



Dread

SELENA

Evil Deeds

Willow Heights Preparatory Academy:

The Envy

Book 2

slena

Evil Deeds

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Unabridged First Edition

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For the Fans.

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*Some memories are realities and are better than
anything that can ever happen to one again.*

—Willa Cather

blurb

Rylan Woods

*You can run, pretty girl. You can hide in another state, under another name.
But not forever. Not from me.*

Everyone knows her as Gloria Walton, the reigning queen of Willow Heights Prep Academy. But I knew the real girl, before she gave up everything for the throne.

Her beauty tempted me. Her wildness seduced me.

Her leaving broke me.

Now it's time to repay the favor.

I will take the crown from her head and show the world it's a fake, just like her. I'm the real thing.

The king of your nightmares has found you, pretty girl.

Ready or not, here I come...

content warning

I write for 18+ readers who have **no triggers**.

If this does not describe you, this series is not for you.

If you simply must proceed, check my website for a detailed list:

<http://selenaauthor.com>

If you're ready for anything...

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

prologue

2.5 Years Ago

Congratulations, RUMOR HAS IT! Your account on The Tea is active. You can now spill your first drop of Tea.

Rylan Woods

“Ready or not, here I come,” I called down the long, wide hallway of the Beauregard home. Giggles echoed from another room as the girls tried to find last-minute hiding places. Heart pounding with anticipation, I crept along, the plush white-and-gold Persian rug silencing my footsteps. I always won the game. Not because I found clever hiding places, but because I could find anyone. I was the best seeker.

But tonight, I didn’t care about showing off my skill .

I was more interested in seeking out Gloria and having a moment alone than in finding our little sisters. Hide and seek was still fun on occasion, especially since her parents were clueless. They thought it was a wholesome game for all of us, that we were still kids with childish interests. Since they wouldn’t let us be in her room with the door closed, though, this was a rare opportunity to steal a few moments unsupervised. If we didn’t go quiet for too long, I could sneak into Gloria’s room, where I knew I’d find her waiting for me.

Sometimes it was still fun to play the game in Gloria’s house, since it was so big it offered endless hiding places. I wasn’t too old to enjoy the

squeals of her little sisters when I found them in one of the nooks of the spacious, modern house. They were only a year younger than we were, and Everleigh had a crush on me, which was fun during games like this. She always shrieked dramatically and carried on when I found her.

But tonight, I only wanted my girlfriend, to feel her body against mine, her silky hair between my fingers, her whispers against my cheeks. I turned the knob on Gloria's door and stepped inside. It was dark, but I heard her hiss from across the room to alert me to her location. She wanted to be found, wanted a moment alone with me as much as I did. That ego boost was a thousand times more potent than winning a game.

I pulled her bedroom door closed and raced across her furry white rug to pull open the closet. "Found you."

She dove into my arms, and our mouths met each other's hungrily, the way they always did. I was hard in seconds, and I pushed my dick against her. When she giggled into my mouth, I pulled her over to the bed, sinking onto it with her. She rolled us over so she was on top, and I ran my hands down her back, over her butt. I'd never touched a girl before Gloria, never dared to hope a girl like her would look at me. She was out of my league, and everyone knew it.

But she was the one who had pushed me back against the wall beside the water fountain at school and kissed me after we got paired up for a project and aced our presentation. She wasn't shy like some girls or loud and braggy like the ones who'd already hooked up. We were only thirteen when we started dating, and neither of us had been with anyone before, though she'd dated and made out with a few guys. Even though she'd climb on my lap and grind on me, seeming to find it hilarious how fast she could get me hard, we hadn't gone all the way.

There was so much more about her to love, anyway. She already knew

how to drive at thirteen. She even knew how to hotwire her dad's cars and sneak out in them so we could make out for hours. Even though her family was loaded and mine was normal, she wasn't ashamed of me. She charmed my parents, then brought them to meet hers so we could go to the beach together and spend all afternoon lying in the sand and splashing in the waves. Our parents became friends, having cocktails and talking boring financial stuff while our little sisters played in the Beauregard's pool, and we shared a chaise lounge and a virgin daiquiri under the disapproving gaze of her big brother.

At school, she sat with me at lunch even though she was popular. When I asked why she wasn't dating some hot-shot football player, she said she didn't have a type, that emo boys in beanies were just as hot as jocks to her.

Now I rolled us over, so I was between her legs, grinding against her. We'd been together for a year, and I wanted to respect her boundaries until she was ready, but I was dying to go all the way.

"I love you," I said, running my fingers through her silky hair.

"You don't even know who I am," she teased. "I could be anyone. Maybe I'm Everleigh."

While I found Everleigh's crush awkward at times, Gloria thought it was hilarious and never missed a chance to tease me about it.

"Hmm, I don't think so," I said, sliding a hand under her shirt. "I know what you feel like, Gloria Beauregard."

She gave a little gasp when I reached under her bra and stroked her nipple. It was so soft it made my dick jerk in my jeans, a wet spot instantly forming on my boxers.

"We better get back to the game before they get bored of hiding," she whispered, but she rolled her head to the side, baring her throat.

"This is more fun," I said, kissing her ear and moving my hand down her

belly. I undid her button and worked my hand into her jeans.

“Oh god,” she breathed when I touched her. “Rylan...”

“I love you so much,” I said, rubbing her underwear and wishing more than my hand was between her legs.

“I love you too.” She rocked her hips against my hand. She was every guy’s fantasy, and I still had no clue how I’d ended up with her. I kept waiting to wake up from this dream.

“I’ve never wanted anything as much as I want to be inside you,” I whispered in her ear.

“We can’t,” she said breathlessly. “My parents are downstairs. My brother might come looking for us.”

“I know,” I said. “I want it to be special for you. If you’re ready by then, I could get a hotel for prom. You can tell your parents you’re staying with a friend.”

“I’m ready now,” she said. “Book the hotel.”

“Really?” I asked, pulling back and switching on the lamp to look at her. I didn’t want to get my hopes up and have her change her mind later, when I wasn’t touching her and making her feel good.

“Yeah,” she said, gazing up at me with pure trust. “I’m ready, Rylan. I love you. I know I’ll always love you. I want you to be my first.”

“I will be,” I said, scooting down beside her. “And you’ll be mine. My first and last and only. I promise. I’m going to marry you as soon as we turn eighteen.”

“I promise too,” she whispered. “Thank you for being so patient, for waiting all this time. I just want it to be special, not rushed or when my parents might walk in on us...”

“I know,” I said. “I’m going to make it special. I promise. Your first time will be as perfect as you are.”

I leaned down to kiss her, but we were interrupted by the sound of loud pounding. I jumped, even though the sound wasn't from her door. Downstairs, the echoes of men shouting filled the house. I frowned down at Gloria, whose eyes had gone wide. "Who is that?"

"I don't know," she said, scrambling up and buttoning her jeans. She raked her hand through her blonde hair, trying to untangle it. "Come on, let's go see."

"Give me a minute," I said, though some cold little knot of dread had already settled in my gut, making my balls shrink up into my body.

It only took a few seconds for my raging hard-on to turn to a semi. My heart was beating hard in my chest, and I wanted to pull Gloria down on the bed and pretend nothing was happening.

A sick feeling lurched in my chest, though, and this time, it was Amber on my mind. "Where's my sister?" I asked, starting for the door.

"Everleigh?" Gloria called down the hall as we started for the stairs. "Eleanor? Amber? Where y'all at?"

Everleigh slipped out of a playroom in the hall, looking pale and scared. "Who's here?" she asked. "What's happening?"

"Girls," Mrs. Beauregard called, her voice high and tight, a tone I'd never heard her use before. "Come down here, please."

We hurried down the wide, spiral staircase, my grip tight on the gleaming banister as we wound around. I leaned over the railing, trying to find Amber, but the oversized crystal chandelier blocked my view. Men in black suits crawled over the place like cockroaches—a precursor of what was to come.

"Daddy!" Gloria cried. She dropped my hand and ran down the stairs.

Everleigh took my other hand shyly, and I gave her a reassuring smile and squeezed her fingers, even though I was anything but calm. I'd learned to

be the protective big brother for Amber, so I put on my coolest expression and tried to look like I wasn't worried.

I turned just in time to see Mr. Beauregard being led out of the enormous marble kitchen in handcuffs. Three men passed us going up the stairs. Eleanor ran to her mother and threw herself into her arms, sobbing hysterically. Dawson was following his father, asking over and over where they were taking him, his voice laced with fear.

Everything was in chaos.

It felt like a dream.

Or maybe it was the sickening moment when the dream ends, when you wake up and reality takes over. The past year had been too good to be true, and this just proved that something that perfect couldn't be real life.

"Your friends need to go home," Mrs. Beauregard said in that same clipped tone.

"Amber," I called into the cavernous foyer echoing with footsteps and voices. "Come out!"

I was starting to panic when I saw her peeking out from the door to the den. I extracted my hand from Everleigh's and ran over to my sister. "What's happening?" she asked, her voice small and her eyes big.

"I don't know," I said, my instinct to protect her kicking in. "But we need to leave."

"Are we going to get in trouble?" she asked. "What if they won't let us go?"

"Don't be silly," I said, trying to make my tone light. "We're going home. They're here for the Beauregards, not us."

I didn't want to leave Gloria, so I turned back when we reached the front door. She was standing there with her arms hanging at her sides while Everleigh clung to her, crying onto her shoulder. I motioned for her to come

with us, but she gave the tiniest shake of her head. I was torn between leaving with Amber right that moment, before anyone noticed or questioned us, and going back for Gloria.

I may have sounded confident, but I had no clue what was going on. I was a good kid. I didn't have run-ins with cops. But that didn't mean a bunch of guys who looked like FBI agents didn't scare me.

"Stay right here," I ordered Amber, planting her beside a huge potted fern near the front door. "Don't move."

I ran back across the two-story foyer to where Gloria stood at the bottom of the stairs. "Come on," I said, grabbing her hand. "We can go to my house. You can stay with me until... Whatever this is... Is over."

"Can I come?" Everleigh asked, dropping her arms from around Gloria's stiff body and throwing herself into my arms. She clung to me, sobbing against my chest. I held her, but my attention was on her sister.

Gloria shook her head. "Go," she said, barely above a whisper. "I'll meet you at our spot after school tomorrow."

I wanted to argue, but her mom was yelling at Amber to leave, and I didn't want her making my sister cry. I maneuvered my arm over Everleigh and grabbed Gloria's face between my hands while Everleigh gripped my side. I kissed Gloria once, hard, on the mouth. "I'll wait for you."

I didn't know, when I made that promise, how long I'd be waiting.

She nodded, her eyes unblinking and shocked. "Me too," she mumbled.

Everleigh was still hanging on me, even when I kissed her sister. I pried her loose and pushed her back into Gloria's arms.

"I love you," I said, already stepping away.

Amber was crying, so I ran back and pulled her out the door. She was my sister, and it was my job to take care of her when my parents weren't around, even if I'd rather be with my girlfriend. I wasn't the kind of guy who

abandoned his sister for a girl.

Not yet, anyway.

I didn't know what was going on, why the feds were all over my girlfriend's house. I didn't know what was about to happen, that her family's ruin would be mine too. I didn't know then that I could ever hate Gloria Beauregard. But I'd know soon enough.

one

Now

Rumor Has It... Two of Faulkner's reigning Kings will be back to rule the halls of Willow Heights this year. What lucky girls will they choose as their Queens?

Gloria Walton

My face is fixed in a placid smile as I climb into the back seat of the H2 the morning of my first day of senior year. I think of Jackie Kennedy climbing into the motorcade and later scrambling over the trunk of the car. The horror and incomprehensible pain she was in, so much that she forgot to smile and wave, forgot the whole world would watch her undignified dive, her undisguised anguish.

And then I push away the dark thoughts and picture her eternal smile as she stood with her sons at the funeral. Whenever I falter, I look at my phone's lock screen to remind myself.

This is poise. This is grace. This was the face of America.

I am the face of Willow Heights.

I scoot to the middle seat. My sisters climb in on either side of me.

"Let's talk about how this year is going to go," Baron says when Duke starts driving. I was their brother's consort for the past two years, and I built my entire survival strategy around appeasing their family. So here I am,

playing Russian roulette with a pair of psychopaths for one more year. Now that their brother and our brother graduated, the whole dynamic will shift.

My sisters glance nervously at each other. I can't tell if they're scared or excited.

"Are you asking us out?" Everleigh asks.

Duke laughs. "Nah, you can fuck around this year."

"What?" Eleanor whispers. "You're cutting us out?"

"No, no," Baron says. "Nobody's being cut out. You can date the other guys on the team. Just you two. Lo, you'll be on call for us."

"Heard."

He glances in the rearview mirror, so briefly my sisters don't catch it. But I do. I'm always on guard, always alert for danger. The moment I let my guard down, he could rip all this away, leave me with nothing to show for all I've endured the past two years.

Once upon a time, they turned me into a weak, groveling, pathetic mess. Then Mom slapped my tear-stained cheeks and told me to get myself together, that being a victim is a choice. If I didn't give them the power to make me into one, then I didn't have to be one.

So I walked into school with my head held high the next day, as serene as Jackie. I made a choice that day. I will never let them beat me or make me crawl in the dirt like Colt Darling.

He's a victim. I am a victor.

As Duke's H2 roars toward school, a bubble of incinerating rage swells in my chest like a scream, but I keep my face forward, my smile painted into place on the outside of my shell. I've perfected my flawless veneer so well they don't notice that the butterfly inside her cocoon is withered and dying, as ugly as a hissing cockroach.

They wouldn't care anyway. The only thing that matters is what the

world sees. Like Mom always says, it's the outside that counts.

She gave me instructions on the first day of sophomore year, ones that have kept women alive for centuries under their oppressors.

Look pretty. Be useful. Smile.

My sisters are watching me for direction, but we can't talk here. We'll talk strategy in the bathroom at school. Right now, it takes all I have not to scream out the unfairness of it all. The only thing that stops me is knowing that if I argue with the Dolce boys, they might claim one of my sisters instead. After two years of terror, El and Ev are finally free. They can date normal guys—if they can find one to put up with their fucked up pasts. My sisters are as traumatized by the D-boys as I am.

This is their chance to get out, though, and I'm not going to do anything to mess that up.

I'm happy for them.

And I'll be fine. It's just one more year. The twins may not be Rylan, or even Royal, but they're not so bad. They only call every month or so now. Duke likes to prove his prowess, and unlike his brothers, he'll even go down. If it's just him, it can be fun after a few drinks. I decided last year I was all in, that there was no other way, so there's no use complaining. I'm the queen of Willow Heights, after all. I've got the kings of the school—hell, of the town—to stay interested for two years, and they show no signs of ditching me, even after their brother did.

I'm the luckiest girl in school.

Our mother will be pleased to find out Royal's brothers are keeping us on their roster, in their inner circle, even after he dumped me. I hold my chin up, my poise in place, so they'll never question whether I'm pleased as well. I never let them see beneath the surface, to the real girl underneath—or the decaying ruins of that girl.

When I told Mom about the breakup, she told me I was a fool to lose Royal. He's inheriting the biggest business in this town. He was the JFK to my Jackie, and I let him walk away.

As if I could have stopped him.

I didn't confide all the ugly truths to any of them. We don't talk about things like that in our family. We talk about how to keep looking our best, about skincare routines and waist training and what we can wear to convince people we belong. We talk about TV shows, and who's going out with who this year. We don't talk about what goes on behind the curtain, or what Daddy did, or how it feels to be destroyed on the inside.

For a moment, though, I let myself imagine what would happen if Royal told his brothers not to talk to me. If I were shunned, and we were truly free of them.

I never let myself hope, though. Hope is for the weak.

We pull up at Willow Heights, and it's show time. All eyes on us.

The walk into school is a big deal for the Dolce boys, especially on the first day. This year, the stakes are higher than ever. Royal's gone, leaving a power vacuum. The twins will fill it, but it's impossible for things to stay exactly the same without their brother. He was the perfect king—imposing, devastatingly gorgeous, and always in control. Now we've got the executioner and the jester stepping into his place. If Duke has his way, senior year will be one big drunken orgy.

If Baron has his way...

Dixie waves, interrupting my thoughts. I wave back, then continue inside. Everyone is watching, whispering, wondering. I hold my head high, basking in the attention. I'd be lying if I said this part doesn't feel good. Being admired, coveted, and envied. I want to blow them kisses like I do in the Homecoming parade. Even though the amount of attention everyone pays

is quite frankly ridiculous, it's addictive too.

All of them think I'm the *It Girl*. That I'm somehow special, that I must have a golden pussy to keep the Dolce boys interested for so long. It has nothing to do with that, of course. It has to do with the fact that they groomed me to be their female counterpart, pushed me until I snapped, then glued my pieces back together in the image of their perfect girl. Sometimes I think it's funny how people must see me—hot, untouchable, and cruel.

And yet, I know I'm not any of these things.

Or am I?

I stop at my locker, and the Dolce boys move on. They like to leave a little mystery, not make it too obvious where they stand. They would never tie themselves down with one girl, not even me. My job is to act like I don't care, like I'm above it all.

Just like Jackie.

I'm almost to my first class when I spot Dixie hovering like a mosquito. She waves and drags her companion toward me. It takes me a second to realize who it is—someone I never expected to see again.

I have one second to slap a smile on my face, to play the part I've practiced until the mask falls into place without instruction or effort. To hide the fact that one look from his bored, smoky blue eyes has incinerated everything left alive inside me.

"Hey," Dixie says, sidling over to me, her eyes alive with excitement, her curly red hair already escaping the scrunchy she's wearing on top of her head. "Sooo, how was your summer? Looks like it must have been pretty exciting."

She wiggles her brows at me, and I fight the urge to tell her she should worry about her hair more than who I'm fucking. But no one cares about her hair, and everyone cares who the D-boys are fucking. They all want to know

their chances.

It's my job to feed Dixie the info the Dolces want her to have. It's her job to spread it through the school via her gossip blog.

We all have our roles to play, not just me.

"Summer was fine," I say. "We went to the beach. What about you? You look pretty happy, considering you're towing around a piece of human excrement."

"Oh my god, right," she squeals. "You don't know. Colt has to repeat senior year because he missed most of last year. And my summer was amazing because we're together now. *Really* together. Officially."

Dread claws at the inside of my shell, and my pulse flutters like wings in my throat, but I quirk a brow and purse my lips, never showing a thing. "Is that allowed?"

"Finally," Dixie says, giggling. "Royal's not here, and Colt worked out a deal with Duke over the summer." She beams up at him like he bought a billboard in Times Square announcing their dating status.

Colt Darling hasn't been allowed to date the past few years. He's been shunned, not even eating lunch in the café with everyone else. Not that I care. I helped drive him out of the café. No one wants to look at that gross, deformed mongrel while they eat.

Dixie's already holding Colt's hand, but she grips his arm with her other hand and sways into his side, looking like she's about to break out in a happy dance in the middle of the hall because she managed to convince the school's least desirable guy to go out with her. She clings onto his bicep like she's afraid he'll run if she lets go.

Maybe he would.

"Well, congratulations," I say. "You've landed Willow Heights' lowest bottom feeder. Why do you keep towing that leach around? You know you

could get a medium-hot guy, at least. Everyone knows *that* loser would be fuck ugly if he hadn't had, like, a million plastic surgeries."

Colt scoffs. "And you're so real?"

I want to scream. I never wanted to see him again. He'll ruin everything. *Everything.*

"Anyway..." Dixie says, widening her eyes at him in warning.

He knows better than to talk to the Queen Bitch like that. He knows better than to talk to me at all.

He looks me up and down with that hooded gaze before his dusky blue eyes settle on mine, cool and indifferent. I raise my chin and return the look. I'm not afraid of him. He should be afraid of me. He should be kissing my feet right now, not looking at me like something that should be scraped off the bottom of his shoe. He clearly needs a reminder of what happens when he forgets his place.

The thought of being the one to remind him fills my chest with elation even as warning bells ring in my brain.

Get it together, you stupid bitch.

I never thought I'd have to see Colt again. He dropped out last year, after he got jumped in the parking lot and almost died. He was a senior. He's supposed to be gone. I want to scream at my cursed luck. All my hard work, the hours and days and weeks and months I've spent perfecting my diamond exterior, and he could crush it like it's as fragile as a robin's egg.

I desperately search his gaze, trying to find some spark of hatred, some whisper of fear or desire. That's how everyone else looks at me. But there's nothing in his eyes that speaks to any emotion.

Not that I expected anything. We walked around the same school for my entire sophomore year pretending the day in the basement never happened, the one and only day I allowed the Dolces to make me a victim. I hate that he

saw me like that, and even more, I hate that he saw my sisters that way. But he knows how strong I am, that I only let them win that one day. I didn't let them break me the way they broke him.

The way we broke him.

I helped them because he didn't fight back. I crushed him because he let me, because he allowed us to make him a victim every single day. He chose that because he's weak. I'm strong. He might hate me, but he'll never feel sorry for me. Weak people don't pity the strong. Losers don't pity winners for their victory.

He was only here a few months of my junior year, so we haven't seen each other in almost a year. Still, it's funny how much history can exist between two people who've barely had a dozen conversations. It's funny how much two enemies can have in common. At the end of the day, we're all just trying to survive. It's every man for himself. How is it that the queen on her throne, surrounded by a sea of admirers, understands that better than the nine-fingered loser smoking under the bleachers alone?

"So, are you going to tell us or what?" Dixie asks. "What's up with you and the D-boys?"

I glance at Colt, but he's staring off, looking bored. Not like I was going to tell Dixie anything real, anyway. We're friends in the way only two people who don't trust each other can be.

"Oh, you know," I say with a dismissive wave of my hand. "D-boys will be D-boys."

Before I'm pressed to elaborate, Cotton Montgomery swaggers by with DeShaun Rose. I'm relieved to have an excuse to slide away from Dixie and fall in with the guys from my group.

"Have I got a surprise for you," Cotton says, the smug grin on his face making me want to gouge his eyes out with my new set of nails.

Those eyes have seen too much.

“Every girl in school knows not to take surprises from you,” I say, smiling sweetly at him. “Especially when they come in open containers.”

“You don’t have to worry about that anymore,” Cotton says. “I’m reforming my ways this year. I won’t need girls at parties. I have a hot new stepsister.”

“That’s just wrong,” DeShaun says, shoving Cotton.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

The Montgomery family lives next door. I would know if someone had moved in. Not that we’re friendly—Cotton hates me as much as I hate him—but Mom would have dragged us over to greet them and welcome them to the neighborhood, like we live in some 1950s suburban nightmare.

“You’ll see,” he says. “Our parents met on vacation this summer. They’re already married. My new mom arrives next week, and she’s bringing me a pretty present to play with. And something for you too.”

“Why would your stepmom bring me a present?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him.

“You’ll see,” he says again, his grin broadening. Then he swaggers off down the hall, leaving me gaping after him, fury rising like a phoenix inside me. I hate being the last to know. My position at this school demands I be *first* to know everything. If I don’t, I look weak.

Cotton knows better than get in my way, though. He’s terrified of me, as he should be.

