never remembers what he did afterwards. Last time, I told him he mistreated me when he was blacked out, so he'd buy me something to decorate my wrist.

This time, I'll tell him he treated me oh so right—and I'll be wearing the proof on my finger.

Will Colt recover his memories before it's too late?

Continue the story in book 2, with the addition of Gloria's

POV: <http://books2read.com/evildeeds>

Curious how the Darling/Dolce feud began? Read the story of Devlin Darling and Crystal Dolce, the forbidden love that started it all, here:

<http://books2read.com/bullyme>