I’m not scared of whatever he has planned. I’m just annoyed that he’s fucking with me. But I won’t show it. I keep my game face on, joining a couple dance team girls on my way into class. We greet each other like long-lost strangers even though we’ve been on a group chat all summer. I play along, my ponytail swinging, a smile plastered on my face like I’m on the

sidelines at a football game right now.

If you stop dancing, you die.

I try to put Cotton's words out of my head, to put Colt's surprise return and the fact that I'm Baron's punching bag for another year in the back of my mind. Cotton will never spill my secrets because if he does, I'll spill his and ruin him. Dixie's social circle intersects with mine, but Colt's not even on the periphery of my world. I barely remembered he existed the first couple months last year. And Baron will be too busy raping and pillaging his way through the freshman girls to even bother with me until second semester.

By then, we'll be on the downhill slide toward graduation. If I keep my head in the game, none of them can catch me. And next year, I'll be at Yale, with all this behind me. High school will be nothing but a fever dream interrupted by the tender ache of a fleeting crush that might have been love if it had been given time to breathe.

two

Rumor Has It... Several new students will be transferring to Willow Heights' this year. Will they make waves or fit right in?

Rylan Woods

“Ready or not, here I fucking come,” I mutter, staring at the pixelated photo I screenshot with my phone. In it, Gloria “Walton” smiles from the top of a pyramid, her blonde hair in a perky ponytail, her lips coated with black lipstick. I’m used to seeing that on the lips of girls who like my band, but apparently that’s cool even for cheerleaders now.

The hands of the girls under her strain to hold her foot, while her other leg is curled up behind her in a perfect scorpion.

I helped her learn that move.

She must feel real fucking victorious up there, thinking she won.

She got to walk away from the wreckage her family caused—or run, like a thief in the night. Funny, since that’s exactly what her family is. Thieves. Except they’re rich, so they call it by a fancier name.

Rich people don’t steal. They embezzle.

Hatred blooms like a mushroom cloud in my chest, and I bite down on one of my lip rings until it threatens to tear through my skin.

Her family got to start over, change their identity with a snap of their fingers, and wash their hands of the whole ordeal. They moved on. For them, nothing changed but their names. Gloria’s still popular, still a cheerleader,

still on the top of the pyramid.

That's okay. I'm not mad.

The higher you climb, the further you fall.

She might not have changed, but I have. A lot can change in two and a half years. Lives end. New ones begin, birthed in the darkness of the mind when sleep won't come and the shouting begins as it does every night, the finger pointing, the blame.

Who decided to invest? Who trusted too much to one man?

They blame each other, but it's my fault. I introduced them to her family.

And then one night there's a gunshot after the shouting.

I'm in the hall.

It's all my fault.

My mother is screaming.

I'm pulling her off his body.

My sister is asking what's happening.

No one is answering.

There are pieces of brain on the wall...

...

...

There's no moving on from that.

From *her*.

She promised she'd come back. She promised she'd be mine forever.

I never forget a promise.

Not even when they do. Rich people don't see the consequences of their actions, the ripple effect that goes from the place where they dropped the bomb, onto the commoners. The financial ruin, the personal devastation.

Her father committed fraud, not suicide.

Her mother disappeared to another state, not into a bottle.

She went to private school, not foster care.

They ran, but they couldn't hide. Not forever. Not from someone as determined as me.

I found her, and I'm coming for her.

I orchestrated the most brilliant revenge scheme the world has ever seen. And now it's time to collect on the promises she made.

Ready or not...

Here I come.

three

Rumor Has It... Senior projects have been announced! To everyone's shock, the two Kings and their Queen have chosen the school's pariah as the fourth member of their team. What other surprises do they have up their sleeves?

Gloria Walton

As if finding out I'm still on the twins' roster for another year wasn't bad enough, later in the week I find out they chose Colt to join our senior project. The moment he walks in and announces he's our fourth member, my heart stops beating. I try to breathe, to keep my fingers from shaking and my soul from leaving my body from the sheer terror ripping through me.

Be just like Jackie, I remind myself as the blinding waves keep coming.

It's clear within seconds that Colt didn't choose this, that he doesn't want anything to do with us. Up until now, we haven't wanted anything to do with him, either.

I still don't, but the twins orchestrated this, no doubt about it. The school may pretend to assign everyone based on interests and future career paths, but we all know it's bullshit. The families with the deepest pockets always gently remind the school to group their offspring together. DeShaun already told me that the founding sons always form the top groups. Sometimes, they let the *nouveau riche* or a cut-throat founding daughter join. I expected the two senior founding sons—DeShaun Rose and Cotton Montgomery—to pair up with the Dolce twins.

I was already wary when the D-boys showed up in the room I'd been assigned. When Colt shows up, a thousand alarm bells start screaming like sirens in my head. The Dolce family has already taken over Faulkner, but they don't have the history here that the town's founders do. Every move they make is an attempt to cement their status as members of the town's elite. Joining the founding sons on this important assignment is the perfect power move for the twins this year.

There's no way Baron Dolce, who never so much as blinks without a strategy in place, chose this combination without reason. That becomes even more clear when Colt announces he has brain damage and won't even be an asset for the team. I knew that already, since Royal cracked his skull and almost killed him, but I didn't know the extent until he drops the bomb.

"I can't remember what actually happened," he says when the twins question him about the attack. "Or the month or so before y'all bashed my head in."

Suddenly, the roaring, storm-tossed waves of panic crashing through my brain like an Atlantic storm go still as the Caribbean Sea.

He doesn't remember.

There are no words to describe the emotions that well up inside me as that revelation sinks in. Relief is too weak to describe the way I think I'll fall out of my chair in a puddle of shaking hysteria at the realization that he can't betray our secret. Frustration isn't even a shadow of the screaming beast of fury that claws at my insides, ripping my sanity to shreds. Devastation is too mild, a lukewarm version of the soul-rending agony that twists the bars of my golden cage.

Someone speaks to me, and I smile, just like Jackie.

I have no idea what they said. My brain is moving at light-speed behind my placid, painted-on face. I can't focus on a thought before it's gone. I can't

control an emotion before it's replaced with another.

Colt doesn't remember.

He doesn't remember Bye Week last year, the fateful morning I gave him a ride home. He can't tell them the things we did in Cotton Montgomery's pool house. He doesn't know that for a moment, we emerged from our cocoons and let our butterfly souls dance through the sky together, that we bent the bars of each other's cages and let each other out.

He doesn't know we let each other in.

And that's a good thing.

He can't expose me or get himself killed for it.

Which means I can't either.

If I want to survive this year, I have to forget it as thoroughly as he has. I have to lock myself away even tighter, so tightly there's no room for memory or sorrow, for desire or fire, for wings that beat like a heart. I have to carry on like nothing happened, just like he is.

I'll do it, even if it kills me. I'll do it, because if I don't, they'll kill *him*.

Somehow, we make it through the first session, though afterwards, I have no memory of what was said after his confession. I only know I kept my face on, even when I was blacked out in an anxiety attack for an entire afternoon.

Only when we're walking out, and Colt stops at the door to let me go ahead, his fingers skimming my lower back, do I return to my body with a jolt that's so harsh it draws a gasp from my lips.

I catch Baron's glance our way, and I bite down on my tongue until I taste the warm, salty blood of my animal body. It brings me back to myself, and I scold myself for letting my mask slip even for a fraction of a second.

Pull yourself together, you worthless cunt.

"Don't touch me, you freak," I warn, curling my lip at Colt in a snarl.

“What, you think this is contagious?” he asks, holding up a hand that’s so scarred he can’t even fully straighten the fingers as he wiggles them at me.

I shrink away in disgust, and he laughs.

The bastard has the nerve to laugh. *At me.*

“Don’t worry, Princess, burns don’t work that way. And you might as well get used to looking at my scars, since apparently we’re going to be spending a lot of time together this semester.”

“In your dreams,” I snap, glaring at him with all the hatred I can convey, hoping he’ll get the message and back off.

He’s not being careful because he doesn’t know he needs to.

But Baron knows.

A shudder wracks my body, and I play it up, pretending it’s a reaction to Colt.

Baron knows.

There’s no other reason he would want to be in a group with Colt. And he doesn’t just know that something happened between us. Surely he has some evil plan brewing in his sadistic mind. He wouldn’t give up the prestige of working with two powerful families just to study us under the microscope of his mind. True, he has an unhealthy fascination with people who possess the ability to feel human emotion, but that won’t be enough. He must want something to come of it. But what?

It doesn’t make sense. He already has all the power.

If he wanted to destroy Colt, he would. No one would even try to stop him.

If he wanted to destroy me, he could. People would glory in my downfall. Everyone loves to see a queen toppled from the throne. And they may not know it, but I hold no power.

Baron holds power, and he tells them to worship me as queen, so they

do. What they don't realize is that I obey and serve him every bit as much as they do. They may not know I'm powerless, but Baron absolutely does.

So what could he possibly gain from torturing me all semester?

I shudder at the memories of all the evil deeds I've seen him do, the schemes I've been called to take part in, the things he's done to me. There is no end to his depravity, and there's no use trying to figure him out. Only another sociopath could understand the workings of his inhuman mind.

"Need a ride, Lo?" Duke asks behind me.

I close my eyes and breathe through my nose, forcing myself not to scream. I wanted to get out of here, to slide behind the wheel of June Bug and go for a drive, figure all this out.

"I drove this morning, remember?" I ask, keeping my tone light and casual. No use giving them a reason to pounce.

He throws an arm around my shoulders. "You hear that?"

"Hear what?" I ask, smiling up at him, so anyone leaving their senior projects early will see us the way the Dolces want them to.

"The sound of my back seat calling," Duke says with a grin.

"I don't hear that," I say, noticing from the corner of my eye that Colt is watching.

"Come on, we finished early," Duke points out. "Which means we've got a little time before your sisters get out of class, and Baron's got some Swans business to take care of."

Colt is still beside us, and I fantasize about clawing his eyes out with my new set of nails. He needs to mind his own fucking business. But I fix the smile on my face as Baron splits off to go do whatever he does for the school's secret society.

"Just the two of us?" I purr up at Duke, running my fingertips down the front of his white shirt and pretending I don't even know that Colt is still with

us.

“Yep,” Duke says, tightening his arm around my shoulder. “I’m all yours, babe.”

I force myself not to glance at Colt before we push through the doors of the school and into the sweltering sauna of September heat. In his Hummer, Duke turns the air on full blast, then hops into the back seat and undoes his navy slacks, pulling his dick out. I take a breath and resist the urge to let out a sigh of annoyance. Instead, I grip his floppy dick and get to work with a smile on my face.

Just like Jackie.

When he’s hard, I have to wrap both my hands around his shaft so I don’t choke to death on his length. God, these boys are freaking enormous. I hollow out my cheeks and go all in, deep throating him with each stroke, hoping to get it over with as fast as possible.

“Get on the floor,” he growls, his fingers twining into my hair.

I slide off the seat and kneel on the floor at his feet, though I hate what he’s about to do. I keep bobbing up and down, slobbering on his dick like the thirsty bitch he wants me to be.

“Fuck, I like the way you look with my cock in your mouth,” he says, still fisting my hair and pumping my mouth over his dick. Ignoring my aching jaw and burning scalp, I focus on breathing and keeping suction while he takes control of my head and sets the tempo.

A minute later, his hips rise off the seat, and he yanks me off his dick. I let it slip from my mouth with an audible pop, just the way he likes. He jerks my head back, grabs his cock with his other hand, and groans as his hot cum spurts over my upturned face. I squeeze my eyes closed and let my jaw go slack, even though I want to clench my teeth and growl at him that I’ve told him a thousand times how much cum in the eye fucking hurts.

When he's done, and his cum is drenching my face, pooling in my eyes and dripping into my mouth and down my chin, he releases my hair.

"Fuck, you're good at that," he says. "Stay there. I want to look at you while I cool off."

I obey, remaining in place while he catches his breath. I even lick the corners of my mouth to give him a little reward for not being a complete barbarian like his brothers. He groans in response, then hooks his hands under my arms and drags me back onto the seat.

"Give me my purse," I say, reaching out blindly.

He hands it over, and I dig through and find my pack of wipes. I clean out my eye sockets, but as soon as I open them, I know I wasn't fast enough. While he caught his breath, it leaked through my lids, and they burn like the devil pissed in them.

"Good call," he says. "Dude who details my car is probably tired of getting cum out of the floormats."

I glare at him and pull out another wipe, swiping it over my cheeks and chin.

"What?" he asks.

"You're going to give me pinkeye," I snap. "I told you not to get it in my eyes."

"But it's so hot," he groans, dragging me into his arms and kissing me. He sucks my lower lip between his, then darts the tip of his tongue into the corners of my mouth, tasting himself on my lips. His big hands tighten on my waist, and I remember to suck in my tummy while he holds me, moaning softly into my mouth and sliding his tongue against mine. At last, he pulls back and rests his cheek on top of my head. "Want me to eat you out?"

"I'm good."

"You sure?" he asks. "You know I love eating your pussy."

“You love eating all pussy,” I point out, drawing away.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” he says, a smile tugging up the corners of his beautiful, damning mouth. I lift my fingers to skim them over his square jaw to his sculpted chin, with just the hint of a dimple in the center. He’s so painfully perfect on the outside that people don’t bother looking much deeper, at how fucked up he is inside. That’s something I understand all too well.

I angle my head and press my lips to his in a soft kiss. He pulls me tighter into his arms, and I let myself melt into his hard body, giving him the closeness I know he craves. I taught myself not to need anything from them a long time ago, but I think Duke’s mom didn’t hug him enough, and he seeks out comfort in whatever arms he can find to hold him. I can spare another moment for this broken boy, even though I know it won’t help either of us. I can’t fix him, and he can’t save me. If his brother puts me on the pyre this year, he’ll light the match and dance in the firelight while I burn.

After a few minutes of long, lingering kisses, I pull away.

“Rain check?” I say, searching his dark, unreadable gaze. “I want to take a drive. Can you take my sisters home?”

“Sure, babe.” He holds out a hand, and I press the wad of used wipes into it.

“Thanks.” I lean in and give him a quick kiss, then check the parking lot. Unless they’re behind schedule, most seniors have half days at Willow Heights, with the afternoon reserved for the independent study project. That means anyone could be in the parking lot, and I’m not going to climb out of the car with my makeup wiped off.

“All clear,” Duke says, checking the other side.

I hop down and climb in behind the wheel of the shimmering, forest green Mustang I’ve named June Bug for obvious reasons. Turning the key in

the ignition, I close my eyes and let the noise of my life fade away, replaced with the sweet, sweet sound of the engine chatter.

An annoying shriek cuts through the noise, and I open my eyes and glare into the rearview. Colt has Dixie pinned up against his truck, her knee hitched up while he grinds against her. God, could they be any more tacky?

I wrench the gear stick into reverse and shoot out of my spot, shifting roughly and stomping the gas pedal. I boil the hides as I turn out of the lot and race past the gorgeous stone buildings that make up Willow Heights Preparatory Academy, home of the Knights that I dutifully cheer for under the lights every Friday night and service under the sheets every time they call.

I hate them.

I hate every single one of them. I picture dousing the entire school in gasoline and throwing a match on it, preferably while the secret society is locked in the basement, trapped inside. I wouldn't help. They never helped me. I'd stand there and watch the flames dance, as hypnotized as Duke Dolce, while it burned. While they all burned.

And then I'd soar high into the sky on the heat waves that rose from it, spiraling like a scrap of ash into the night, and disappear forever.

I turn onto the highway and let the two-ninety horsepower show me what it can do. I feel it charge through me, flattening me against the seat and bringing a smile that I don't have to fake. I feel it spread over my face like the summer sun on the beach. I can almost feel the breeze in my hair, making the strands tickle my skin as they dance across it; can almost smell the salt air and hear the rush and thunder of the waves. I may not be able to go home, back to Savannah where life was simple and my family was whole and my love was pure, but for a few precious hours, I can escape my life and every ugly thing in it.

I can be myself, alone in this car, where no one can see me and expect me to be anything I don't want to be.

Faulkner falls behind me, and then the rice fields, and then Ridgedale. I wish I could drive forever, until there was nothing left. But no matter how long I drive, I never reach the end. Something always turns me around and points me back home. Something calls me back. I can't leave Faulkner, because if I did, I'd be leaving my sisters to their fate, with nothing between them and the Dolce boys.

I push the thoughts away and let myself sink into the purr of the engine, the freedom I feel only when I'm inside my June Bug or under her hood. When I was a kid, Mom's uncle would come visit us in Savannah once or twice a year on his cross-country treks for one of the car clubs he belonged to. Dad didn't like him, but Mom would never turn away family, even her eccentric uncle, a rich old paranoid prepper. I guess it paid off, since he left her the house and all his cars when he died.

He's the one who taught me how to care for and maintain a car, something he said would come in handy if society ever collapsed. Dad would just shake his head and point out that if society collapsed, we wouldn't have gasoline to run our vehicles. But that didn't stop my great uncle from teaching me how to change my own oil and spark plugs, in addition to basics like how to change a tire and add fluids. The day I successfully hotwired the 1969 Boss 302, he let me name her and promised he'd leave her to me in the will. True to his word, she's all mine now, from her JUNE BUG license plate to the mustang emblem on the hood.

She's my prize possession—my only possession. The feds demanded we hand over our house, our money, our every possession down to our phones and the shoes in our closet. They took our family and shattered it. They left us with nothing, which is how we ended up moving in with my great uncle.

And then he died and gave me this.

When the Dolces took everything the feds hadn't, things I thought could never be taken, this remained. They ordered me to hand over my innocence, my dignity, so they could dictate every part of my life from my phone to my clothes and makeup. They devoured my soul and left me with nothing to call my own, not even my body.

No matter what they've done to me, though, they've never bothered my car. This alone is mine.

She's the one thing they haven't touched, which makes her even more sacred, even more *me* than my own body.

A song by the Regrettes comes on the radio, one I used to love back in Savannah. I pull off and take a winding road to nowhere, through the wilting trees and smothering afternoon heat. I miss the Spanish moss that hung over the sun-dappled roads back home, the ones we'd take to go out to the beach on Daddy-Daughter days. Dad would put the top down on his shiny new Lambo, and the twins and I would scream out the lyrics at the top of our lungs, high on the thrill of cursing when Mom wasn't around to correct us and tell us that proper ladies don't talk like that.

Dad would just smile indulgently at his three perfect blonde daughters like we were put on earth for the sole purpose of making him proud.

I don't want to think about him rotting in a prison somewhere, about that car being impounded and sold. Instead, I put the top down and sing along at the top of my lungs, as if my voice alone can drown out all three of us in my memory. As if I can erase the memories by willpower alone, replace the ones I made back home with this afternoon alone on a winding road in Arkansas, with just my June Bug for company.

As if I can forget the innocence of a time when I thought we were the good guys.

My mind returns to this afternoon, to the boy who is blessed with the greatest gift in the world and doesn't even know it. Of all people, it had to be Colt Darling to win the jackpot. Why does he get to forget, and I can't?

I've fucking suffered.

I could tell him. I could be as petty and cruel as everyone thinks I am, and I could tell him everything he doesn't know. I could tell him about the game of hide and seek, and the way he looked behind the wheel of my June Bug, and the moment we realized we were more than strangers who were enemies for the simple reason that we'd been picked by opposing teams.

Maybe then when he saw me smiling at Duke, he wouldn't look at me with such judgment in his eyes that it makes me sick. Maybe he'd burn with jealousy the way I burn when he smiles at that leach Dixie like she's the only girl he's ever wanted. Maybe he'd call me his butterfly again and run his palms up my sides and light my whole world on fire. Maybe this time, we'd dance through the flames together, letting it all burn. Maybe he'd know that I can spot a fake from a mile away, and he'd save every genuine smile for me.

But maybe he wouldn't.

I don't know if I'm strong enough to lose him again.

It's a silly fantasy anyway.

I could no more love Colt Darling than I could transform into an actual butterfly, change every villain in my story into a hero, take back every evil deed I've done, save my family, call myself pure, or be the girl I was before the Dolce boys destroyed me, when the only boy I thought I'd ever love was a gentle, adoring emo boy named Rylan Woods.

four

Rumor Has It... With Willow Heights' Queen and two Princesses spoken for, the Kings remain unattached. Are they unattainable, or will someone tame the notorious bachelors at last?

Rylan Woods

Gloria steps into her bedroom and stops short, her eyes widening like she's seen a ghost. She probably thinks she has. She's forgotten me and moved on like I never existed, like I'm dead and buried. She tromps over my grave, the grave of our relationship, every fucking day. I bet I never even cross her mind.

"R-Rylan?" she asks, her bag dropping to the floor with a thud.

"Found you," I say flatly.

"What... What are you doing here? How did you get here? Wh..."

"How did I find you?" I ask, acid burning in my throat at the sight of her after all this time.

She sways on her feet like she might faint. Her face has gone pale, but it looks just the same. She's taller, probably five-five instead of the short girl I remember, and it's all in the legs. She's willowy and thin now, almost gaunt. Her hair is longer but just as blonde, and she sports a fresh tan, like she spent the summer at the beach the way we used to. *Together.*

I use my anger to fuel me, to keep me from being the simp I was when we were together. She walked away. She didn't suffer.

I suffered.

Now it's her turn.

I stand and stroll around her room, touching her things. "It wasn't hard," I say. "See, your great-uncle who lived in this very house used to take the whole family to Savannah every summer. That's when your mom first went there. That's why she fell in love with the place."

"What does that have to do with anything?" she asks, watching me warily, like she might bolt. I pick up a picture on her desk, a framed one of her and her sisters on the beach, crowded together with their brother behind them, his arms around all three of them, squishing them together. They're all smiling. Happy to forget the past like it didn't happen. Happy to walk away from the destruction they caused.

"It has everything to do with it," I say, bringing the picture down on the corner of the desk.

Glass rains down on the worn hardwood floor. Gloria jumps, but she still doesn't step into the room.

"See, I knew you couldn't have gone anywhere with your dad, seeing as how he's in federal prison," I say, putting two fingers to my temple. "My dad? Dead, not that you care. Shot himself in the head. *Blam!*"

Gloria winces.

"Your dad, though, didn't have any other properties," I say, flipping my lip ring around with my tongue before going on. "We found that out. That they took everything. Just like that show your sisters used to love. *Schitt's Creek*. Except you didn't even get this shitty little down, did you? You just moved here, convinced some senile old dinosaur to give you his house. Your mother probably killed him too."

"What?" she whispers.

I scratch at the edge of the picture with a nail sporting black polish,

catching it and pulling the photo out of the frame. I crumple it in my fist, watching Gloria's face as I crush her happy, smiling family the way she crushed mine. She flinches, but she doesn't stop me. Maybe she's afraid of me.

She should be.

"That's right," I say. "I was always the best at hide and seek. Remember? Your mom didn't even change her maiden name. It's like you weren't even trying. Did you want me to catch you, like you did in when we played in your house back home? You wanted me to find you, didn't you?"

I wheel on her, demanding an answer, but she just shakes her head in silence.

I open my fingers and drop the crumpled picture at my feet. "I found you, found out who you were staying with. But that wasn't enough. So then I found the neighbors. I started researching them, and I found out one of them was single. So I sent some pictures of my mom, set up a dating profile for her when I got back from one of our stints in foster care. She hasn't been the same since Dad died, but she went along. She's pretty out of it, if you want the truth. When Mr. Montgomery learned she lived in Savannah, he was only too happy to come visit. Your uncle had talked to them about Savannah a lot, it turns out. The old frog really liked the place. Your neighbors had never been, but they were interested. They just needed a little something to tip the scales, convince them it was worth it."

"You catfished my neighbor?" Gloria asks.

"You could call it that," I say. "Or you could call it matchmaking. Guess I'm a modern-day Cupid. I slipped through your window, after all."

She glances at the window in question, where a tree made it almost too easy to sneak in. While she's distracted, I look down at the frame in my hand, and rage billows inside me. Hidden behind the picture of her shiny happy

family is one of Gloria on the arm of some oversized ‘roid-head in a tux. She’s wearing a blue gown, a crown resting in her blonde updo.

I stare at it, my blood turning to acid in my veins.

“Who the fuck is this?” I grit out.

“It’s no one,” she says, finally stepping forward. “It’s just a guy I went to prom with. We’re not together. That’s why I covered the picture.”

“Why didn’t you get rid of it?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at her and holding the frame away when she reaches for it.

“I don’t know,” she says. “It’s a prom picture. People keep those forever. It’s not a big deal.”

“A picture of you with another guy, a picture you’re going to keep forever, is not a big deal?”

“It’s not,” she says, drawing herself up. “It’s been three years since we were together, Rylan. Did you really think I’d never date anyone else? It’s not like... He replaced you.” She finishes the sentence haltingly, her voice weak and the guilt in her eyes telling a truth that her lying lips don’t.

“Didn’t he?” I snarl, ripping the picture from the frame, expecting to see a picture of us behind it. But there’s nothing, just the cardboard backing. I tear the picture into tiny pieces and hurl them to the floor.

“Rylan, don’t,” she cries.

“Did you fuck him?” I demand.

“What?”

“Your *boyfriend*?”

“He wasn’t my boyfriend,” she says. “We never dated. We just hung out because we were in the same group at school. And—and I told him all about you. I cried about how much I missed you. He never liked me that way, I swear. He just took me to prom because... I don’t know, it’s expected, and I campaigned for queen because it looks good on college applications to win

stuff like that, especially when you need a cheer scholarship...”

“Did you fuck him?” I ask flatly.

“What?” she repeats, her sapphire eyes rounding.

“You said he didn’t like you. Did you like him? Did you love him the way you loved me?”

“No,” she cries, tears shining in her wide eyes. “You were my first love, Rylan. I just... I never thought I’d see you again.”

“You promised you’d meet me the next day,” I say. “You promised you’d come to our spot.”

“I tried,” she cries, a tear spilling down her cheek. “I did, Rylan, but Mom said no. They took everything, and then we had to find a place to stay. We were reeling. I was in shock. It all happened so fast, with no warning...”

“I would have been there for you.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, swiping away a tear. “I wanted to meet you, but Mom wouldn’t let us, and we had to go before...”

“Before people came after you for what you did,” I say, my voice hard. “People like my family. People whose lives you destroyed.”

She nods, sniffing and wiping away another tear. “I was ashamed.”

“So you ran and hid,” I say. “Instead of taking responsibility. Not everyone had that luxury. Some of us were stuck there, in the aftermath when the bomb dropped. Not everyone had a safe zone to flee to. Not everyone could change their name and start over with a new identity.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers again. “I wanted to go back, to see you... I loved you, Rylan.”

“What other promises did you break?”

“What do you mean?”

“You promised to come back,” I say. “You promised I’d be your first. So did you fuck that guy or not? Are you a whore, or just a liar?”

She swallows, shaking her head.

“I waited for you,” I growl. “I waited all this time for you. I never fucked another girl, never even touched one. So give me a straight answer, Gloria. Did you wait for me? Or did you conveniently forget that promise, too?”

“I never forgot,” she whispers, shaking her head.

“Good,” I say, grabbing her wrist. “Because I’ve come to collect.”

“What?” she asks, her eyes going wide, her body tense as she pulls against my grasp.

“Get on the bed,” I grit out through clenched teeth. “You promised.”

She gulps, her eyes going wide as her gaze moves from me to the bed. “Now?”

“I’ve waited two and a half years for what I’m owed,” I say. “I moved across the country for you. I tracked you down and convinced my mom to marry some random asshole just so I could see you again. What have you done to get back to me, Gloria?”

“I...”

“You haven’t,” I answer for her. “The least you can do is fulfill the promise you made freshman year. It’s kept me going all this time. I didn’t date some other girl, didn’t take her to prom so I could be popular. I only wanted you. I’ve only ever wanted you.”

My words might make me sound like a sap, but I deliver them in a tone laced with hatred. I drag her to the bed and push her down on it, holding her down with my weight.

“Rylan, wait,” she cries, struggling to free herself. I’m already hard just being on top of her. She always had that effect on me.

I pin her wrists to the bed. On one of them, there’s a butterfly tattoo. That she’d permanently alter her body without any consideration for my thoughts on the matter infuriates me beyond reason. “I’m going to fuck you,”

I growl. “You may have tried to go out with some other guy, but we never broke up. So you cheated on me, and now you’ll pay for it. You’ve always been my girlfriend. You always will be. I’ll be going to your school starting tomorrow, and then everyone will know who you belong to.”

She struggles, but she’s wearing a skirt, and it’s easy to pull it up even while she’s kicking and struggling under me. I yank down her underwear. She’s shaved underneath, and my cock throbs at the sight of her bare skin.

“Who are you shaved for?” I demand.

“No one,” she says between panting breaths. “I have to be neat for cheer. It’s easier to shave it all off.”

“We’ll see if you’re lying,” I say, shoving down my jeans.

“Rylan, no,” she cries. “The door’s open. Someone will see.”

“I hope they do,” I growl. “I want everyone to know you’re mine.”

She starts struggling harder, and I have to pin my forearm across her chest to hold her while I reach down and grab my cock, pushing it to her soft flesh. Precum oozes from my tip, my cock throbbing uncontrollably. It’s the first time it’s ever touched a pussy, and it wants more, wants to empty inside her.

“Condom,” she gasps, her nails digging into my arm as she tries to take the pressure off her chest.

“Why?” I demand. “We’re both virgins. What do we need protection from?”

I hold the head of my cock and force it past the resisting squeeze of her entrance. My eyes roll back, and I nearly lose my mind, nearly bust inside her before I’m even all the way in.

“A baby,” she chokes out.

“I hope I give you a baby,” I say, thrusting deeper into the impossible tightness of her virgin cunt. “Then you can never leave me again.”

She cries out, her eyes brimming with tears when I force myself deeper, though it feels like there's a solid block in front of my cock. I'm opening her for the first time, opening a path.

"Rylan, stop," she whimpers. "You're hurting me."

"Good," I growl. I shove as hard as I can, trying to get into her. I don't feel a hymen, but she's so tight I can barely get in all the way. When I'm buried to the hilt, I have to stop and draw a shaking breath, because I want to cum right now. I'm inside her now, all the way in. Relief pours into me that she was telling the truth, and I start to feel how good it is, the iron grip of her hot cunt around me, the first time I've ever been inside a girl. I've dreamed of this since I was thirteen, pictured our first time together.

I could have fucked someone else. Even lame-ass high school bands have lame-ass groupies, chicks who dig guys with guitars. But I didn't. I waited for Gloria so it would be fucking special.

"I'll be back every day to remind you," I tell her, beginning to move on her. "To collect what's been denied to me for the last two years. What you owe."

I draw back and thrust into her again with each sentence, trying to get the tears to spill from the corners of her eyes. Her lashes flutter, her chin digging into my arm, and I ease off her chest. I'm getting what I came for, what I'm owed. She can never take this back. I took her virginity. It's mine now. I'll always be her first, and nothing will ever change that. Taking her this way is my revenge for all the pain she caused me.

I drive into her again and again, but her tears sink back into her eyes instead of spilling. I look down and see blood on my cock when I pull out, and I feel myself losing control. She really was a virgin. Really mine.

I stab into her hard and fast, about to cum, and then I hear footsteps and a gasp. I look up, and there's one of her twin sisters, all grown up now. She's

not a little girl with a silly crush on me, like she used to be. She looks like Gloria but a little shorter and curvier, and she's wearing a short schoolgirl skirt and heels. Her eyes go wide, and she stands frozen while I plunge my bare cock into her sister.

It's perfect. The ultimate betrayal. Not just to use Gloria like a whore, but to cum inside her while I look at someone else, like she's not even here. And not just anyone, but one of her own sisters. The thought of hurting her in an even deeper way undoes me. I can't hold back another moment. I watch her sister's pretty lips fall open, and then our eyes meet, and I cum hard and deep inside Gloria.

five

Rumor Has It... A certain trio of blonde beauties have it all. If the first week of school is any indication, the sisters remain atop the throne for the third year in a row. How lucky can one family get?

Gloria Walton

Rylan collapses on top of me, and I wince, struggling to adjust my position so he's not bruising my tits. I pinch my lips together, forcing myself to stay still. I can feel his heart beating, can smell the tang of his sweat. It's funny how you can love even the smell of someone's sweat when you want them enough. I used to draw hearts in the mist on his back as we sat under the umbrellas by the pool, wanting to lick up every dew drop from his pale skin. Now, his sweat smells like a stranger's.

I hear a soft giggle and look over to see my sisters standing in the doorway together, holding onto each other. I glare at them, and they start whispering. Eleanor gingerly tiptoes in, widens her eyes, and casts a glance out at the hall. Then she scrunches her shoulders and her face up at once, drawing the door closed as she backs out of the room.

I close my eyes in relief. At least I'm not exposed when I'm so raw, so vulnerable. I have time to collect myself, to put myself back together and put on the smile my mother expects when I go down to dinner. The freedom of June Bug doesn't extend to the house. This belongs to Mom, not me. The car is my sacred space, a bubble that only encompasses one vehicle. There, I can

be the girl I am inside the layers of makeup and lacquer and diamond that form my impenetrable shell. There, I am a butterfly out of her cocoon.

Here, I am a trespasser, a counterfeit, trying to convince the house's owner that I can pass for the real thing.

I'm glad Rylan doesn't speak after he finishes, that he lies on top of me without pushing up to look at my face. I know it's a mess. My lips are trembling, and I'm fighting tears.

Get over it, you stupid bitch. Crying is ugly. Do you want to be uglier than you already are?

Finally, when I've gotten my face under control and found my anchor in the heavy iron chunk in my chest, I push at Rylan's shoulder.

He doesn't move. I'm about to say something when the deadweight on top of me lets out a soft snore.

Fuck. He passed out on me.

I shove at his shoulder again, but it barely budes. I have to squirm and fight my way out from under him, biting down on my lip so I don't whimper at the pain between my thighs when I drag myself off his dick. It's soft now, and the sensation of it sliding out of me along with a flood of cum is revolting. I climb off the bed, holding my breath and moving as carefully as possible. He stirs, and I freeze. His lips move slightly in his sleep, and his hand twitches.

It strikes me that we didn't even kiss.

I shudder and pull up my underwear, trying not to gag at the grimy stickiness between my legs. Then I look down at the boy I never thought I'd see again, my first love, my first kiss. The boy I've built up in my mind, made perfect when seen through the rose-tinted lens of memory. The boy who was always supposed to remain gentle, romantic, and as pure as our love that made my teeth hurt it was so sweet.

Through the minefield of the past two years, he was the one thing that never changed, the one constant. As long as Rylan Woods existed in my heart, there was good somewhere out there in the world, even when I couldn't see it in my own world.

But of course he's changed. He's a human being, not a memory. He's no more the person in my past than I am. We're no longer squishy caterpillars, vulnerable and defenseless, waiting to be scooped up by the fierce talons of passing time.

I take a slow breath, forcing down the ache in my throat. This feels like a dream, but I'm the one who's awake while he sleeps. He looks almost the same—taller and lankier, with longer hair peeking out the bottom of his black beanie. His nails sport chipped black polish, and he has a piercing in his left eyebrow and snakebite piercings in his lip, but that's not the change that strikes me in the heart. It was the hatred in his eyes, the stark contrast to the last time he looked at me, at the bottom of the stairs of our Savannah home.

I've played that moment in my mind a thousand times, swearing to myself I would keep my promise, that I would return to him as soon as I graduate and can leave home.

He's my reason.

I could endure this if *that* was waiting. The memory of his loving arms comforted me after the unbreakable grip of Baron's crushed me into nothing. The memory of his gentle touch soothed the ache of agony inside me after taking a pounding from Royal. The memory of his sweet kiss reassured me when I gave in to Duke's relentless mouth that had something to prove, even if it was just to himself, so he could believe he wasn't as bad as the others.

I step into the hallway, drawing a shaky breath. My sister darts out of their room, gesturing urgently for me to come. I shake my head and point to the bathroom.

She stifles a giggle, and I slip into the bathroom at the end of the hall, pulling the door closed. My lip starts trembling uncontrollably again, and I bite down hard, staring at my pretty face in the mirror.

Look how ugly you are, you fat cow. Now your eyes are puffy too.

Crying is for the weak. I am not weak, so I have to stop acting like it. I can't turn into the sniveling mess I used to be. I spent every night of sophomore year lying in bed and holding my fist to my heart to keep it from rupturing out of my chest at how badly it ached to go back. Back to Savannah, where I had real friends who would giggle about boys with me. Where I had a boy with safe arms, a boy who let me grind on his lap but stopped when I pulled his hands from under my shirt.

I cried into my pillow until it was a sopping mess, stifling the sound so my sisters wouldn't hear me, so they wouldn't be upset. So my mother wouldn't hear and feel guilty for bringing us here, for doing the best she could. So my brother wouldn't hear and feel like he'd failed to protect me from his own friends, the boys who pulled us all into their circle—for a price.

Keeping silent about what they'd done to us was the price we paid.

Looking the other way was the price Dawson paid.

Last year, after everything went down with Colt, I truly realized and accepted that there was no escaping this. Something inside me snapped when I lost him. That's when I truly embraced it, when I decided that I would be the Bitch Queen that people said I was. I would walk around school with Harper, pretending I didn't hear the whispers or see the looks, everyone thinking I was stupid or pathetic for being friends with the girl who "stole" Royal from me. They thought I was groveling at his feet, that I was some dick-whipped slut who didn't understand that he'd never been mine and never would be.

I pretended I didn't care that they thought I was throwing myself at a boy

who had literally dragged me under him and refused to let me go. I already knew there was nothing I could do about any of it, but that night in the pool was the moment I finally gave in, when I decided to stop fighting it and just own it. Embrace it. Become it.

Suddenly, I can't feel my limbs, my lips, my heart. I don't see my face in the mirror anymore.

I see cold white stars piercing the black, November sky overhead; feel my hair floating around me, my cheer skirt brushing my thighs in the water. I know I'm wearing my shoes, but I can't feel my feet. I'm floating on the surface of the pool, so cold I think I might not make it to the far end. In some careening, reckless, hysterical way, I don't care. I keep singing one line, my voice echoing off the corners of the pool.

"I'm not the only one..."

I swallow hard, my pulse trembling in my throat, and drag my mind back to the present. I can't live in the past if I want to have a future.

I slap my cheeks as hard as I can, the sting bringing fresh tears. I control them, force them back into my eyes just to prove I can. I am still the queen, after all. Like Jackie, I must be collected, poised, in all things. I will never cry for Rylan again. I'll never cry for Royal. No boy will ever make me *less than* again, will ever take my love and leave me with nothing.

I'll let teardrops fall from my eyes the day I can make them turn into diamonds, as hard as I am.

Nothing less than perfect beauty for a Walton.

I take a makeup sponge and touch up around my eyes to make sure my face looks normal. Then I step out of my ruined underwear, tossing them into the trash before cleaning up the downstairs situation. It's not too bad. Baron likes dry sex, so a little blood is nothing new to me. I'll be sore for a few days, and then I'll be good as new.

Except he said he'd come back every day...

The thought makes my whole body clench up. If I'm honest, the Dolces were only really bad to us for the first few weeks we were at Willow Heights. Then Colt walked in on us in the basement one day. I still remember the way Royal covered me, like he could shield me from Colt's eyes. Maybe he just didn't want Colt to know what he was doing.

"So you're just a bunch of fucking rapists?" Colt demanded. "They're not even Darlings."

I'm sure he'll regret those words until the day he dies, but I owe him a debt I can never repay. How could I even begin? Just looking at Colt wrong could put him in danger.

After that comment, though, Royal called off his brothers. For a few days, we thought it was over. We tried to pick up the pieces of our dignity as quietly as possible, figure out what the hell just hit us. It was like a car wreck where the other car comes out of nowhere, and before you know what happened, it's over, and you're left sitting in a pile of wreckage wondering how you got there.

It was hard at first, but Mom helped us, told us how to be proper southern ladies who never show their hands. To be like Jackie. That's how you win. By never giving up, never admitting defeat, no matter how badly you're beaten. You keep coming back, unruffled, until they can't help but be impressed.

And they were impressed. The next week, Royal brought us into their inner circle like we had passed some kind of test. I guess we did. We were no longer their target. Instead, they went after the Darlings full-throttle for the rest of that year, and I was expected to participate. Standing up to them would have put us in danger—not just me, but my sisters, my brother—and it wouldn't have stopped the Dolces. Nothing could stop them. Our only choice

was to join a boy I didn't know and his sister as victims, or to join the rest of the school against them.

So I made my choice. I protected myself and my sisters. I said the necessary things, made the remarks when someone looked at me or could overhear. I cut Colt and his sister down when it was expected of me, playing my part. But I never went out of my way to speak to either of them. Every word I spoke, every expression on my face, every text I sent, was scrutinized by Baron Dolce, to make sure I was really an ally. I had to watch my every step, every day inching forward on the tightrope in the dark. I couldn't just pass their tests, though. I had to pass Mom's, to make her proud. I didn't just have to do the impossible and please the Dolces, even impress them. I had to make it look natural, effortless.

By that winter, I had learned to disappear inside myself when their bruising, careless hands reached for me. I learned to keep the smile on my face, to keep dancing. I learned not to cry in front of them, not to show a single crack in my armor.

And all along, what kept me going was the knowledge that it wouldn't last forever. High school isn't forever. When I was free, I would go back. Because somewhere, there was a boy who saw me as worthy, not just something to play with and punish and use as a pawn.

And now, he's here.

I finish cleaning up and leave the bathroom, heading for my sisters' room. They pull me inside, their eyes wide and full of questions.

"Oh my god, was that *Rylan*?" Everleigh asks, her cheeks flushed.

"What is he doing here?"

"Are you back together?"

"What did he say?"

"He said... He moved here," I say at last.

My sisters exchange a look. “But how?”

“He found us,” I say. “I mean, it’s not like we’re in witness protection. We moved in with family.”

“He convinced his family to move here?” Eleanor asks, gaping at me. “For you?”

I swallow. “Not for me. He said his mom married Cotton’s dad.”

They exchange a look, and I can see the swoons building inside them. “But he still loves you?” Everleigh asks.

“I don’t know.”

“But you slept with him,” Eleanor whispers, sinking down on her bed. “You never want to sleep with anyone besides the Dolces.”

I shake my head, trying to get my thoughts straight. There’s not a place on my body where a dick can go that hasn’t been claimed by the Dolce boys, and yet, somehow, Rylan managed to violate me in a new way, a way those boys never have. They couldn’t violate my trust because I’ve known since day one exactly what they are.

Rylan, though... Rylan was the one pure thing I had left. He may not have taken my virginity, but in some deeper, more devastating way, he took the last of my innocence today.

He took away the fantasy. The illusion. The hope.

“Don’t lie,” Eleanor hisses, widening her eyes at me, taking the shake of my head as a denial. “I saw you. You left the door open!”

“Sorry,” I mumble.

“It’s so romantic,” she says, picking up a pillow and hugging it to her chest. “He loved you all this time...”

“Yeah,” I say. “He waited too. So don’t say anything.”

I glare at her, waiting for the meaning of my words to sink in.

“Oh my god,” Everleigh says. “You didn’t tell him?”

“How could I tell him that?”

I don’t even tell them, and they know. We don’t talk about sex stuff. They’re my sisters. It’s just not done in our family.

“What are we even talking about?” Eleanor asks.

“He *waited*,” Everleigh explains patiently. “He was a virgin.”

Eleanor’s eyes go wide as saucers. “Oh…”

“We won’t tell,” Everleigh says. “But we’re not the ones you need to worry about. The whole school knows.”

“And they wouldn’t dare whisper it where I can hear,” I say, crossing my arms.

“It’s so *romantic*,” Eleanor sighs again. “I always knew he was special.”

“Yeah,” I say. I should be swooning too, but I’ve shut off my feelings for so long I can’t even remember what I’m supposed to feel in this situation. It doesn’t feel romantic to me. It feels like one more landmine that could destroy me if I make a single misstep. I held onto the idea of Rylan for so long, but that’s not reality. I should have known there was nothing good or pure left in the world. Not for girls who’ve done what I’ve done.

I push off the door frame. “Do either of you have a pair of new underwear?”

“What for?” Everleigh asks, going to her dresser and rifling through.

“I don’t want to go back in there and wake him,” I say. “And I need to talk to Baron.”

“Oh, yeah,” she says, her eyes widening. “They’ll tell for sure.”

“Not if I can stop them,” I say. “Rylan said he’s going to our school, so I have to talk to them, figure out what I can give to make them let me go.”

“You’re going out with Rylan already?” Eleanor asks.

“He says we never broke up, so we’re still together,” I tell her. “Which means he considers what happened cheating.”

“That sucks,” Everleigh says, handing me a pair of cheeky little white panties from a new pack. They haven’t been washed, but I’m in no position to be picky.

“You don’t have anything in color?” I ask, cringing at the thought of the stain I’m sure to leave on them. The Dolces ruin so many pairs of underwear that Mom has a dozen auto shipped to our house every month.

“No,” my sister says with an apologetic shrug.

I know why. Baron likes the sweet and innocent look. I wonder if my sister actually likes him, the way I fell for Royal after a while. It’s hard not to develop feelings after spending so much time together and being involved so intimately.

I pull on the underwear and tell my sisters I’ll be back for dinner. Then I start down the street toward the Dolces’ house. Royal told me not to go back there, but we live in the same neighborhood, and I’m basically his brothers’ possession. He’s going to see me from time to time.

My heart aches when I picture the indifference in his eyes when he told me to leave his family alone, that I was dead to him. He may not have loved me the way I loved him, but we were friends. True friends.

Sometimes I’d hook up with Royal over the past few years, even though I knew he didn’t want more than a friend with benefits. He knows what he’s doing and he’s good at it, and when I fell for him, I’d seek him out, needing the closeness and release the same way Duke does.

Every girl in school saw what they did to Mabel and is terrified of becoming their next victim though, even if they’re fascinated by the danger and mystery at the same time. Claiming a D-boy is social proof, a status symbol, not something girls do out of genuine affection.

Now, I’m about to risk their wrath by daring to ask for something of my own, something I’m not even sure I want. I just know I can’t lose it all now,

after I've come so far, done so much, to ensure I'm never a victim.

I am a victor.

six

Rumor Has It...One of the Founding Families has expanded through a whirlwind summer romance that brings two new students to WHPA! Will they join the Founding Heirs or forge their own paths?

Gloria Walton

When I reach the Dolce house, my heart sinks. A car is parked in the driveway, and Royal's leaning on the trunk talking to a girl I don't know. He should have gone off to college in another state, played on a Division 1 football team. For reasons no one understands, he stayed in Faulkner and went to the dinky little Catholic college. I'm surprised by the flare of jealousy in my chest when the girl laughs and leans her hand on the car near him. It's not a cozy or sexy pose, but their familiarity irks me. I was his friend, and now she is.

Maybe she's even a girlfriend, though her casual posture says she's not trying to impress him. I'm good at reading the body language of others in his presence, from the fawning admiration to the overly seductive touches. I spent the good part of my sophomore year dying of jealousy as the entire school threw themselves at him. I was always sure he'd choose someone else, and I'd know that the reason he didn't date wasn't because he was too fucked up for a girlfriend, like he said. I'd know it was me, that I wasn't good enough.

And now I do.

I march up the drive anyway. A victor doesn't run from her problems.

Royal crosses his bulky arms over his hulking chest and tips his chin up, watching me approach with cool, hooded eyes. "I thought I told you not to come around here anymore."

"I need to talk to your brothers," I say. "It's an emergency."

"Did you try changing the batteries?"

"Fuck off, Royal," I say. "You don't own this house."

"No, Dad does," he says. "I'm sure he'll ask for a turn before you go upstairs to my brothers. Wouldn't it be easier to order a new one online?"

"It's not my fucking vibrator," I snap, glaring daggers at him.

"Hi," the girl interrupts, clearing her throat and giving me a cool nod. "I'm Mercy."

"I hope you like your cervix bruised," I say. "If it doesn't fit, Royal makes it fit. It might sound sexy, but trust me, being in constant pain gets old fast."

I turn and walk up to the house, fully expecting Royal to grab me and manhandle me off his property. He must be into that girl, though, because he stays to explain himself instead of following me.

Duke's door is closed, and a tie hangs from the knob. No doubt he charmed yet another poor freshman out of her virginity.

Baron's at his desk setup, playing a video game. He makes me wait a solid fifteen minutes before he takes off his headphones and swivels away from the three monitors to face me.

"What's up, Lo?" he asks. "We're kind of in the middle of something."

"Do you have someone here?" I ask, glancing at a tray of fancy hors d'oeuvres on the table beside the door.

"Duke's got her right now," he says, stretching his sculpted arms over his head. "When he's done, he'll tell her he's going for snacks, and then I'll

tag in for the next round.” He takes off his glasses and ruffles his hair, giving me a disconcerting grin that instantly turns him into his identical twin. It still creeps me out how he can mirror even Duke’s expressions, becoming him in two seconds flat.

“Charming,” I mutter.

He picks up his glasses and slips them back on. “Everyone knows if you fuck one of us, you’re signing up to fuck both of us,” he says. “What does it matter if she doesn’t know she’s already done it?”

“It probably matters to her.”

He shrugs. “You know how it works. Two for one deal. So, what’d you want?”

“You know how I had that boyfriend back in Savannah?”

“Yeah, Riley. What about it?”

“Rylan,” I correct tracing my fingers along the pattern in his duvet. “Anyway, he’s here. He’s going to Willow Heights starting on Monday.”

“So?” Baron asks, watching me intently.

“You knew?” I ask, my gaze darting to his.

“I know everything,” he says.

I’m not surprised. Cotton’s their little bitch, just like Dixie.

I swallow my pride and go in for the ask. “It’s just... He thinks we’re still together, and that I was saving myself for him.”

Baron throws his head back and laughs. I feel my face heating, but I control it with my breathing, waiting for him to get done finding the thought of me being a virgin so fucking hilarious. At last, he slides his fingers under his glasses and wipes his eyes. He once told me he recognizes humor in an intellectual way, but he doesn’t actually know how to laugh. Even though I know he faked that to humiliate me, he’s so good at it I almost believe it.

“Can you just... Not tell him?” I ask. “Please? I’ll do anything you want

in return.”

The corner of his mouth tugs up into a smile. “You already do anything we want.”

“I know,” I say. “I don’t have much to offer. I’m at your mercy, Baron. I’m begging of you. Please. As a friend, as your most loyal lackey...”

“You don’t just want us to keep quiet about fucking you,” he says, crossing his arms and leaning back to study me. “You want to fuck him, don’t you?”

I swallow. For the first time in years, I don’t know what I want, and that scares me. I always wanted to go back to Savannah, to go back to Rylan, for things to be like they were when we were together before. That daydream was my lifeline, and now it’s been severed.

Maybe I can still have it, though. Maybe he was just hurt about seeing Royal’s picture, and he didn’t know what he was doing because he was a virgin. Now he’s gotten it out of his system. Like my sisters said, he must really love me if he’d literally track me down, get his mother to marry someone so he could move in next door, and never date another girl in the years we were apart. I have to at least try.

“Yes,” I agree, sitting up straight and facing Baron. “I want to be his girlfriend. What would that take?”

He hooks his hands behind his head and swivels the chair gently back and forth as he considers. “It might be fun to watch. But we can’t just let you go, Lo. You’re our queen. You belong to us. If people see some guy come in and steal you?” He shakes his head. “No. That can’t happen.”

“He could be in our circle too,” I say. “Like Dawson was. If you own me, you can choose to give me to your friend Rylan, like you allowed my sisters to date this year.”

“Hmm,” he says. “What if we just let him fuck you? I want to see his

face when he realizes you're the furthest thing from a virgin."

I suppress a shudder at the thought of what Baron would do if he found out I already fucked Rylan. No one touches the queen without the king's permission. That's grounds for execution—for both me and Rylan.

"Come on, Baron," I plead. "He wants to be my boyfriend. My sisters get to date, and I've done more for you than they have. Can't I just have this one thing? It's senior year. I'm never going to have this chance otherwise."

"You have done a lot," he admits, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair and tapping his fingers as he studies me. "That's why we can't let you go. You're our perfect weapon, an asset we've put so much into. And you serve us so well."

I glare at him, seething with hatred for this boy who can see the injustice of what he's doing but simply doesn't give a single fuck. It serves him, and that's all he cares about. Duke won't be any help, either. He'd never break ranks with his brother, and he only cares about himself too.

The only difference between them is that Duke wants to feel good and doesn't care if it hurts others. Hurting others is what makes Baron feel good.

"I'll continue to serve," I say. "I'm just asking for one thing. Please? In two years, I've never asked for anything."

He snorts. "Oh, please. We've done plenty for you, Lo. We let you in. We *made* you. You think you would have won Prom and Homecoming two years running if not for Royal?"

"No," I admit, like being the fucking homecoming queen matters.

"You're fun to run a train on every now and then, but your pussy's not that good," he says. "You've already gotten far more than you deserve. Dad gave you a scholarship. Your whole family, in fact. And we kept that secret from the school because you wanted to be the rich bitch everyone worships."

I never wanted that. I took it because it's all I could get in return for what

they did to me and my sisters.

I swallow the scream that wants to rise in my throat and hatch like a butterfly from a chrysalis. It wants to spread its wings and show them how powerful it can be, covering the world in its shadow. But it's stuck, bound in the constraints of my throat, in the need to be safe by playing along, to smile and endure in silence, to take the high road, never let them see you cry, never let them win. A lady perseveres.

"I keep your secrets too," I whisper.

"Are you threatening me?" Baron asks, his eyes lighting with a predatory gleam, like a hawk that just spotted movement in the grass below.

"No," I say quickly, holding up a hand.

"What are these secrets you're keeping?" Baron asks, rising from his chair and stalking forward.

"You know what you did to us when we first got here," I say, scrambling off the bed.

"And you think anyone would believe you?" he asks with an incredulous scoff. "You think you're going to go to court and convince anyone that after you spread your legs for all three of us, after we elevated you to top girl for two years, that you didn't want us, the most powerful men in this town? We're fucking *gods*. Every girl wants us. The whole town knows it. You think anyone would believe you were anything more than an opportunistic whore?"

"I'm not saying that," I insist. "I'd never take you to court. I'm not stupid."

As fucked up as the relationship between us is, I've been with these boys for two years. I know the Dolces better than anyone in the world except their own family. I know what they're capable of.

"You walked around on our arms willingly, Gloria," Baron says coldly.

“Don’t kid yourself. You threw yourself at Royal like every other desperate slut who wanted her pussy wrecked by a Dolce dick. You wanted it, just like Mabel, just like your sisters, just like Harper. If you didn’t, you’d have walked away.”

“You wouldn’t let me,” I whisper, pressing my back to his wall.

“If one side got more out of this, it’s you. You got scholarships, dates to the biggest events, head cheer position. You think you got that by talent alone? You can’t spread your legs any wider than any other whore on the squad. You’re top girl because you were Royal’s favorite. Now he’s gone, and I’m in charge. And I don’t play favorites.”

I swallow hard, my pulse fluttering frantically in my throat. “Okay.”

Baron shakes his head in disgust. “Don’t push your luck. You’re good at what you do, but unlike Royal, I have no sentimental attachment. One wrong move and you can plummet from the top of the pyramid. And the ground below is not forgiving.”

I nod, my heart racing. I should never have asked for anything. That’s not how this works. It’s not a relationship of compromise, of give and take. It’s not a relationship at all. It’s an unwritten contract. He’s not my boyfriend. He’s my ruler. He may dress me up like his queen, but I have no more power than the lowliest leper.

Just like Colt Darling, when he tells me to kneel, I kneel.

“Okay,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

“Make no mistake, Lo,” Baron says, his eyes gleaming with malice. “You’re on top because I allow it, not because I’m getting something from you that I can’t get from any other girl. And theirs would be a lot tighter than your loose, sloppy hole. So stop playing the victim.”

I nod again, my throat too tight to speak.

Not a victim. Never a victim.

A victor.

A villain.

“Good,” Baron says. “Now come over here and get me warmed up for that girl in the other room. I want to be able to make it last with her. She’ll be tight. She’s a virgin.”

I shudder, thinking of Rylan sleeping on my bed at home. “I can’t.”

Baron chuckles and moves around the end of the bed toward me. “It’s funny that you still think what you want matters. You know what they say, though. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. And we all know you’re a crazy bitch.”

“I have a boyfriend,” I say, edging toward the door.

“Wrong,” Baron says. “You have a master.”

We stare at each other a moment.

“That’s why I’m asking permission,” I say at last, deciding to go along like I always do. Sometimes it gets me what I want.

Defiance never does.

“You’re ours,” Baron says. “Understand?”

“Your what?” I ask. “If I’m not your girlfriend, why can’t I be his? I can still play my role.”

“You’re our queen,” he says, the corner of his mouth tugging into a smile, though his eyes remain vicious behind his glasses. “That doesn’t make you our equal. It makes you our product. We created you. We own you. If we want to share what’s ours, you’ll lie there and take it, no matter who we let fuck you. But it’s our choice, not yours. If Rylan fucks you, it’s with *our* permission. You don’t get a say in the matter.”

“That’s not fair.” I’m seething with anger, my voice shaking. I never agreed to this, don’t know how I got here, in this deadly cocoon that’s sealed so tightly around me I can’t break free. I don’t even know if I created this

cage of my own free will, or if I did it under some sort of spell they put on me without my knowing. Or maybe they forged the steel around my heart and convinced me I did it. The lines have all blurred, reality and illusion, intent and execution, survival and destruction, until they're fused into the impenetrable bars of my prison.

"Don't pretend this is something new," Baron says, hooking a finger under my chin to raise it. "It's always been that way, my little queen. You've always been our puppet."

"So I can't do anything for myself?"

"You can obey," Baron says. "That's for you, isn't it?"

I swallow, my mind racing. Obeying isn't for me. It's for my safety, sure, but it's not something I want, something I choose.

Disobeying is something I choose.

For the first time in a year, I feel the sickening, terrifying lurch of recklessness in my belly, the need to explode out of my carefully constructed cage. I want to shatter the walls of my diamond prison, to dance across a room with warm light flickering over my bare skin, to see the shine of warmth and admiration in a boy's eyes instead of cold calculation when he looks at me. I want to *want* something, do something, just for me, and fuck the consequences.

So I bring my knee up, slamming it into Baron's crotch. I don't wait to see him fall. I hear his roar of pain behind me as I make my escape. I've never hit back, not one time in two years. I've fought, but I've never struck first.

I feel the ribs of the cocoon around me splintering as I make a mad dash for freedom, exhilaration unfurling along my back like glorious wings, as if I could fly already, shoot straight up through the roof, leave the wreckage raining down on them while I soar into the sky, a majestic beast full of fire

and fury, power and glory, my true size revealed. My soul is so much bigger than the girl who has to fit into a size two no matter how tall she grows, who is only allowed fast food once a month, who has weekly weigh-ins to make sure she's still contained in her perfect package, her shining, fractal bubble with no cracks, no leaks, no sign of the messy, reckless animal inside.

Baron's body hits me from behind, and I crash to the floor, my hands and knees burning against the rug. No glorious wings stop my fall, take me away. I'm not a majestic, flaming falcon. I am a butterfly, my only defense camouflage. When I make a move, I draw attention, and I'm trapped in a net, pinned to the floor in the hall with a boy who outweighs me by two.

"You want to play this game, do you?" he growls in my ear. "I don't mind a little chase, but no one disrespects me and gets away with it."

I struggle under him, but he's already pulling up my skirt, yanking down the white underwear. I clench up when I feel the heat of his erection against my flesh.

"No, please," I cry, tears springing to my eyes before he's even forced himself in. "I'm sorry, I'll do whatever you want." I'm crying, begging, but I don't care. I know what he's going to do before he does it. Baron likes to punish, and he knows how much I hate it.

"You knew the risks," he growls, thrusting viciously to breach my rear entrance. "You know the consequences when you disobey."

He thrusts again, and I can't help the scream that tears from my lips. He clamps a hand over my mouth, forcing himself deeper, until I think I'm going to die from the pain. I don't know what's wrong with me, but since the first time he did this, it's always hurt like this, like a knife is stabbing into me with each pass. Sobs choke me, and I can't breathe. All I can do is pray I'll pass out from pain.

Baron keeps driving into me with sharp, quick thrusts, grunting as he

pounds me into the rug, his fingers cutting into my cheeks and muffling my cries. “If you wanted to play, you could have just said it,” he growls into my ear. “If you want to be the victim, I’ll play your attacker. I like it when you put up a little fight like you did in the beginning. It’s so much more exciting this way, isn’t it?”

I focus on his words, force my body to go still, to hibernate inside the pain until I hardly feel it. Only the sharp, stinging of my torn skin remains. I know he likes the fight. That’s why I stopped fighting, why I learned to turn into a limp doll when he touches me, no matter how roughly he does it. That’s when they started losing interest. I can’t let myself go back, can’t let myself forget these things. I can’t endure a year of their interest. Being a boring, empty bitch with no fight left is the only way to survive.

I focus on his rough, steady thrusts, his rapid breathing, his soft grunts of satisfaction. When he finally cums, I don’t move. I wait until he stands, and then I climb to my feet, my knees shaking so hard I can barely hold myself upright. There’s a big splotch of blood in the middle of the floor. The sight makes my head swim, and I run back into his room and into his bathroom. I sit on the toilet for a minute, rolling out toilet paper and blotting my face. When I stand, the water in the bowl is so red that when I flush, the swirling blood makes me dizzy again. I fall to my knees, hugging the bowl and squeezing my eyes closed while I vomit into the fresh, clear water refilling the bowl.

When I’m done, I keep my eyes closed while I flush, pressing my forehead to my arm.

“You should see a doctor,” Baron says, his voice uninflected, almost bored, as he stands at the counter, washing his dick in the sink. “Most girls don’t bleed that much even without lube.”

I nod mutely, too exhausted to answer, to tell him I fucking know it’s not

normal, and maybe if he'd stop doing it, whatever's fucked up in there will heal. But there's no use telling him that. Baron doesn't care if I heal. He cares about what he wants, what feels good to him. Causing pain feels good to him.

I knew better than to provoke him.

"There are pads under the sink," he says, checking his phone when a text comes through. "Take one and get out of here. Duke's tagging out."

"Okay."

"Oh, and I'll allow you to date that idiot," he adds, pausing in the doorway. "I want to see his face when he finds out. But make no mistake, you are still ours. We'll fuck you whenever we want, and nothing changes at school. I don't have time to train someone to take your place."

He leaves the bathroom, and I hear him take the tray of food and leave. My legs are wooden when I stand. I clean up and take a few minutes to get myself together before stepping out of the bathroom. I turn my face up as I pass the stain on the carpet in the hall, but then I'm staring at the light where I know their father has a camera mounted. Mr. Dolce put it there because he said the maid was stealing, but Royal said it's really to keep watch over his kids because he's always in their business. I pray he isn't home, that he didn't witness the shame of what just happened.

When I step out into the sultry, oppressive evening heat, I'm so relieved that Royal's gone that I almost cry. I don't think I could handle talking to someone right now.

But then, I know that I can.

It's amazing the battering that a human body can survive, that a psyche can withstand, and keep going, keep dancing. So, I'll go home and have dinner with my family and act like everything is completely normal.

After all, it is.

I wonder as I walk, though, how this became normal. I wince with every

step, gritting my teeth and forcing myself not to show the pain as I smile and wave to Mr. Montgomery and his new wife out on the porch having cocktails. When I reach our front door, I have that weird, disconcerted feeling again, the one where I can't remember the wrong turn I took to end up here. All I know is that anyone who says the walk of shame is wearing the same clothes the next day has never walked home leaking blood and cum from two different holes left by two different men.

seven

Rumor Has It... The two new transfers are part of Faulkner's Elite! Will they be the new faces of royalty at Willow Heights? Or will the current monarchs' reign continue unchecked?

Rylan Woods

Gloria's sitting at her vanity again. She didn't used to be so vain, so enamored with her own face in the mirror. I had to trade rooms with Amber so I could see through Lo's window, and now I watch her all the time. I even bought a pair of binoculars so I could get a good look and make sure she's not lying to me about anything.

She never undresses where I can see, but I like to watch her do mundane tasks too. There's something perversely satisfying in knowing that I'm violating her without her even knowing it. She leans into her mirror and carefully blends her makeup. When she starts doing her lips, I set down the bass guitar I was fucking around on, unzip, and slide a hand into my jeans. I jerk on my cock until I'm stiff. Then I hurry out of the Montgomery house, across the lawn to the Waltons', and climb the tree outside Gloria's window. I take a few steps across the roof, slide the glass up, and drop to the floor inside her room.

"Get on the bed," I say without bothering to greet her.

"Rylan," she protests. "We don't have time. The game starts in an hour."

"Who cares about the game?"

“I care,” she says, staring at me in the mirror.

“I’m your boyfriend. I come before the football players.”

“Obviously,” she says, turning to me with a smile. I would think her smile was fake if they weren’t all like that now.

“Then why do you care about some stupid football players?” I demand. “Are you trying to make one of them jealous by dating me?”

“Of course not. I have to go to the games,” she says, pleading for me to understand. “I’m head cheerleader.”

“So?”

“So the squad relies on me for all our routines. I’m top girl.”

“If you were gone, they’d put someone else on top.”

“Exactly,” she says. “I can’t miss a game.”

“You could,” I clarify. “You just don’t want to.”

“You’re right. I don’t.”

We stare at each other a minute.

“Get on the bed,” I say again.

“Rylan...”

“What?” I snap. “I’m your boyfriend. I have rights to your body. I can fuck you whenever and wherever and however I want. Now do it before I raise my voice.”

She glances at the door and swallows, then reluctantly rises from her chair and goes to the bed. “Dawson’s home this weekend, so be quiet,” she says, dropping her little black cheer skirt with the gold trim. My cock stiffens again, and I unzip my black jeans.

“Leave that on,” I order, approaching her.

“But... You might get stuff on it.”

“Then you can wear it to the game with my cum on it,” I say, pulling out my cock and yanking it a few times. “Now bend over and open your legs.”

She pulls up the skirt, leaving her bloomers and panties around her ankles, and bends over the side of the bed. “Condom,” she says, her little round ass peeking out from under her skirt.

She always asks, even though she knows the answer.

“You’re rich,” I say, lining up and thrusting into her cunt. “Get a morning after pill if you’re worried about it.”

“You want to get me pregnant?” she demands, wincing as I draw out.

“I want to cum inside you,” I say, pumping deeper into her tight little hole. “I don’t care what happens to you after that.”

Her fingers curl into the blanket, her eyes squeeze shut, and her jaw clenches, but she doesn’t cry like she did the first time. She likes it. I know, because I’ve climbed through her window and fucked her every day, sometimes more than once, just to remind her I can. She’s mine, and I can do whatever I want to her. She owes me.

After a couple minutes, she always gets wet, so I know she wants it, even if she never cums. I don’t try to make it good for her. This is punishment, after all. It’s a race to finish while she’s small and tight, while there’s friction. It’s not hard. I don’t try to last. I use her the way she used me—with only myself in mind.

I jab into her with quick, shallow thrusts, the ones that feel the best and take the longest to get her wet. When I look down at her cheer skirt pushed up above her tight little ass, her pussy stretched tight around me, the sight undoes me. I fall forward onto my hands, driving to the hilt. My hips jerk in rhythmic spasms as my cock widens and empties my cum into her. She takes it without complaint, like she does everything.

I pump the cum into her a few times, feeling how slick she is with my release. I hope she gets pregnant. She can go to her game and cheer for all those fake-ass football players with my cum dripping out of her. But she’ll be

mine for the rest of her life. If she gets pregnant, she'll never get away. She could try, but no one else will want her then. She'll be ruined for other men. I can do this every night of our lives, reminding her of what she did to me.

I collapse onto her back, knocking the breath out of her with my weight. Lying there, I bite down on my lip ring to make a dull ache thud into my skull like a fist, so I'll feel something other than disgust with myself.

It was supposed to be over by now.

I was such a fucking dumbass, thinking I'd come here and fuck her, take her virginity as revenge for all she's done, and it would be over. Everything would go back to the way it was before.

But it wasn't enough. The more times I fuck her, the more pissed off I get. Because it's not over. No amount of fucking her or getting revenge will ever change the fact that she ruined my family. My life. The more I get revenge, the more that realization sinks in, the more I hate her.

I could just stop and walk away, but I can't admit defeat now, after everything I did to get here. Even if I wanted to, I'm stuck here now. We can't go back to Savannah. My mom is married to some asshole we barely know—an asshole I set her up with. If I'm honest with myself, I moved our whole lives here for Gloria. And yet, it's still not enough. It didn't change anything.

I wanted it to be good again. I wanted her to be shocked and surprised. I wanted her to grovel and beg for me to love her again. I wanted her to be happy that I was here. After she earned my forgiveness, I wanted to love her and for her to love me again.

I wanted to be happy.

But I'm not happy.

My dad's still dead. My sister's still mute.

And worst of all, I'm still so fucking angry.

I just want it to go away. I hate feeling like this all the time, filled with so much rage I want to rip my hair out, rip my skin off, rip my piercings out just to bleed. I want to take it all out on Gloria, dump it into her with my cum, and for it to be gone. But it follows me like the shadow of a toxic storm cloud. We moved halfway across the country trying to leave it behind, but it's still here. No matter how violently I pound it into Gloria, it never abates. It's stuck in me, like I'm stuck in this place. I can't get rid of it, and I hate her for that, for not taking the burden of my rage from me.

"Are you done?" she asks after a minute.

I roll off her, so filled with self-loathing I want to put a gun to my head like Dad. Instead, I pull up my black jeans and arrange my wallet chain while she goes to the bathroom to clean up. When she comes back, she sits in front of the mirror and touches up her makeup that smudged when her cheek was pressed into the bed. Her black lipstick is still perfect. We didn't kiss.

We haven't kissed since I moved here.

"You should come," she says, like nothing happened at all.

When did she stop feeling? Not just for me, but for anyone? She's plastic, nothing but a blowup doll for me to fuck, with nothing inside.

"I don't like football."

"Half the people there don't like football," she says. "You go to hang out. If you're my boyfriend, you're part of the inner circle. It's weird that you don't come to things."

"I've always been weird," I grumble. "You never cared before."

"You're not weird," she protests. "But this is how things are at this school. I told you. The Dolces run everything. They said you could date me, and that means you're popular."

"I don't even know anyone except you and your sisters," I point out. "How can I be popular?"

She sighs. “That’s not how it works. If the Dolces say you’re popular, then you’re popular.”

“What if I don’t want to be popular?”

For the first time tonight, the slightest flicker of emotion passes over her face, though I can’t read it before it’s gone. “You don’t want to be my boyfriend?” she asks carefully.

I think she’s hurt by the idea. A spark of malicious joy fills me at the thought. Maybe there are still torn pieces of her heart floating around in all that emptiness inside her, like the little torn pieces of butterfly wing floating down her forearm from the tattoo on her wrist.

“Do you want me to be your boyfriend?” I ask. “Because it seems to me that all you care about is being popular and doing what the Dolces want. Maybe you should fuck them.”

“That’s not true,” she says, sounding genuinely hurt. “You know that’s not true, Rylan. You know me.”

“I knew you.”

We stare at each other in the mirror for a long moment.

“What do you want me to do?” she asks. “Leave their crowd? They wouldn’t let me if I tried. They want the image of the blonde cheerleaders at their table.”

“So what?” I ask. “What are they going to do if you sit somewhere else? They’ll find another blonde cheerleader to sit at your spot. What’s the big deal?”

“They literally control everyone’s life at Willow Heights,” she says. “Not just the other popular people. Everyone from the homecoming queen to the loser smoking under the bleachers.”

“That seems like a lot of work for them.”

“Have you met Baron Dolce?” she asks, raising a brow. “He’s a force of

nature.”

“Is that the one you’re trying to impress?” I ask, knowing I sound like a sullen little bitch. I don’t understand why she’s so concerned with doing exactly what everyone wants, though. Gloria Beauregard was a cheerleader, and she dated a guy like me without a second thought to what anyone thought of it.

Where’s the girl I fell in love with, the fun girl who hotwired her dad’s cars, wanted to make out with me all the time, teased me by grinding on my dick, and played hide and seek in her huge house? The girl who was always full to overflowing with laughter, generosity, and love.

What happened to all that? How did she become this empty shell, the cocoon of the butterfly tattooed on her wrist? And where did the butterfly go?

She shudders and turns back to her makeup. “No. I don’t try to impress Baron. I try not to piss him off. We’re all his puppets, though. That’s why I have to go to the game and to the party afterwards. Please come? You said you don’t know anyone, but how will you get to know them if you’re holed up at home?”

“I’m not sure I want to know your friends,” I say, thinking of the lunch table where I’ve sat for the past couple weeks with her. The guys are dicks, and the girls are no better.

“Come on,” she says, sliding off her chair and coming over to me. She takes my hand and tugs on it, giving me a pleading smile. “If you give them a chance, maybe you’ll like them. And if you give them a chance to know *you*, I know they’ll like you.”

“Why?” I ask. “Why do *you* even like me?”

“Because I know you,” she says, sinking down beside me. “I get it. You’re pissed. But the boy I fell in love with, who I promised my virginity to, is still in there. He has to be. I have to believe that.”

I open my mouth to tell her he's not, to crush her naïve dreams and make her as hopeless as me, but something stops me. It's not because I want to spare her the pain or because I don't want to take that fantasy away from her. It's because some naïve part of me, the one that believed it would all be okay once I got here and made her pay for her crimes, likes that she believes that. I want her to see me that way for just a little longer before I reveal the truth. That the boy who she fell in love with has vanished as completely as the girl who fell in love with him.

"Okay," I say, standing from the bed. "I'll go to your lame-ass party. That's my duty as your boyfriend, I guess. When we get back, you can do your duty as my girlfriend again."

"I'm still sore," she protests.

"Good," I say. "Then you'll know how painful it is for me to hang out with all your stupid friends."

*

The party sucks ass. It's just a bunch of rich kids showing off and pretending to be powerful, even though their daddies paid for everything here. If their families cut them off, they'd be nothing, just like me. Or like I was until I set my mother up with Mr. Montgomery. At least I'm smart enough to recognize that it's all an illusion, the mirage money casts over our lives. I know all too well what happens when the mirage dissipates, when the curtain is pulled back. Without money, we're *all* nothing.

An hour in, I can't fake it anymore. These people pretend to be my friends, not just because I'm with Gloria, but because I'm rich now too. But if Mr. Montgomery figures out that my mother can't function without an expensive cocktail of prescription pills and kicks us to the curb, we'll go right

back to being nothing. All these assholes trying to shove drinks into my hand and take selfies with me will pretend we don't exist. After all, keeping us around would remind them that it could happen to anyone, that everything in life is so fucking fragile it's hardly worth living.

I escape through the back door and make my way around the corner of the wrap-around porch. Suddenly, I find myself alone, as if the party switch was flipped off when I stepped into the shadows. This side of the house faces into a section of trees, the only light spilling from a window at the far end. I hate the crowd, and I let out a sigh of relief to leave it behind for a while. I make my way to a detached porch swing, figuring I'll hide out here until Gloria answers my text.

I don't see the figure sitting in the shadows until I'm about to sit down. My heart gives a start, then thrums in my chest like a guitar. He's still as a statue on the far end of the swing, a beer in one hand, eyes fixed on the dark woods.

"I didn't know you were coming to this," I say, sinking onto the other end of the cushioned seat.

He turns to me, squinting to make out my features in the dark.

"Rylan," I remind him. "Surprised?"

"Oh," he says, his voice a slow-mo slur of confusion that's all too familiar after watching my mother disappear over the past few years, replaced with a distracted, distant version of her former self. "Yeah, man. My sister told me you moved here. How'd that happen?"

"Long story."

I haven't seen Dawson since moving to Arkansas. He's been at college in another state. I'm a little disappointed that I didn't get to see the look on his face when he found out I was back, but I'm also pleased that Gloria told him about me.

“Want a beer?” he asks, holding up the one in his hand.

I shake my head. “I don’t drink.”

“What do you mean, you don’t drink?” he asks. “Are you, like, a Jehovah’s Witness now?”

“Sure,” I say because it’s easier than explaining that after watching my mother spiral into a bottle and having a social worker tell me that addictions run in families, the thought of doing something that could put me on the same path freaks me out.

“I always knew you were a good guy,” Dawson slurs. “You always treated my sister right.”

“Yeah,” I say, guilt chewing me up inside.

I used to treat his sister right.

“Not like the guys here,” Dawson says. “The Dolces, man. They’re evil. Don’t tell them I said that. They’d fucking kill me, even though I don’t live here anymore. No, they’d probably kill my sisters. But you won’t say anything, will you? You’re a good guy. We gotta stick together, so that’s just between us. Man to Savannah man.”

He chuckles quietly, a hiccup coming with it.

The anger pulsing in my chest stills as it strikes me that he’s vulnerable right now, too drunk to filter himself. He thinks we’re friends, that I’m still on their side, like I was back home. He doesn’t know things have changed. He doesn’t know what I’ve been doing to his sister for the past few weeks.

“Yeah,” I say, nervously flipping my lip rings with my tongue as my pulse picks up speed. “How long have I known you? We’re practically brothers. Of course I won’t say anything.”

“I knew you were a good guy,” he slurs, reaching over and clapping me on the shoulder. “Unlike fucking Royal.”

He takes a swig of his beer and glowers at the woods.

Curious why his voice went so bitter, I see an opening and go for it.
“Gloria’s ex?”

“Yeah,” Dawson says. “He’s here tonight too. I shouldn’t have fucking come, but she said all the college kids would be here. She’s right, I guess. He’s in college like me. I was thinking about girls, though, not that asshole.” He snorts and takes another drink.

“You don’t like him, I take it?”

“He’s a fucking monster,” Dawson says, then chuckles. “But I got the last shot. He doesn’t know it, and fuck if I’d ever tell him. Then he’d really kill me.”

He gives another quiet, bitter laugh. He’s changed too. We all have. When I first saw Gloria, she looked so similar to the Savannah version that I thought only I’d changed. But she’s changed so completely that even her smiles are a stranger’s.

“Tell him what?” I ask. I fucking suck at deception. I’d fail a lie detector test in two seconds flat. Luckily Dawson’s way too drunk to notice I’m being shifty.

“People say it doesn’t make things better, to get back at someone,” he says. “But they’re wrong. It doesn’t erase what he did, but it feels fucking great to know I fucked him over too.”

I grit my teeth, wondering if he’s just going to drunkenly ramble nonsense all night. “How’d you do that?”

“I stuck it to him once, even if he doesn’t know it,” Dawson says, his voice harsh. “Stuck it to his girlfriend, anyway.”

I lean back on the swing and consider him. Gloria’s not the only Walton who ruined my life. Their whole family did.

That’s where I went wrong, and why the revenge on Gloria is never quite enough. She’s not the only one who needs to pay for what their family did.

They should all pay.

Dawson himself is saying that's the trick, that once you get revenge, you feel better.

"His girlfriend cheated on him with you?" I ask, chuckling like I find the whole thing funny. I know better than anyone that revenge is a serious game, but I can play along if it gets me something I can use.

Dawson takes a drink, finishing his beer and crumpling the can while he speaks. "Yeah, man. We got fucked up on Alice and just fucking raw-dogged the bitch all night. I thought she was going to die. I don't care if I sunk to his level. If I have to come back to this town—the place is cursed, man, I'm telling you. I don't know why you moved here."

I sway the swing with my foot, like I'm not dying to shake him and tell him to keep talking. I could tell him that everywhere is just as fucked up, you just don't know it until you see the rotten side. But I don't want to derail his drunken train of thought so I just say, "I don't know either."

"I need another beer."

"I'll get you one," I offer. "But finish what you were saying first."

"That's it, man," he says. "If I have to run into him at parties, at least I know I got him once too, y'know? He fucking destroyed us. But when he fucks his girlfriend, he doesn't know she took it from three guys at once. Just gangbanged the shit out of her, no rubbers or anything. Slut's probably still leaking our cum six months later."

I remember the guy who used to frown at me for kissing his sister in front of him, and again I find myself wondering what happened. It's not like I've never heard guys talking shit, but it's uptight big-bro Dawson, for fuck's sake.

Still, I've been at Gloria's lunch table for a few weeks now, and I know the kids at that school are fucked up from all that money. I'll probably be just

like them by the time I graduate.

“I’ll get you a beer,” I say, standing. “Be right back.”

I don’t go in search of a beer, though. I go in search of Royal Dolce. Even if I hadn’t seen him in the picture on Gloria’s desk, the guy is hard to miss. He’s six and half feet tall, his muscles have muscles, and he looks like he could whip out his dick and use it for a baseball bat when he’s in a silly goofy mood.

Just the kind of man a guy like me wants to know his girlfriend dated before him.

Unlike his brothers, he’s not mingling. He’s leaning against the wall, a red plastic cup in one hand, watching my new stepbrother like he’s trying to decide if he should disembowel him or let him live. I’m curious what Cotton did to get on his shit list, but that’s a question for another day.

“Hey,” I say, deciding to go right for the truth and face the consequences later. “Did you fuck my girlfriend?”

Royal barely shrugs one shoulder. I don’t blame him. It’s so big it’s probably hard to lift.

“Undoubtedly,” he says, his voice and face completely devoid of expression.

“Do you know who I am?” I demand.

His gaze moves to me briefly before going back to my stepbrother. “No.”

I debate throwing a punch to show him I’m not someone to be dismissed that easily, but who am I kidding? Of course I am. I’m no threat to him. He looks like he could reach inside my chest and rip out my heart with his bare hands like a cartoon villain, and I’m not quite suicidal enough to tempt fate tonight.

“I’m Gloria’s boyfriend,” I say.

He finally gives me his attention, his gaze moving over my hair, my

piercings, my choker, black T-shirt, silicon bracelets, and black jeans, all the way to my Vans. His lip curls the slightest bit, though I can't tell if it's a smirk or a sneer. "Okay."

The word comes out on a snort of breath, like he doesn't believe me.

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, we go way back. All the way to Savannah, in fact. I know her whole family, everything about them. Did you know they used to go by the last name Beauregard? Or hey, here's a fun one. Did you know her brother fucked your girlfriend?"

Royal's eyes narrow, and the muscle in his jaw flexes. I take an involuntary step backwards. Looks like my days of running my mouth like a smartass are about over.

"What girlfriend?" he grits out.

I shrug, cursing myself for not getting her name from Dawson. Is it his girlfriend now? Or the one he was with when they were in high school together?

"I don't know," I admit. "He didn't say. Just said she was a ho. Let him and a couple buddies take turns with her all night. Sorry, man. But hey, thanks for fucking her instead of my girlfriend. You did me a solid, letting her save herself for me. I figure I owe you one back. That's why I told you."

I know I'm rambling, but my palms are clammy and I'm about to piss myself from the way this guy is looking at me. He's not just gigantic, he looks like a stone-cold killer. I wish I had a beer to sip on so I could look all cool and casual like him, instead of like my pulse is thundering in my ears so fast all I can hear is the inane drivel coming out of my mouth. I stop myself at last, shove a hand into my zipper pocket, and flip my lip ring around with my tongue.

My mouth goes dry as I wait for Royal to punch me out and manually remove my testicles.

After a minute, though, he leans back against the wall and sips his beer, like the insanity in his eyes was never there at all. “Thanks, kid,” he says.

“That’s it?” I ask. “You’re not going go find him and gouge out his eyeballs and shove them up his ass because he’s seen your girlfriend naked? Or at least rip his tongue out for calling her a whore?”

The corner of his lip twitches with amusement. “No.”

“Damn,” I say. “I thought you were supposed to be, like, the *Thugs R Us* special deluxe edition. From the way your brothers talk, I thought you’d go nuts on the guy. What are you afraid of? He might kick *my* ass, but there’s no way he could do any damage to you.”

“You think because you’re too much of a pussy to fight him that you can find the nearest guy with muscles to do it for you? I’m not your goon. You got shit against Dawson, go work it out yourself. Don’t worry about how I handle my shit.”

“No wonder you couldn’t pull the trigger with Gloria,” I mutter. “You’re a pussy.”

Royal just chuckles and shakes his head. “You’re lucky I don’t fight smart-mouthed high school punks half my size. Now walk away before I change my mind.”

He glowers at me until my balls crawl halfway up to my heart. I swear, being the object of his icy stare for a single minute makes me come to terms with my own mortality. It definitely convinces me that truer words than his have never been spoken—after calling him a pussy, I’m lucky an EMT isn’t scraping an unidentifiable mass of scrambled body parts off the floor right now.

I leave him without answering. I’ll just have to find another way to make the Waltons pay.

eight

Rumor Has It... Willow Heights' Queen and the new boy she's been flaunting were not seen together all night at the post-game party. Is there trouble in paradise already, or were they making moves in secret?

Gloria Walton

“Gloria?” Coach Snow says, setting down the phone that just rang on her desk.

My shields fly into place, instantly ready for battle the moment someone speaks my name, and the eyes turn my way.

“Yes?” I ask, lifting my hair back over my shoulder and facing our cheer coach, who also teaches my history class. I like her. She takes no shit and keeps a drawer full of assorted feminine products in her desks, so girls can take anything they need without having to ask.

She gives me a smile full of the last thing on earth I ever expect directed my way—abject pity. “They need you at the office. Bring your stuff.”

My head swims, a cold chill explodes over me, and a flash of terror obliterates everything.

“What’s going on?” Dixie whispers.

I shrug, closing my MacBook and shoving it into my bag, ignoring the flash of intuition that stunned me for a second. Whatever is happening, it’s not good.

“Is it about Homecoming?” Dixie presses. “Do you think I should

come?”

“They didn’t ask for you,” I point out. “And they said to bring my stuff. I’m obviously getting checked out.”

“Why would your mom check you out?” she asks. “You have a car.”

“I don’t know, Dixie,” I say, summoning my patience. “I’ll see you tomorrow, ‘kay?”

I take a slow breath while bending down to zip my bag, so no one will see me collecting myself. Dixie is watching like a hawk. I can’t afford to let myself slip in front of the school’s gossip blogger. I’m the subject of at least half her posts already. Because I’m popular, she thinks I’m going to tell her everything so she can put it on her blog and somehow become popular herself. I hate to tell her, but it doesn’t work that way. I’m on top because I paid my dues and continue to pay them every goddamn day. She hasn’t sacrificed anything, except maybe her dignity.

The chick needs to get grip and stand on her own two feet instead of clinging to everyone like a leach. I’m not her ticket out of here any more than Colt is.

I guess thinking about my arch nemesis is enough to summon my torment in the flesh because I’m halfway down the hall when he emerges from the restroom, and I promptly forget how to breathe.

God, why did he have to come back this year? I’m barely holding it together as it is.

I force my chin up, clench my jaw, and march toward him, letting my gaze move beyond him like I don’t even see him. There’s no one else in this hallway, but I can’t be too careful. Someone could walk out of the classrooms at any moment, see us talking, and report back to the Dolces. Then it would all be over for both of us.

I’m about to pass him when he stops walking. I force myself not to close

my eyes and inhale as I walk by, to take in the smoky, woodsy scent of him and use it like oxygen, let it revive the tiniest tendril of some dead thing inside me, make it live for one precious heartbeat before it turns black again.

“Hey,” he says, tipping his chin at me.

I should ignore him and keep walking.

I should.

But I don't.

I can't. Not even for him. I know he's the one taking the bigger risk, that all I'll lose is the throne I built from the ground up, when I was crawling in the dirt with broken nails and bloody thighs, stacking one sin on another like bricks while acid rain fell from my eyes as if it could cleanse them of the unholy things I've seen.

He could lose his life for talking to me.

“Since when do we say hi in the hall?” I ask, giving him a scathing look to warn him off.

“You have a tattoo?” he asks.

I could deny it, but there's no point. Everyone in Faulkner has seen it. Even if I wore long sleeves all year long, my cheer uniform exposes it every week.

“Yeah, so?”

“Can I see it?”

Butterflies explode in my belly as I glance around. What if someone leaves a class to go to the bathroom or the nurse or the office? What would they think if they saw their queen talking to the untouchable, so close he could touch me?

“No, you freak,” I say, glowering at him.

He steps even closer, and my heart stops beating. “Let me see it.”

His voice is low, a honeyed drawl that's more intoxicating than whiskey,

more hypnotic than a snake in an opium den. I can't help but obey, even as I hate him for making me, hate myself for doing it. I swallow hard, lifting my arm and letting my loose sleeve drop below the stretch of skin that Maverick made beautiful. Mom freaked out when she saw it, but for once I had chosen something of my own, something she couldn't take away.

Colt grips my wrist gently, pulling it toward him and examining the ink. My heart is pounding so loud I'm sure he must hear it, that the traitorous beat is echoing down the hall and through the walls, the tell-tale heart Edgar Allan Poe didn't live to write about. At any second, everyone will rush from the rooms to see what's causing the commotion that quakes the building, that rends the ground like an earthquake of immeasurable magnitude.

"Colt?" I whisper.

He runs his thumb slowly over my skin, over the pulse in my wrist that's fluttering like a thousand butterfly wings. They've taken me over—my stomach, my throat, and down low, in the ache below my belly. I lift my gaze to his, and I'm sure he knows. That he sees me, all the way inside, where the stench of the rotten girl who died there has been contained for so long.

That's why he's so terrifying.

Colt sees me, who I truly am, in a way the Dolces never tried to do, in a way Rylan isn't able to. He's always seen me, since that day in the basement when he saw what I endured and what I did with it afterwards. We took opposite paths, though, and the one thing he's never been able to see is why I chose mine instead of his.

"Let me go," I breathe, not moving to pull away.

He presses the pad of his thumb to my pulse point, and our gazes clash for a second. *He knows*. He has to feel how hard my heart is pounding from his touch, his nearness, and the dark, masculine scent of him that invades me and makes my head spin with fear and hunger. I wait for the smug smile, the

gloating. I wait for his smoky blue eyes to darken with desire or to harden with cruelty before he taunts me, ruins me just because he can, and it's what I would do to him.

Instead, he drops my hand without a word, his eyes empty of all emotion, like it's nothing to him to know he makes my heart throb until I'm lightheaded from it, until I can't breathe. The pain spirals in deep and quick, stunning me speechless. I stand there like a marble statue as he walks away without a backwards glance.

I hate him.

I hate him for walking away and not even caring that he's not just forgetting a month of last year. He's forgetting *me*. The worst thing I ever did, the thing that should have destroyed him, doesn't even exist to him.

If he despised me, if he tried to destroy me, I could fight back.

I can't fight nothing.

And that's what I am to him.

Not even worthy of being an enemy.

I want him to come after me, to seek revenge, to make me pay for my crimes one slow scream at a time. I want him to be as cruel to me as I've been to him.

Then, at least I'd have his hatred.

Now, I have nothing.

*

I'm still reeling from my encounter with Colt when I reach the door to the office. Before I can open it, Eleanor appears at my side. "What are you doing here?"

"They called you too?" I ask, my throat going dry.

“Yeah,” she says. “What do you think they need us for?”

I glance around. “No one else from our group is here, so it’s probably not about the D-boys.”

“You think we’re in trouble?”

“No,” I assure her. “We’re fine. Come on.”

We step into the office, where the headmaster, assistant headmaster, and office manager are hovering behind the desk, obviously gossiping. The assistant is crying, and the others are patting her back, but she quickly pulls herself together and tosses her tissue when we walk in. I home in on their expressions, hoping against hope she just got dumped or found out her birth control failed. But the moment they see us, their expressions morph into one that makes the butterflies in my stomach spiral down into a pit.

Something’s wrong.

I glance at Eleanor, but she hasn’t noticed.

“Maybe Dad got released early,” she whispers, her eyes bright with excitement.

What would Jackie do?

I give the admin my plastic smile. “You called us?”

“Let’s just wait for Everleigh,” says the headmaster.

I glance out the windows of the office, but the lobby is empty. “Can you tell us what this is about?” I ask.

“Let’s just wait,” he says again, turning to the office manager. “You called her, right?”

She nods, giving us a watery smile. “She was finishing up a test.”

“Why don’t you girls go back to the counselor’s office?” the headmaster suggests.

I glance at Eleanor, who still clearly expects good news. I don’t burst her bubble. I don’t resent Everleigh for finishing her test and making us wait in

agonizing suspense for five more minutes. Whatever's going on, I have a feeling I'm going to regret it once I find out. I try to hold onto the moment too, the moment before I know.

But I can't focus on anything normal because I know there's nothing normal about this call. It's too late for me. I don't know what's coming, but I already know our lives will be upended. They've already been upended. We just don't know how yet.

"What's happening?" Everleigh asks, stepping into the counselor's office an eternity later. She takes us in and lowers her voice to a whisper. "Is it about our scholarships?"

I don't have time to respond before Dr. Lister steps into the office with the headmaster and pulls the door closed behind her.

"Y'all draw the short straws?" I ask, straightening my spine and steeling my nerve.

"I'm afraid we have some tragic news," the headmaster says, taking a seat in one of the ergonomic chairs across the heavy wooden table. He adjusts his tie and puts on his brave-in-the-face-of-tragedy mask. "Your mother just called and wanted us to send you home. It seems your brother has... Passed away."

We all just sit on one side of the table staring back at him.

"What?" Eleanor whispers.

"We're so sorry for your loss," Dr. Lister says.

Not our brother. Our *loss*.

As if he's suddenly become something else, no longer a human but an object, an idea.

"That's not true," Everleigh cries, almost shouting.

"I'm so sorry to have to break the news to you," Dr. Lister says, coming around to sit beside my sister. "Your mother's already identified the—him.

She wasn't able to come down to get you, so if you're able to drive home... We can certainly provide transportation if not."

"We can drive," I assure her, giving her a serene smile. "We'll be fine. Thank you for your concern."

"But—he was here last night," Eleanor says. "He just went out with the guys."

They keep talking, but I'm no longer listening. My hands reach out automatically, closing around each of my sister's. We cling on, and for once, they feel like a lifeline. It's just us now. Dad's gone. Dawson's gone.

Dawson, my very human brother, who went for runs with me until he was pouring sweat. I always called him a pig. He was a pig. He'd belch and fart out loud with no remorse, almost proudly, and leave his shoes kicked off all over the house and torture us with his smelly feet.

My brother, who was at a party with us just a few days ago. Who wasn't even supposed to come home from college, but randomly showed up and then stayed an entire week. I thought maybe he'd been kicked out already. He was acting shifty. Did he get into something at school? Or back here?

My head swims.

Oh god. That has to be it.

He was the WHPA supplier last year. He must have come back here and was going to see his connection and get drugs to sell on campus. Something must have gone down at the deal.

"Your mother would like you to be together as a family right now," the headmaster is saying, trying to get us and our obscene level of pain out of his office.

"And you'll be excused as long as you need," Dr. Lister assures us, her sympathetic smile reminding me to keep my face on, frozen in place like a porcelain doll. "The grieving process can be very different for each

individual, and we want to be here to help in your healing journey in any way we can.”

Healing journey.

I want to puke. I have to get out of here.

Eleanor is sobbing, huge, ugly-sounding hiccups coming with it.

It’s embarrassing.

“Thank you,” I say, standing and smoothing my skirt so it’ll be as free of wrinkles as my face. “I’ll check my emails for the assignments every day while we’re gone.”

“How’d it happen?” Everleigh demands.

“Your mother will want to explain everything to you,” the headmaster says, his flabby neck flushing red with discomfort.

“Thank you,” I say again, dragging my sisters out of the office. They climb into the back of the Mustang, leaving me alone up front like I’m their chauffeur. I listen to Everleigh trying to soothe Eleanor, who’s sobbing on her shoulder. I watch the trees blur by, wilted in the late summer heat, defeated by months of relentless sun.

The dog days of summer. That’s what my great uncle called this time of year when we came to visit him here when we were kids. I thought it was so funny.

He’s dead too. But then, he was old.

Dawson wasn’t even old enough to drink yet. Not legally.

He said he was going out with the Dolces last night. That we shouldn’t wait up. They came to pick him up in Royal’s Rover.

But he must have come home and then gone somewhere else on his own, because his car was gone this morning when we left for school. I didn’t think much of it. He has friends from high school here, and plenty of girls want to sleep with a college guy.

We pull up to the house we inherited from my great uncle, a big white antebellum style mansion with glaring white paint like all the others in the neighborhood. The lawn is perfectly manicured, the roses trimmed. Only I know that Mom goes out at night and does them herself with a flashlight because we can't afford a gardener, and she doesn't want anyone to know.

From the outside, everything looks perfect. We make sure to keep it clean and painted and spectacular, even though the inside is falling apart. It's the same for our family, our lives, and our bodies. We're all as fake as the big pretty house with the roses out front and the floors rotting through.

"Mom?" Eleanor yells when we step inside. The lights are off, even though it's dim and stuffy inside. We can't turn the air down too much, can't turn the lights on during the day. Every cent counts.

Mom is sitting ramrod straight on the couch that came with the house, the pattern of pastel flowers leftover from the eighties. She stares with unseeing eyes at the TV, where *Local News with Jackie* shows the pretty brunette newscaster standing in front of the bridge to the Darling manor.

"The victim's identity remains undisclosed while the family is being notified," she says gravely, nodding with just the correct balance of professionalism and sadness. That's a woman who knows how to fake it, who knows how to school her face into the appropriate expression for any circumstance. She lost a daughter a few years ago, but she's still out there, doing her job, not letting it break her. Suddenly, I feel a kinship with her practiced smile and steadfast reporting. She's a Jackie, too.

"He hung himself," Mom says faintly. "My baby boy hung himself."

My sisters dive onto the couch on either side of her, wrapping their arms around her and burrowing into their grief. The sound of sobbing echoes through the dimly lit room.

I turn and climb the stairs to my room.

I thumb my phone on and see a message from Dixie asking what happened. Everyone will know soon enough. It was on the news. They'll text with fake sympathy, fake concern. They'll pretend to care, and I'll pretend I believe they do.

I power off my phone and toss it into the drawer beside my bed.

Then I run a cold bath and sink down into it, closing my eyes and letting the cold take me over until I'm too numb to feel anything, like I did that night last year, when Royal almost drowned in the river after he tried to kill Colt.

I know I should cry like my sisters, but I can't remember how. The cold helps keep everything at bay by forcing me into my body so viscerally, like it did the morning after Royal didn't die. I guess that's why my brother hung himself instead of just jumping. Jumping doesn't work. The bridge is too close to the water.

Except maybe this time of year, when it's been dry all summer and the water is low.

He died in the dog days.

It strikes me as funny, and suddenly, I'm laughing. I promised I'd never cry for a boy again. So I laugh for Dawson instead, for my dead brother who didn't know how to protect me, who couldn't beat them so he joined them, just like me. We're all survivors.

Until we aren't.

I laugh harder, sitting alone in the cold bath, thinking I've finally lost my entire mind. I laugh until it echoes around the loose, faded tiles of the bathroom, until my stomach aches, until tears roll down my cheeks. They don't count. They're tears of laughter. I can't stop even when I'm afraid I'm going to slip under the surface and choke on the water.

I guess Baron Dolce is right. I really am a crazy bitch.

nine

Rumor Has It... Willow Heights' three queens were suddenly called out of class and checked out of school without explanation. Will we find out the reason for their quick and quiet departure, or is it a secret? Watch for more drops of Tea to be spilled today!

Rylan Woods

Revenge is supposed to taste sweet, but the bile in my throat is only bitter as I stand outside a back door of the school, resting my hands on my knees and trying to breathe. A discordant symphony is banging around in my brain, my thoughts clashing like twelve kids let loose on drumkits with no instruction.

Dawson Walton is dead.

That's not what was supposed to happen.

I didn't mean it, didn't mean for anyone to die when I meddled like a little bitch in their family. I was just running my mouth. I didn't expect my words to have that much power, to have real life consequences.

Not ones this dire.

I should be happy.

This isn't my fault. It's karma.

Her family drove my father to suicide. I couldn't reach her father, so I did the same to her brother.

But I didn't mean to. I didn't.

Did I?

I couldn't have predicted this. I couldn't have known this is what he'd do after, I assume, his friend confronted him about fucking his girlfriend. He sure as fuck didn't sound sorry about it when he was drunk at the party. He sounded fucking proud of it.

The door beside me swings open, and a guy with tattoos all up his arms comes out. He pauses when he sees me. I drop my head, trying to catch my breath.

He tips his chin. "You good?"

"Yeah," I say. "Just a stomach bug or something."

He digs in the pocket of his navy slacks and produces a pack of cigarettes. "Guess one of these wouldn't help."

"I don't smoke."

He tucks the butt of the cigarette between his lips. "You're Lo's little fuck boy, right?" he asks around it while he digs out a vintage Bic.

I straighten, a flare of jealousy rising in me when he calls her by that nickname.

"I'm her boyfriend," I say. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing," he says, and he turns and walks off toward the bleachers, leaving me to wonder.

I've never met the guy, but it's a small school. Everyone knows who Colt is. He's WHPA's one and only loser. I'm not sure why he goes here at all, since he doesn't fit in with all the perfect, plastic people at Willow Heights. Maybe they need a whipping boy, or the Dolce twins need an example to hold up when people forget what happens when you disobey them. Apparently they're to blame for his disfigured hand.

Gloria's whole group hates him, and he's relegated to eating under the bleachers every day so as not to taint the pretentiously named 'café' with his loser vibes. He must be poor or something, and combined with the hand and

the stain of bad blood between him and the Dolces, it's enough to make the whole school shun him. It makes me understand Gloria a little, why she's so nervous about making a wrong move. I'm nervous around them too, but I also feel for the dude who didn't get so lucky as to have the perfect blonde cheerleader for a girlfriend.

I should thank Lo, really. If not for her, I wouldn't just be out of the popular group. I'd probably get my ass kicked and have to eat under the bleachers too.

Hell, I'd probably be friends with that guy. Just from looking at him, I can tell we have more in common than I have with the meathead jocks who sit at her table and only think about showing off how many cars they have and how many girls they've fucked.

But if I talked to Colt now, I'd probably end up with more than a fucked up hand in the process. He looks like an even match for one of the twins, while either one of them could kick my ass with one hand tied behind his back. So, I head back inside because I know the Dolces don't let Colt have friends, and I'm not going to put a target on my back without good reason.

After school, I slide into the new, leather seat of my new, shiny 4Runner, tricked out with every extra the dealership could throw at my stepdad. I tried telling Mr. Montgomery that I didn't need his charity, and I sure as fuck don't need a gas-guzzling, oversized SUV that says I'm compensation for something. But he showed up the next day with keys in hand, having completely ignored my arguments and gotten it for me anyway.

He said he thought I was just being modest, and Mom bitched me out for being ungrateful when I tried to argue. I wasn't trying to be ungrateful, but if he'd told me I didn't have a choice about getting a car, I'd have picked out something within the same galaxy as my style.

Amber rolls her eyes as she climbs up into the passenger seat. She gets it.

We look like a couple rich pricks driving around in this, but I guess that's the point. We fit right in with the rest of the kids at this school.

"You okay?" I ask my sister as we lurch out of our parking spot, the oversized beast roaring before I quickly let off the gas. Everyone in school has heard about Dawson by now, since some chick posted about it on social media.

Guilt curls into a dark hollow in my chest when I think about how I can never, ever tell anyone what I did at that party.

Not even Amber. She'd never look at me the same if she knew I took someone from the Waltons the way they took Dad from us. She'd never wish that pain on anyone.

A few heads turn our way as we roll past the rows of cars, kids probably expecting to be run over by some 'roid-raging dickhead who would rev his engine at them. I cringe at the thought of being seen that way. I'm one of the populars now. If I was like Gloria, if I could be the guy she wanted me to, I'd embrace popularity and act like the kind of guy who would threaten to run over kids in the parking lot just for laughs.

But I'm not that kind of guy. Sitting at their table just shows me what a sham it all is. They're all fake. Even Gloria.

Gloria most of all.

I don't want to act like that. I'd rather not be popular than try out for football and go through whatever hazing is required to be one of them, and get a spot on the team because Mr. Montgomery leaned on the coach. I'd never make it off the bench anyway. My talents are strictly musical and do not extend to athleticism, coordination, or feats of strength.

Of course Amber doesn't answer me, so I'm left alone with my thoughts.

She hasn't spoken since the night of the gunshot. Mr. Montgomery promptly put her in therapy the second we got here, as well as music lessons

with some big shot pianist, but I don't know how therapy's supposed to help if she doesn't talk. Guess it's not my business.

She goes to her room at home, and I cross the lawn, climb the tree, and drop into Gloria's room. I haven't fucked her in three days—the longest it's been since I moved here. I actually tried the first day, but each time I stabbed into her, another horrible image arose in my mind. In the silence of Gloria's spacious, clean, well-lit room, I heard the gunshot in the dark.

I saw the splatters on the wall.

I heard my sister screaming.

I saw my mother's haunted, vacant stare as the judge told us we'd be going into the system.

I imagined a body swinging from a rope.

I heard my own voice when I finally snapped and yelled at my sister to shut up.

She did—permanently.

I realized I wasn't fucking Gloria anymore, that I'd gone limp like some pathetic old guy with erectile dysfunction. I rolled off and walked out without a word to her. We haven't spoken since.

Today she's lying on her bed in a pair of sweats when I climb through the window. When she sees me, she lifts her hips and pushes them down without a word, like the only possible reason I could be here is to use her pussy. I hate myself for making her think that.

I hate her for making me hate myself for it.

"Have you left your room since I was here last?" I ask.

"Does the washroom count?"

"No," I say, scowling down at her. "Look, I get it. I get it better than anyone. But you don't get to just give up."

"Why not?"

Her question infuriates me.

Because I didn't, that's fucking why. Because I had a little sister to protect when we went to our first foster home, and Amber wouldn't say a word if someone touched her because she still wasn't speaking, because I told her to shut up that night. Because my mother fell apart and gave up, and now she's married to some asshole who buys me fancy cars and is probably creeping after my sister when I'm over here, and it's my fault, because I'm the one who set all this in motion to get back to Gloria.

I won't have her turn into nothing because then it's all for nothing.

"Get up," I say. "Let's go get something to eat in town."

She sighs and rolls up from the bed. A minute later, she's in the shower and I'm sitting on her bed waiting. I glance over and see a little foil sheet with a circular ring of pills on her bedside table. I snatch them up, my pulse pounding in my temples. I count the empty places where she's popped one out each day. There are five left. Have I been home that long? I can't remember how many days. I don't think it's that many. Which means she was already on these, already fucking someone. No one takes birth control when they're not having sex.

Rage blinds me as I sit there counting them again. Maybe it's the right number of days, but if it is, she must have gotten on them the very next day after I showed up.

She should have fucking told me she was on these. It's a decision we should have made together. I didn't tell her she could take birth control. I wanted to make sure she was stuck with me, and now I find out she went behind my back and found a way to prevent it from the start. Why is she trying to get away from me so hard?

I'm seething as I think of what I've done for her. Gone along with her friends to their stupid parties. Sat at their table. Endured their bullshit talk,

pretended their jokes were funny. Hell, I've even started selling a little for extra cash because they hooked me up with a connection and it's better than taking money from Mr. Montgomery.

Which one of them is fucking my girlfriend behind my back?

I open my phone and scroll through, finding the number for my supplier. I shoot him a quick text, then stand and kick off my shoes. I've never done it in the shower, but if Gloria thinks she's going to escape me by going in there, she should know better.

I watch her through the curtain for a minute, the shape of her body a tease, a blur of alluring curves and mystery. I hate that she has secrets I don't know, that she has motivations she hasn't shared, things she hides from me. Her boyfriend should know everything, her every thought and dream and secret, like I used to.

Knowing she didn't hear me come in, that she doesn't know I'm watching, makes me hard though. I quickly undress and step into the shower with her. She turns, her eyes widening with surprise. They're red, like she was crying silently in here, but maybe it's just the water.

"I'm on my period," she warns.

"Another first for us," I say, stepping under the spray of hot water. She backs against the wall, out of the spray, and lifts her foot onto the edge of the tub, a resigned expression on her face.

I move forward, awkwardly pushing my hips against hers. The position is not ideal, and my feet slip when I try to get leverage. I brace them and push up into her, spluttering as I thrust into her and my face bobs straight into a full spray of water.

"Fuck," I manage, turning my face from the water. She reaches up and adjusts the showerhead, making the water sluice down my pale chest. I drive into her again. At least it's easy when she's already wet from her period.

Looking down, the blood reminds me of our first time—and a lot of times since. Now that I know she bleeds almost every time, I don't even know if she was really a virgin the first time. She felt like one, but it's not like I had anything to compare it to. Now that I do, I'm not sure. It was different enough to make me believe, in the moments I want to believe, that she was telling the truth. But maybe it only felt different to me because I'd never done it before.

“Rylan,” she gasps, and I look up to see an expression I haven't seen on her face before. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips slightly parted, her pupils dilated with desire. “Kiss me.”

I lean in automatically, but the column of spray stops me and brings me back to my senses. “No,” I say, slipping an arm around her neck and bringing her forward, so her face is under the water. She spits and struggles, and when her body tenses, her pussy grips my cock hard enough to make me cum. I give a few quick, hard thrusts, then shudder against her as I finish. Only then do I let her lean back against the wall. She stands there coughing and panting while I let the spray clean the blood off me before reaching behind her to shut off the water.

“Come on,” I say. “It's time to get you some food.”

We drive in silence to the unfortunately named Boehner's Burgers and sit at one of the old wooden picnic tables. I buy two baskets of burgers and fries and set them between us, along with a shake for me and the diet soda she asked for.

“Since when do you drink diet?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Gotta stay on top of the pyramid.”

“You coming back to school soon?”

“Next week,” she says, setting down her half-eaten burger.

I grab her hand. “When did you do this?” I demand, fury pulsing in my

temples.

“What?” she asks, her eyes going wide as she glances around, like she’s afraid someone will see us together, even though everyone already knows she’s mine. A big group of about ten kids from school occupies another table, and I glare at them, trying to find the guy she’s afraid will see us holding hands.

“Your nails,” I grit out. “You said you’d only left your room to go to the bathroom.”

“Let go,” she hisses. “You’re hurting me.”

“Good,” I say, squeezing harder. “You lied to me. That hurts me. You deserve to hurt in return.”

“I didn’t say I’d never gone anywhere else,” she grits out, her breath coming short as she breathes through the pain. She’d never cry out, bring attention from the other occupied table. I never quite understood that, why abuse is more shameful for the victim than the abuser. But then, I never understood why someone would want to hurt their partner until I started doing it.

“Who the fuck are you getting all done up for?” I demand. “Where have you been going while I’m at school every day?”

I can’t be there to watch through her window with my binoculars when she’s home. I need her back at school so I know what she’s doing, if she’s lying to me.

“Nowhere,” she says, wincing but refusing to pull her hand away and cause a scene. Her fingertips have turned purple from the strength of my grip. “My mom took us all to get them done. She was trying to make us feel better.”

“You don’t deserve to feel better,” I say, shoving her hand back at her.

She hugs it to her chest, her food forgotten. Tears shine in her eyes, but

she doesn't let them spill. She just stares at me with big, hurt eyes, like a kicked puppy.

"No one made me feel better when my dad shot himself," I snap at her, fury pounding inside my skull. "No one took me out to get burgers or get my fucking nails done. You don't deserve that, either. You deserve to know how it feels when someone you love takes their life and your entire world turns into a series of explosions that detonate one after another until you can't tell up from down."

"What?" she asks, swallowing hard.

"You deserve to lose your house, and your family, and your dad," I snarl. "You deserve to have seen your brother jump off that bridge, to have heard his neck snap. You deserve to suffer, to lose your mom, to go into foster care and go to sleep every night in fear, knowing something could happen to your sisters, and you'd never know. Then you'd know a quarter of the shit I've lived through."

"I know," she whispers, staring at the table.

"You don't know," I say flatly. "You'll never know. Because even if you had to go through all the shit I have, you'd never get to feel what it's like to know the reason for all of it is the person you love."

Tears swim in her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"You may know what it's like to lose someone you love, and think what if you'd done something differently, and what if you could have saved him. The difference is, you're the reason I lost my dad. I'm not the reason you lost your brother."

She nods, dropping her gaze as a tear slides down her cheek. "I know."

The big, noisy group leaves, a couple of them whispering when they see Gloria Walton out getting burgers just a few days after her brother died, like a heartless bitch. Good. I hope they knock her off her pedestal, even if they're

on a lower rung of the social ladder. They can still shake the queen loose from her perch at the top.

I turn back to Lo when the others are gone. “Then you know that you deserve every bit of pain you’re feeling, because when you wonder if it’s your fault that Dawson is dead, just know that it is. You may not know how, but it is. It’s not part of your punishment. Your karma. Think about that while you walk home.”

I stand and grab her food, tossing it on my way out. She doesn’t deserve to eat the food I paid for after what she did to my family. She deserves to suffer and hurt and rage for as long as I do. I’m not going to stop until I know she has. That’s her punishment. And since mine never ends, hers will never end either.

ten

Rumor Has It... WHPA's beloved blonde royal was seen out and about, grabbing burgers and canoodling with her new beau just days after her brother's tragic passing. Was it a case of mistaken identity, or could our Queen of Hearts really be so heartless?

Gloria Walton

I'm still collecting myself when footsteps crunch on the gravel of the picnic area, and a pair of men's Doc Martens tucked into bootcut blue jeans appears in my line of sight. I take a breath and make sure the tears aren't still shining in my eyes before I look up, taking in the white t-shirt stretched over a muscular abdomen, strong chest, and broad shoulders. I know who it is before I even note the ink swirling over his bare arms and up his neck, to where his hair is pulled back at the nape.

The last person on earth I want to see is standing in front of me with a red and white soda cup in one hand and a basket of fries in the other, a burger tucked into the end. One look in those smoky blue eyes and I can see the sorrow written there.

No way am I letting myself become so pathetic that *Colt Darling* feels sorry for me.

"What are you staring at, creep?" I snarl at him.

"Don't tell me the untouchable Prom Queen is eating alone," he says, the momentary pity gone from his eyes.

Relief sinks into me, and I'm hideously grateful that he's going to be a dick to me instead of being sympathetic. I know how to deal with dicks. I don't know how to deal with pity.

"No," I say, scowling up at him. "I'm eating with my boyfriend."

"One of the Dolce twins, or Bad Omens?"

"It's Rylan," I say, squaring my shoulders. "I told you his name. You'd remember if you weren't so mentally challenged."

He nods toward the parking lot. "So, the one who just high-tailed it out of here."

"He went to get something," I say, though I hear how lame my excuse sounds the moment the words leave my mouth.

Colt laughs and steps over the bench seat, straddling it and sitting sideways to set his food down. My gaze involuntarily skates down his masculine body, the curve of his torso as he leans his elbow on the picnic table, the way his hips angle that makes my mouth go dry. I jerk my gaze back to his, mortified by his amused expression. He clearly saw me lusting after his body, but instead of looking smug like a normal guy, he looks like he finds it hilarious.

Somehow, that's infinitely worse.

"What do you think you're doing?" I ask, making a shooing gesture with my newly manicured fingers. For some stupid reason, I'm glad I just got my nails done, that they're perfect when Colt Darling sees them. I tell myself it's just because I want him to see that they're sharp enough to scratch his eyes out, not because I'm afraid he'll see me as less than flawless, less than hard as diamond and sharp as a steel knife.

"Just keeping you company until Fall Out Boy comes back."

"Go away, freak," I say, flicking my nails at him. "Rylan will kick your ass if he sees you talking to me."

Colt snorts and picks up the glass ketchup bottle in the middle of the table. “I think I could take him.”

“You think he’s weak?” I ask, watching the muscle in his scarred forearm flex as he bangs on the bottom of the bottle to get the ketchup to come out.

He sets it down and smirks at me before picking up a couple fries and swirling them lazily through the pool of ketchup he poured. “You have a better a chance of kicking my ass than that kid.”

“Aren’t you already pathetic enough without adding ‘got beat up by a girl’ to the list?”

“That’s not very progressive of you, is it?” he asks, quirking a brow and popping the fries into his mouth. I watch him chew, annoyed that even the way he does that is careless, lazy, self-assured. I hate him for not caring what anyone thinks, for having confidence even after everything we’ve taken from him.

“Maybe not, but it’s true,” I say, lifting my chin and flattening my hands on the table, wishing I had food to keep me occupied. “Even you wouldn’t be able to live it down if a girl kicked your ass.”

“Hey, I’ve seen you throw down with Harper,” he says, holding up a hand and letting a slow smile spread over his face. “You’re not half bad.”

My traitorous pulse flutters in the side of my throat when he fixes me with that look, like he admires me despite the fact that I’m the last person who deserves it. For a second, our eyes meet, and I’m frozen like a deer in headlights, sure he’ll see through me.

That he’ll remember.

Then he pulls his gaze from mine, and I can breathe again. God, why does he have this effect on me? As much as I hate him, I can see how he used to be a heartbreaker. He still is, even if he doesn’t know it.

He unwraps his straw in silence and stabs it through the cuts in the plastic lid. After taking a drink, he picks up his burger and pushes the hot, salty fries toward me. I glance around, and he lets out a snort of breath. “You afraid someone will see you eating my fries and think you’ve caught mad cow disease, or whatever you’re going to tell everyone is wrong with me this year?”

“I never said that.”

“Nah, you just told everyone I didn’t have a penis, but somehow I still had... What was it? Syphilis?” He bites into his burger and watches me as he chews, a challenge in his eyes.

“Explains the brain damage,” I mutter.

“Go on,” he says. “You can have them.”

“No, thanks,” I say, pushing the basket away even though my mouth is watering for them. “I shouldn’t eat that kind of thing anyway.”

He cocks his head. “Why?”

“Maybe just one,” I say with a sigh, reaching for the basket. “If I ate as many as I wanted, you’d have to roll me out of here.”

He laughs quietly and shakes his head. “Girls.”

“What about us?” I ask, annoyed by his tone.

“Nothing.”

“Must be nice to look like that without even trying,” I grumble. I realize what I said a second too late, but Colt just raises a brow and grabs a few fries, swipes them in ketchup, and eats them between bites of his burger.

I sit there in silence for a minute before caving and taking another fry. I nibble at the end, watching him eat the way boys do. I must be insane with grief, because somehow even the way he eats is sexy, and there is not one thing that I should find sexy about the school’s dirty outcast. What happened last year was temporary insanity, so brief I shouldn’t remember it any better

than he does.

“You gonna be okay?” he asks, brushing his hands together when he’s swallowed the last bite of burger. I search for pity in his eyes, but all I see is casual guardedness. I might as well get used to the pitying looks. I’m going to have to go back to school next week, and I’m sure I’ll get plenty. I have a few days to rebuild my cocoon, add another layer of steel to keep them out. Never let them get to you, after all. Never let them see you cry.

“I guess you heard,” I say, slumping forward and resting an elbow on the table.

“I meant because you’re stranded here,” Colt says, grabbing a few napkins and wiping his nine remaining fingers. “I could give you a ride home.”

“You think I’m going to be seen getting out of your truck?”

“Right,” he says, crumpling the napkin and tossing it onto the table. “You live in the Dolces’ neighborhood.”

I stare at the worn, wooden boards of the picnic table while he picks up his soda and takes a few long pulls on the straw. I bet it’s not even diet.

“He jumped off a bridge,” I say to the table. “Who does that?”

“Lots of people,” he says without missing a beat.

That’s when I remember his sister did the same thing a couple years ago. Fuck.

“They should take out that bridge,” I burst out. “It’s dangerous!”

“It’s a bridge,” he says, then hesitates, looking at me in this way I don’t have time to deal with right now, like he’s trying to figure something out. Right now, I’m so stricken I might let him if he tried, but he shrugs after a second and takes another drink. “My sister did what was best for her. I can’t blame her for that.”

I stare at him a long moment, then shake my head and go back to the

table, running the point of my sharp nail along a small crack in the wood. “He didn’t even leave a note,” I mumble. “I mean, he did, but not for us. It was public. I had to see it on *The Tea*, after hundreds of people had already seen it. He didn’t leave us a different one privately, not even for Mom. After all she’s been through...”

Colt reaches over and lays his left hand over mine. I stare at the tattooed skin on his fingers, the ink partially obscuring the burn scars extending all the way up his forearm. I wasn’t there that day, but I know Duke Dolce did that to him. My gaze drops back to the stub of his missing middle finger, and I feel like I’ll throw up. Baron Dolce did that. Boys whose command I still obey, because if I didn’t, they’d do the same or worse to me. They haven’t left any outward scars except a little brand Duke leaves on all his conquests, but the damage that no one can see is inside, immeasurable and invisible.

But the instinct to keep going, to keep pretending, to hide the damage is too deeply instilled in me to stop. I want to throw my shell open and let him see, to emerge like something victorious, shining and beautiful and powerful, from the ash and grime that’s left. But I know that wouldn’t happen any more than it happened when I tried to run from Baron when Rylan showed up. I’m just as ruined as the rest of the twisted, huddled remains inside the cocoon that should have birthed a flawless butterfly. Now, only the cocoon will ever be flawless, and I’m desperate to keep him from knowing that the inside doesn’t match the beauty of my shell.

I slide my hand from under his and pull out my phone. “My sister’s almost here to pick me up,” I lie. “I can’t be seen with you. And if you ever tell anyone we talked...”

I don’t finish the sentence. I don’t need to. Colt doesn’t need threats spelled out for him. He’s endured more than enough violence to know the consequences of disobeying royalty.

That's why I can't tell him the truth. I can never tell him. Because if I did, there's a chance that in a reckless moment of anger or frustration, he'll let it slip. He does shit like that, like flipping off Baron when he was pissed one time. That's how he lost that finger. It's a miracle Baron didn't see something last year, when Colt was so drunk on daring that he'd text me at school.

Or maybe Baron did. Maybe that's why he put us together in the senior project. He's the cat playing with his mice, reveling in his power and my terror. There's no point in making Colt share the fear. He's happy. He has Dixie, and his cousin, and even a new girl to hang out with. All I would do is get him killed. After all, if they tried to kill him for hanging out with Royal's plaything, what would they do if they knew what he did to their queen?

I stand on the curb and text my sister asking her to come get me.

Colt throws his trash away and gives me the barest nod, like we're less than strangers, before he walks to his truck and drives away without a backwards glance. I glare after him, hating him more than I ever have in my life. It's unfair how easily he deals with things. His sister tries to kill herself, and he says it's for the best. The Dolces beat his head in, he just comes strolling back the next year like nothing happened, flaunting his annoying girlfriend. Nothing can stop him.

He bends so easily he can't be broken. It infuriates me. He doesn't care enough about anything to be hurt. He's mild, lukewarm, without passion. It's everything I want to be, even as I stand there, sure I'll explode at any moment, storm and rage and seethe and tear apart this entire town and everything in it just so someone will pay for the hurt that drills down deeper and deeper into my soul and never ends.

Or maybe I'm just shallow enough that all I want is for someone to see me, to think that I'm worth seeing. To realize that I'm not the façade I show

the world, that I am not Jackie, and to want to know even more. I want someone to break open the shell I've created even as I scream for them to stop. I want them to see my darkest shames and the secrets I work so hard to hide, and to know that I'm not perfect, that I'm not beautiful, that I'm not okay.

I want someone to see that I'm more than a pretty diamond shell. That I'm not the girl I was two years ago, and I'm not my flawless veneer, and I'm not the Bitch Queen. I want them to stop trying to make me those things and just admit the truth of who I am now—a hideous, blackened golem who is a thousand times uglier than Colt Darling will ever be.

I don't need them to love me despite it.

I just need them to acknowledge it.

eleven

Rumor Has It... A certain Founding Son hoping to join the Elite inner circle is throwing his first party tonight. Will it prove he truly belongs, or will he fail the test and remain on the fringes? Only time (and this girl!) will tell!

Rylan Woods

FightFuckFinnegan: got ur shit

TheseDarkWoods: k

FightFuckFinnegan: rush delivery?

TheseDarkWoods: at a party

FightFuckFinnegan: hs?

TheseDarkWoods: mostly, some college

FightFuckFinnegan: any virgins?

TheseDarkWoods: how would I know?

FightFuckFinnegan: besides u

TheseDarkWoods: fuck off

FightFuckFinnegan: its ok little man. We'll get u laid one day.

TheseDarkWoods: what would I need ur shit for if I was a virgin?

FightFuckFinnegan: solid point, mate

TheseDarkWoods: c u next tuesday

FightFuckFinnegan: ur a real one

TheseDarkWoods: thx

“Hey.”

I look up from my phone, quickly turning off the screen. A goth girl I recognize from school stands over the sofa where I’ve parked myself out of the way of the football assholes. I glance around, but I’m the only loser hiding out on the second-floor landing, paying more attention to his phone than the crowd.

“Rylan, right?” she prompts.

“Yeah,” I say. “Lo’s down there.”

I nod to the railing that runs along the catwalk and landing, turning into the banister when it reaches the stairs to the first floor. Below us, I can see a good amount of the party, which means I can keep an eye on Gloria without joining the drunken horde. I’m pretty sure there are people actually fucking on the dance floor, the perfect atmosphere for her to let down her guard and get a little carried away. I’m just waiting for her to slip up and show me which guy she’d rather be fucking than me.

“Oh, I know,” the goth girl says, flopping down on the couch. Her drink sloshes onto her tits, which are barely contained by her black corset top. I’m pretty sure I can see a sliver of her pink areola as she wipes off the droplets with her fingers. I gape at the pale globes of her round tits, and she giggles and licks her fingers.

Fuck, is she flirting with me?

I jerk my eyes away from the display and back to the dancefloor, guilt wilting the threat of erection. Gloria is dancing with her sisters and a couple other girls from school, swinging her blonde hair around like a delicious tease. I wonder who’s standing off to the side, where I can’t see. Who is she dancing for?

“I’m Dixie,” the girl beside me says. “I was dancing with Gloria and Gideon and them, but I’m taking a break.”

“Gideon?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at her.

“Yeah,” she says, widening her eyes. “Gideon Delacroix? This is his house?”

“I know who Gideon is,” I say, since he’s one of the populars. He’s less of a dickhead than the others, kind of quiet and moody. He actually talks to me like I belong there and I’m not just some peasant who’s tolerated because I’m fucking the queen.

“Oh, right,” Dixie says, giggling again and shifting on the couch to make her tits jiggle. “You sit with him at lunch. Of course you know who he is.”

“You’re the gossip chick,” I say, remembering Gloria’s connection with her.

“That’s me,” she says, sipping her drink and beaming.

“I guess I owe you a thank you,” I say. “You probably made me famous by putting me in your blog so much.”

“Nah, you’d be popular for dating Lo anyway,” she says, waving a hand. Then she giggles and takes another drink. “Okay, maybe I made you a little famous. You definitely made things more interesting this year.”

I scoff. “I seriously doubt that.”

“You did,” she insists, giving my arm a flirty little shove. “Ever since I started here as a freshman, the elite squad has always been a homogenous group of the usual suspects—football players and their skinny cheerleader girlfriends. You’re definitely the first emo kid to sit at their table.”

I’m not sure how to respond to that. It’s widely acknowledged that Dixie knows everything about everyone, which piques my interest but also makes me wary. I’ve never talked to her, since Gloria says any little slip around her could get someone in trouble. But maybe there’s a reason my girlfriend doesn’t want me talking to her.

“You said Gloria and Gideon,” I muse. “Like they’re a couple. Is there

something I should know?”

“What? No, I didn’t.”

I give her a look and nod to where Gloria and her sister are sandwiching DeShaun between them. “You’re telling me I have nothing to worry about?”

“With Gideon?” Dixie asks. “No. No way. He’s a nice guy. And so is DeShaun. Which is not Lo’s type.”

I scowl at her. “What’s her type?”

“You know,” she says with a nervous giggle. “The Dolces.”

“Right,” I say, glaring down when I see Royal making his way past the dance floor. He doesn’t even spare Lo a glance, which is satisfying as hell. I watch my girlfriend, waiting to see if she’ll show off for him, shake her ass his way or grind on DeShaun, but she doesn’t seem to notice him either.

“I mean, that *was* her type,” Dixie says, noticing my frown. “Before you. Actually, she’s never really dated anyone before, so you must be pretty special.”

“Really?” I ask, the relief inside me so immense I didn’t even realize how worked up I’d gotten about Gloria dating someone else. Maybe she really did love me all that time, like I loved her. She told me she and Royal just went to prom together, but I never quite trusted her word.

Having someone confirm it settles my anger for the first time since we moved here. Maybe I can stop punishing her at last.

“Yeah,” Dixie assures me, laying a hand on my knee. “And y’all are like, official. That’s a big deal at Willow Heights. Most of the elite prefer not to label things or get serious. Baron’s only had one girlfriend, freshman year, and I’m pretty sure he was just setting her up. Duke’s never had a girlfriend, DeShaun and Dawson only do casual, and girls know better than to date Cotton.”

“Why?” I ask, not wanting to know if I sentenced my sister to worse than

foster care by bringing her into his family, but unable to bury my head in the sand like Mom does.

“Well, I don’t know for sure,” she says. “I mean, it never happened to me, but I hear things.”

I frown at her. “He’s my stepbrother. My sister lives in that house. What did he do?”

“There’s a rumor that he takes advantage of girls when they’re drunk. And maybe worse.”

I swallow hard, thinking about the tears in Gloria’s eyes when I fucked her the first time. “What’s worse?” I croak.

“Off the record?” Dixie asks, licking her lips and glancing around before lowering her voice to a whisper. “I’ve heard the twins jokingly refer to him as the Roofie King.”

Fuck.

My heart starts hammering, and I try to remember what Cotton orders in my pickup every week. I’ve only been dealing for a few weeks, though, and I can’t remember what I gave him. I know he bought something off me. Was it pills?

I can’t deal with that shit right now though. It’s enough to know that Amber is safe at home with Mom, and Cotton is here at the party, probably going to date rape some stranger. Better than my sister. I met the guy last summer when they came to Savannah. He helped me set up the whole thing with our parents. He seemed like a normal guy, if not exactly someone I’d hang out with at school. He’s a regular dumb jock, a privileged prick who will get into an Ivy League school not because he’s special but because Daddy buys his way in.

Surely he’s smart enough not to fuck around with a girl under his own roof. The risk of being caught is too high, and shit would get messy real fast

when he was.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts. That's a distraction from the real issue at hand, the reason I started talking to this chick to begin with.

"What about Lo?" I ask. "She said she dated Royal last year."

"Oh—I wouldn't call it that," Dixie says. "Royal didn't date at all. I mean, sure, they did the whole king-and-queen act, but he would never let one girl tie him down. He liked having options."

"Options," I say, biting down on my lip ring as the sick feeling rushes back up inside me. I tug to the point of pain, needing something to hold onto so I don't go berserk and freak this girl out before I'm done getting the information I need.

"They weren't serious," she says. "Definitely not dating. They were more like friends with benefits. Not a lot of guys in your group would give her the kind of commitment you have. I can see why she made an exception for you."

"They slept together?" I ask flatly, my belly full of lead.

"Well, yeah," Dixie says, giving me a funny look. "You didn't know?"

I shake my head.

"Shit," she mutters. "Everyone knows. I just assumed... I'm sorry." She offers me a cringing smile.

"I gotta go," I say, standing and adjusting the checkered suspenders hanging around my hips. "Thanks for telling me."

"Of course," Dixie says, giving me a wink. "Us goths gotta stick together."

I make my way downstairs and past a group of girls who scream my name like I'm on stage with a guitar. Popularity is fucking weird.

Ignoring them, I walk straight across the room to Gloria, grab her by the throat, and back her off the dancefloor.

“Rylan,” she cries. “What are you doing?”

“What are *you* doing?” I snarl, slamming her back against the wall. “Or should I say who?”

“What?” she asks, her eyes widening in shock as I wrap my other hand around the first one, squeezing tighter.

Her eyes roll back and forth, probably searching the room for that human steroid she was fucking last year.

“That’s right,” I growl. “I know you fucked Royal Dolce. You really thought I wouldn’t find out? You’re not that clever, Gloria.”

“Let go,” she chokes out, trying to pry my fingers loose. “I’ll scream.”

“You can’t scream,” I say, squeezing harder. “I won’t let you. And even if you did, no one will help you. No one likes you. They’re a bunch of pathetic sycophants, but they don’t care about you. Not as much as they care about avoiding awkwardness for themselves.”

I see her eyes moving around the room, and it pisses me off that she’s still naïve enough to think she’ll prove me wrong. I don’t have to look. I know from experience just how indecent people find other people’s problems.

Dixie has it right. She prints all the gossip and people love her for it, not because she’s keeping them in the loop but because she distills other people’s pain down into digestible little morsels of gossip before she serves it up for the masses to consume. I’ve seen them do it, all eyes glued to their phones for her drops on *The Tea* app.

People like gossip, and they’ll like reading about how I choked out my girlfriend at the party. Seeing it firsthand is biting off too much, a mouthful of something too raw for them to digest. I don’t have to turn around to know that every pair of eyes that meets Gloria’s will quickly turn away, pretending the moment didn’t happen, that they didn’t see her cry for help. If they

acknowledge they see, they'll have a burden of responsibility, and no one wants that.

“You thought I was some dumb little virgin, and I wouldn't know the difference,” I snarl at Lo.

“I didn't,” she rasps, her face starting to go red from the tightness of my grip around her throat.

“You fucking did,” I say, squeezing so hard her eyes bug out of her head. “Now stop looking for help. No one cares about you, Lo. No one except me. You're a bitch and a liar, and no one could love you even if they tried. Right now, they don't even envy you, which is the only thing you usually have going for you. Now you have nothing. You're powerless, helpless, and pathetic, and they're all embarrassed for you.”

“Don't,” she pleads, her voice nothing but a croak now.

“See, the trick is, you have to get someone to actually care about you more than they care about their own comfort. No one cared about us after Dad died. No one cared until our music teacher called the state. That's when we went into the system. You know what everyone else did? They looked away. When the cafeteria ladies yelled at us for trying to sneak extra rolls to take home in our pockets so we'd have dinner, they looked away. In our classes, they moved to different tables because we were dirty. We didn't have any water to shower or wash our clothes at home for months, Gloria. Fucking months!”

My fingers tighten automatically as I speak, the rage clenching them into a fist around her frail neck.

“And then, this weird thing happened,” I go on. “They started saying I was fucking my own sister. You know why? It wasn't because of anything we did. We're not touchy-feely people. We weren't holding hands or some shit. We didn't do anything different. It was because people wanted it to be

true. They wanted us gone so that they didn't have to deal with their own discomfort, and they wanted to make us something 'other' so they could rationalize their disgust."

Gloria's face has gone an interesting shade of purple, and her body starts to shake.

"Did you fuck him?" I demand. "Look in my eyes and tell me the truth, Lo. While I was waiting for you just like we promised, were you spreading your legs like a dirty whore for that juiced-up buffoon?"

"Yes," she mouths, her voice cut off entirely.

I think about fucking her right there, not to show everyone how weak their queen really is, but to show her that I can. Not one of them would stop me.

But I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be able to get it up with the mountain of self-disgust crushing me right now, and turning out to be a flaccid little dipshit who couldn't close the deal would defeat the purpose.

Suddenly, I'm grabbed from behind and wrenched away, and Gloria falls to her knees. I fully expect Royal to be standing there when I'm spun around, but it's Gideon Delacroix. The guy's only a sophomore, and he's not as big as the others, but he's sturdier than he looks, and right now he looks like a storm cloud—wind-whipped dark hair, skin darkened with fury, dark eyes flashing like lightning.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he demands, grabbing my shirt and hauling me up in his face.

"This is between me and my girlfriend," I say, trying to push back from him.

"The fuck it is," he growls. "You're choking out a girl at my party."

DeShaun and Duke have stepped in to back him up, as if he's the one who needs help. A minute ago, we were invisible, but the moment my hands

are no longer on Gloria, I'm fair game.

"What do you care?" I snap. "Are you fucking her too?"

"Get out of my house," Gideon says, releasing my shirt and pushing me back, his voice cold and commanding. One look at his henchmen and I know there's no room for argument. I'm not interested in getting my ass handed to me by three big athletes, so I turn to Gloria, who's still on all fours, her head down and her hair covering her face as she coughs and wheezes to catch her breath.

"In case I didn't make it clear, it's over," I say. "I'll never touch your skanky slut ass again."

I turn and walk out before the guys can throw me out. Just my shitty luck, it's raining. And of course I rode with Gloria, since she loves her car and I hate mine, and this was her stupid party.

I sit on the porch swing and open my phone.

TheseDarkWoods: emergency pickup?

FightFuckFinnegan: rn?

TheseDarkWoods: kicked out of party.

FightFuckFinnegan: u? fr? I'm impressed, little man

TheseDarkWoods: got a ride?

FightFuckFinnegan: thot u were coming 2 pick up ur shit.

TheseDarkWoods: other kind of emergency pickup

FightFuckFinnegan: sure mate. Give me an hour, haven't fucked yet tonite.

WYA?

TheseDarkWoods: Delacroix place. Have a question about stepbro 2. Will ask later.

For the next hour, I sit on the porch and watch people leave. A couple

gets in a fight down the street. I'm pretty sure the guy is Royal Dolce, judging by his oversized 'roid-head build. He tosses the girl up on the hood of the car and they fuck, which is pretty hot to witness when they don't know I'm watching. I consider jerking off, but I figure if Gideon comes out and sees me spanking it while spying on his party guests after he told me to leave, he won't go so easy on me.

A black Jaguar with tinted windows pulls up, and I adjust myself and head down the steps into the rain, sliding into the passenger seat. We start down the street, his headlights sweeping over the couple still going at it on the car.

"Damn," Colin says, his Irish accent slightly slurred. "Little pervert got a show while he waited."

Great. I just climbed into a death trap with a drunk drug dealer. My decision-making skills are top notch tonight.

"Apparently Mr. Stallion there couldn't wait to get home to try out another one of his endless *options*," I say bitterly as we pass them. "Guess you never run out of those when you're hung like a porn star."

"I can confirm," Colin says smugly, toying with the coins he wears on a chain around his neck.

"Fuck you."

"Is that what you're pissy about?" Colin asks. "Your cock's too small?"

"It's not small," I say, glowering at him.

"It's not all fun and games, having a massive cock," he says. "I can count the number of times I've been able to talk a woman into anal on one hand."

"A real fucking tragedy."

"Condoms don't fit," he says. "Speaking of, I got your shit in the back."

"Thanks," I say, reaching behind the seat and feeling around until I find a paper bag.

“Don’t pull it out while I’m driving, you bloody idiot,” he says. “I’m sloshed.”

“Let me drive.”

“Fuck no,” he says. “If I can’t handle my whiskey and my ride, I deserve to die.”

“I guess I deserve to die for being dumb enough to get in the car with you,” I mutter. I barely know the guy. I just buy drugs from him. But who else was I going to call? I’m sure as shit not calling Mom, who would probably tell my stepdad. And I don’t want to wake my sister or look like a loser she has to come pick up from a party. I’m not even drunk. If it wasn’t raining, I would have walked home. I probably should have.

When we pull up outside the Montgomery house, I grab the bag out of the back and reach for the door. The next thing I know, I’m a headlock.

“Whoa there,” Colin says, his strong arm crushing my windpipe. “Where’s my fucking money?”

“It’s inside,” I say. “Calm the fuck down.”

“Drop the bag.”

“Do you sell Cotton Montgomery roofies?” I ask, struggling against his grip.

“I sell people what they need.”

“If my sister gets hurt because of you—”

His forearm tightens on my neck. “Finish that sentence, pretty boy,” he growls into my ear.

“I’ll get your money,” I say, dropping the bag.

“Good,” he says, releasing me and shoving me toward the door. “I give people what they want—for the right price. What they do with it is none of my fucking business. I suggest you do the same, or Willow Heights will replace you by next week.”

“Thanks for the tip,” I say before slamming the door behind me. I stalk into the house, pissed at myself for thinking he was a friend. I don’t have any more friends here than Gloria—probably less. I’m just another link in the supply chain.

Colin and I are bound together though, even if we aren’t friends. We’re the supply that fills a demand. If he didn’t sell Cotton what he wants, someone else would. If I’m not his connection at Willow Heights’, someone else will step in. It won’t stop Cotton from doing what he does.

At least this way, I’ll know what he’s getting, and I can watch if he tries anything with Amber.

I grab the money from under my mattress and head back out. Colin’s standing next to his car in the rain, smoking a cigarette. He makes me stand there and count the money before he pulls out the packet from the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Sure you know what you’re doing?” he asks.

“I thought it was none of your fucking business what anyone did with the product once you delivered,” I remind him.

“Yeah,” he says, holding tight to one edge of the packet while I try to pull it away. “It’s just... That’s a kid, man. Is that how they should be brought into the world?”

“That’s rich, coming from a guy who doesn’t use condoms.”

He releases the bag, a grin spreading across his face, showing off his chipped front tooth. “Touché, bitch.”

As I head up the walkway, I wonder if I shouldn’t have brought him here. Now he knows where I live. I moved a little product to survive when we were in a home where the parents didn’t feed us. After we got back, when Mom got bad again, I did it for a few more months to keep the bills paid. But this feels different, like I’m getting deeper into something that I’m not sure I

want to be involved in at all. I don't need money anymore. I'm fucking rich.

But I don't want to ask Mr. Montgomery for more, and this gives me—and therefore Amber—protection at school. I'm the dealer at Willow Heights, a position as important as head cheerleader and quarterback, though to a different subset of the population. Like Dixie and Colt and the others who don't fit the mainstream mold, I found my place with the other misfits. No one will mess with me while I'm their connection. Hell, I'm even more special because I get to be a unique individual. After all, there's a whole football team, but there's only one dealer.

I just have to keep from fucking up, because the consequences will be a hell of a lot more dire than losing a spot on the football team.

I wait in my room, watching out the window until Colin drives away. Then I cross the lawn, climb the tree outside Gloria's house, and drop in through her window. She's not home, but I don't know how late she'll stay. I move quickly, opening her drawer and finding the foil packet of birth control pills. I count the empty spots, then pop out an equal number in the new sheet Colin sold me. I slip her packet into my pocket, along with the handful I popped out of the new one, and leave the replacement in her drawer before climbing out and hurrying back across the lawn.

I planned to use those so she'd be tied to me forever, but plans change. Still, I paid good money for the blanks, and I'm not letting them go to waste. She's not my girlfriend, so I won't be fucking her anymore, but that doesn't mean she shouldn't pay for her betrayal. She deceived me and ruined my life, so I'm paying her back in kind. If she lets some other asshole fuck her without a condom, she'll get what she has coming. She deserves it for being such a whore.

twelve

Rumor Has It... After an altercation that got physical at a recent party, the Queen herself may be dateless for Homecoming. Will a Knight in Shining Armor swoop in at the last minute to save her from such a humiliating fate?

Gloria Walton

I used to love to stand at the edge of the water on the beach. I'd plant my feet in the sand and let the waves roll all the way in and wash around my ankles. Each time the water pulled back, I could feel the sand being pulled with it, and my feet would slowly sink in until they were covered.

Now, I wake in a cold sweat from a nightmare about the whole beach being washed away, and no matter how hard I swim, I can't get back to shore. That's my life this year. I can feel the solid ground under my feet shifting, can feel the foundation I built slipping away. Once I lose my footing, I'll be swept out by the waves, and I'll never gain the ground I lost. I'll never get back to where I was, to the safety of the shore.

Or maybe the shore was never safe at all.

Something unexpected happens the week after my brother dies, though, something that brings a glimmer of light to the darkness.

Harper comes back to school.

Everyone likes to pit us against each other, act like she came in last year and stole my man, but in truth, she was the kind of friend none of them were. She didn't care about status, didn't care what anyone thought, and didn't fake

anything.

Ironic that the one person I can trust to be a real friend is my exact opposite.

I was hurt that she didn't tell me she was dropping out of school last year, but when she shows up a month into school, we work out our shit. I need a friend like her, even if she ghosted me last year.

And maybe she needs a friend like me, one who will tell her to get her shit together and grab Royal if she wants him back. Between his looks, money, and power in this town, he probably has college girls beating down his door day and night. Harper's slow to trust him again, but we all end up at the same party that night.

I'm not into Royal anymore, but after the humiliation of Rylan publicly choking me and then dumping me, I need a drink to drown my shame. One drink turns into a few, and when Royal grabs me out of the blue and kisses me, I'm too shocked to react. He drags me to a bedroom, and I know there's no point in protesting. Royal takes what he wants, and I give. That's how our relationship always worked. And I'd be lying if I said there's no comfort to be found in his arms. They may not be safe, but they're familiar. I know what he wants from me, and I know how to give it.

Harper puts a stop to it before things go too far, and I leave them to work out their shit. Someone shoves a shot of something pink into my hand, and I take it. I dance. The floor is crowded with sweaty, horny boys and the drunk girls they're trying to take home tonight. Dixie's grinding her ass on Gideon's dick, and I have to stop myself from grabbing her around the neck like Rylan did me, choking the life out of her for daring to dance with another guy when she has Colt.

She has *everything*.

And there's not a damn thing I can do about it. So I watch her flirt,

laugh, and have fun while I ignore Duke's groping hands on my body, force myself not to show my loathing, and keep a smile plastered on my face.

Still, a little tendril of hope sprouts in the wasteland inside me.

What if she and Colt break up?

I can't think like that. If they broke up, nothing would change. Telling him the truth would still put him in danger. And even if I told, he'd still hate me. He'd hate me even more than he does now.

"Lo," Dixie squeals, dragging me away from Duke. It's a relief to get away from him, but that's short lived. "I saw what happened with you and Rylan. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, laughing and waving a hand to dismiss the whole thing. "It was nothing. He's just passionate, y'know? He's a musician. They're like that. Amber plays too. Have you heard her? She's like, a piano prodigy or something."

"No, I didn't know," she says. "What does he play?"

"He plays guitar," I say with a smug smile, thankful my rambling distracted her. "It's so sexy."

"What was he mad about?" she asks, her eyes wide with concern.

I know she's fishing for tidbits for her blog, and I curse myself for counting my blessings too soon. I'm too drunk to talk to the gossip queen, too drunk to censor myself the way I need to. She's dangerous, and I'm not sharp enough to pick my way through the minefield of her questions right now.

"Oh, not much," I say, turning when a new song comes on, hoping to return to Duke's groping hands. But he's found some other girl to dry hump, and Dixie dances around me, so we're facing each other again.

"It must have been something," she says. "Eleanor said y'all broke up."

Damn my sister and her big mouth.

"Of the record, yes," I say. "He found out I slept with Royal."

“He didn’t know?”

“No,” I say, scowling at her. “And he doesn’t know about the twins, so don’t tell him.”

“Your secret’s safe with me,” she says, giggling and miming zipping her lips. “That sucks that y’all broke up though. And right before Homecoming...”

“It’s fine,” I say. “I’m sure we’ll get back together. It was just a little squabble, nothing serious.”

“It looked pretty serious,” she says, glancing at my neck with a doubtful expression.

Not serious enough for her to step in and say something when it was happening, I think bitterly. But then, I can hardly expect her to stop a scene that will surely make her blog. The longer the drama unfolds, the more she’ll have for her story.

“Oh, he’s just very physical,” I say. “He didn’t grab me hard. I barely felt it. He just wanted me to listen.” I adjust my scarf, thankful for the chilly October weather that will let me stay covered until the bruises fade.

The song changes to “Don’t Stop Believin’,” and Dixie’s friends drag her away, all of them jumping up and down and screaming along. I stumble outside and puke up the pink drink.

The fight with Rylan leaves me single for Homecoming week, but Baron ditches his date and sweeps in to replace my boyfriend. All the girls swoon over what a gentleman he is, but I know the truth. It would look bad for the queen to go alone. More than that, it looks good for him to have the most popular girl on his arm. Harper’s shaken up the social order a bit since returning, and he’s trying to make sure everyone knows he’s still the king.

Since he has a twin, he has to share the spotlight, but neither are as perfect for the throne as Royal. I know it’s eating away at Baron, even though

he's feared enough to keep everyone in line. After we take our crowns, he says I can go talk to Rylan, who's been avoiding me all week. He's even left our lunch table, opting to sit with his sister and Dixie at Harper's table instead.

I know he hates crowds and high school dances, so I'm surprised he's even here, but then, pretty much the entire senior class showed up. Even people who hate this kind of thing don't want to regret it later, so they come just to say they went to Homecoming. I leave to find him, but instead run into Colt. I've had to see him more than I want lately, he's friends with Harper in addition to being in my senior project. I should stay away, not only because it's dangerous but because I had a boyfriend up until this week. But he has some hold over me, as if one look in his smoky blue eyes puts me under the same spell I was under last year.

I want to kill him for making me this weak, but I can't even hurt him. I can't hurt him because he doesn't care. He's the one who hurts me every time, telling me to go away and leave his family alone.

This time, I do.

I walk outside into the cold night, thinking how ironic it is that the Homecoming queen is going home alone again, while the school leper is going home with his adoring girlfriend. She's not the queen, but she was on Homecoming court. She's popular, and he's nothing, and neither of them care. Status and labels don't matter to them because they're in love. She'll pull up her dress and ride his pierced tongue later, get on her knees and crawl for him the way he likes. He'll hold her against his tattooed chest while they fall asleep in each other's arms.

And yet, I'm the one everyone will envy. They think I won tonight.

I find Rylan leaning against the trunk of a black Jaguar with Colin Finnegan, smoking a clove cigarette.

“Can we talk?” I ask, glancing at the notorious drug king who graduated from Faulkner High, the public school across town. I’ve never had an actual conversation with the guy, but I know he’s a creep. Dawson used to buy from him, and now Rylan does, thanks to me getting him involved in Dolce business. Baron makes sure to control all the important people at Willow Heights, even the ones who aren’t in the popular crowd, so he’s damn sure got our school’s dealer under his thumb. Not to mention Baron’s a bit of a chemist himself.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Colin says in his Irish accent that would make me stupid if I didn’t know better. “What can I get for you?”

“Hey, Colin,” I say, forcing a smile. “I was actually talking to Rylan, but how are you?”

“Not too bad,” he says. “I heard about your brother. Shame about that.”

“What’s up?” Rylan asks, dragging on his cigarette.

“Since when do you smoke?” I ask.

He shrugs one shoulder and glances at Colin from the corner of his eye. “Since whenever.”

I roll my eyes at Rylan’s attempt to look cool. He’s obviously trying to impress the older boy, which isn’t surprising. Half the girls in town swoon over Colin’s accent, and he’s got the looks, money, and bad boy reputation to go with it. It’s a lethal combination not just for girls, apparently.

“I’m surprised you’re at a high school dance,” I say to Colin.

“I saw Royal Dolce inside,” he points out. “Guess I’m not the only pervert who likes to pick up high school chicks.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Royal is here with Harper, not creeping for dates.”

“I’m here with Amber,” Colin says with an easy grin.

I gape at Rylan. “You set your sister up with this guy?”

“Hey,” Colin says, smirking down at me. “I’m a nice guy.”

“Right,” I say, drawing out the word. “Even you know that’s not true.”

He laughs and claps Rylan on the back. “She’s straight shooter,” he says. “I can respect that. Go home with her. I’m going to find a freshman and ruin her life.”

Rylan startles and then gives me a belligerent look, as if daring me to confront him. Not only is Colin notorious for selling to street dealers, but he’s got a reputation for getting violent at the drop of a hat and sleeping with much younger girls. Which makes him a role model for half of Faulkner’s male population.

“Just leave Amber alone,” Rylan says.

“She left with your stepbrother ten minutes ago,” Colin says. “Haven’t you been watching?”

Rylan glowers at him. “You sell him anything?”

“That’s your job,” Colin says, holding up his hands. “I’m just here for the jailbait.”

“I still want to check out your uncle’s studio,” Rylan says, pushing off the car and tossing his cigarette on the ground. “Hit me up when you want to play together.”

They clasp hands and slap each other on the back in one of those bro-hugs, something I never thought I’d see Rylan do. He’s usually scornful of overly gendered gestures, but apparently Colin’s grooming him in the ways of toxic masculinity.

“You know that guy is a pedo in the making,” I say when I’m behind the wheel of my June Bug.

“Your date spent the first month of school fucking all the freshman at Willow Heights,” Rylan points out.

“Okay,” I say. “I just thought you should know, since you’re new to Faulkner and might not know about him. I’m the one who got you involved

in that, so it seems like my job to warn you.”

“So you’re pissed that I have a friend you didn’t choose for me?”

“No,” I say, glancing at him as I pull out of the lot. “I’m just concerned for you. He’s not a very nice person, and I’d hate to see you or Amber get hurt.”

“Because your crowd is just brimming with good people,” he mutters.

“You’re right,” I say. “That was hypocritical. I’m sorry.”

“What do you want, Gloria?”

“I want to apologize,” I say, adjusting my grip on the wheel. “I wanted to tell you about Royal, but I didn’t know how. You came on so strong from the minute you showed up, and it meant so much to you...”

“That sounds more like an excuse than an apology.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “You’re right. I should have told you. I know it was wrong to keep it from you. I just don’t want you to think I loved him more than you. I didn’t. No one could replace you. You were my first love.”

He snorts quietly, but he doesn’t argue.

I swallow hard, my chest tight. I think about that night in Cotton’s pool house, sliding under Colt to hide. I think about his hands on me, how it felt to be seen again after locking myself away for so long. How it felt to be wanted the way only he has ever wanted me. Not the idea of me, not my innocence or some other claim of possession. He didn’t want to own me. He just wanted to fuck me.

Why don’t people see that the way they see first love, as pure and honest?

I shove the thought away. Tonight, Colt told me never to speak to him again. He told me that was the only way I could help him or his family.

And he’s right.

I glance at Rylan. “I always had this fantasy of us getting back

together... It kept me going. I thought as soon as I graduated, I'd go back to Savannah and look you up. And when I saw you in my room that day, I was in shock. Even though you were pissed, I thought we'd get back together and it would be the way it used to be. I wanted to love you the way I used to. I guess that's dumb."

"It's not dumb," he says quietly, and he reaches over and takes my hand.

I wait for the rush of electricity, for my body to come alive, but I feel only the cool of his fingers. "Are we too jaded for that?" I ask, desperate for that connection we once had, that love. "Is it too late?"

"I don't know."

We drive the rest of the way home in silence. I pull into our garage and shut off the Mustang before turning to him. "What now?"

"I don't know," he says again. "Do you want to get back together?"

"I want to turn back time," I say, swallowing the lump in my throat. I can't say the rest. That I want to take it all back, to erase all of it. Dawson would be alive. Rylan's dad would be alive. Amber would still talk. Dad would be home. We'd all live in Savannah, and I'd never have come to this hell on earth where the demon twins reign.

"I want that too," Rylan says, staring at our hands. "I'm sorry too, Lo."

I bite my lip to stop it from trembling.

Get a hold of yourself, you stupid cunt.

"But we can't," Rylan says, tracing his thumb over mine.

"I know." We haven't talked like this, really talked, since he moved here. It's what I've wanted, to be close to him, to be honest. "I don't want to give up on us, though. What we had, that was real. Wasn't it?"

"Yeah," he says, squeezing my hand. "It was real."

"Do you want to try again? Really try this time? Or do you still hate me?"

“I don’t hate you,” he says. “I’m just... I don’t know what I am. I’m fucked up, and pissed, and confused, and I don’t want to think it was all for nothing. I did so much to get here.”

“I know,” I say, my throat tight with unshed tears. I turn my hand over and lace our fingers. “I can’t believe you did all that for me. I don’t want it to be for nothing, either.”

“But if I’m honest, I don’t know if I can trust you,” he says, picking at my thumb with a blunt nail. “You lied to me, Lo.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, a tear finally forcing itself onto my lashes. “I didn’t want to hurt you, and I knew it would. I’m sorry I didn’t wait for you. If I’d known you were waiting...”

I break off, unable to finish. If I’d known he was waiting for me, it wouldn’t have changed anything. The Dolces would have fucked me anyway. I couldn’t have changed that. The only thing I could have prevented was Colt, and god knows I’d change that if I could. I already regret it with every breath I take.

If I’d known it would torment me every day, that I’d have to see him walking around with my friend, kissing her, dancing with her, gazing into her eyes with all the love that will never be mine, I’d never have touched him. I’d give my crown, my reputation, my fucking life to forget the way he has. But I know it’s my karma, my punishment for the evil I’ve done on the Dolces’ behalf. I deserve it. I deserve to suffer with the memories, and he doesn’t, so he got to forget.

If I can’t erase it from my history, at least I can rewrite it when I tell Rylan. He doesn’t have to know the worst things I’ve done. He can still believe that I’m someone worth loving.

“What do *you* want?” I ask after a stretch of silence.

He meets my eyes, his dark gaze searching mine. “I want you to love me.

Can you still do that?”

The tears on my lashes spill down my cheeks, and I lean across the seat, sliding a hand over his cheek and bringing his face to mine. “That’s what I want too,” I tell him, and I press my lips to his.

For the first time since he moved here, I kiss him. He tastes like cloves and tobacco, but I remember his kiss, the way he moves, the way we fit. After a few minutes, we climb out of the car. I hold up my dress as I grip his hand and lead him up the stairs to my room.

I never chose the boys who stormed my life like a hurricane hitting the Atlantic coast, leaving behind nothing but devastation in their wake. I survived them.

Once, I chose a boy who made me feel like summer sun, a boy who made me shine, who made me bright and warm for a moment. But he chose someone else, and I survived that too.

This is what I have left.

It’s not nothing.

As I lie under Rylan, I search for a connection, for the threads that tied me to this boy for so long, the glimmers of golden light that warmed my heart when I thought of him all these years. But I can’t feel anything, and I hate the Dolce boys for it, and I hate Colt for it. And most of all, I hate myself for it, for what I let them do to me, what I let them make me. For the choices I made so I wouldn’t be a victim, and the ones I made so he wouldn’t.

Rylan doesn’t hurt me tonight, so when he asks if I finished, I tell him I did. He lets me kiss him, and I tell myself it’s enough.

It doesn’t feel like a choice, but it doesn’t feel like devastation either.

And that’s enough.

It’s enough because it has to be.

thirteen

Rumor Has It... The Bye Week Halloween Party is tonight! Since what happens during Bye Week stays in Bye Week, you'll have to be there in person to get the Tea!

Colt Darling

I'm halfway out the door when Dad's voice stops me. "Colt? Can you come in here for a minute?"

I find him at the bar in den, as usual. "What's up?" I ask, hovering in the doorway.

"Where you off to?" he asks, looking me over.

"You know you don't have to ask me that anymore," I point out. "I'm eighteen."

"I just like to know," he says, finger-combing what's left of his hair. "In case..."

"In case the Dolces bash my head in again," I finish for him. "Well, you'll be happy to know it's Bye Week, which means I'm allowed out of exile and can rejoin society for the night."

"And that's how you're dressing for the occasion?"

I smile and gesture at the hideous costume Dixie chose for me. "Don't worry. I'm going to a Halloween party, not wandering the streets looking like a total tool."

Dad doesn't know all the illegal shit I get up to on the other side of town,

and I'm fine with keeping it that way. A party is a good excuse to be out all night, and a costume makes it believable. I could just leave like an asshole, but I've cost him more than enough pain and worry along with the expenses of my surgeries. The least I can do is put his mind at ease so he can drink his gin and tonic and pass out for the night.

"Will the Dolces be at this party?" he asks.

"The Dolces are at every party," I point out. "If I wanted to avoid them, I'd have to stay in my room like usual. This is the only time I get to do normal shit. But seriously, Dad. Don't worry about me. Even the Dolces honor the tradition of ignoring social status and clique membership during the team's free weekend."

"You thought they were honoring your agreement with them last year too," he says, giving me a stern look.

"Yeah, well, I was a dumbass who pissed them off last year by messing with Royal's girl. I have my own girl this year. I'll be okay, Dad. I promise."

We both know I can't make that promise, but we pretend.

Dad finishes his drink and rattles the ice cubes in his glass. "I'm going to see your mother next week. Do you want to go?"

"Nah, I'll pass," I say. "Maybe next time."

"That's what you say every time," he says. "Look, Colt, I understand that you're angry at her, but I know she'd like to see you."

"Except she wouldn't," I say flatly. "And I'm not angry. I get it. She did what was best for her, just like Mabel. Just like all of us. But me being there isn't going to change anything."

"Okay." Dad sighs and slides off the bar stool, going to refresh his drink. His shoulders slump, and I understand the defeat in his gait. We're all defeated. We're all just hanging on, trying to survive each day as it comes.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I say, pulling out my keys. "Love you, Dad."

“I love you too, son.”

I turn and head out, feeling like the shittiest son on earth. At least I checked in with him, though, told him I loved him. At least he’ll know that if I don’t come home tomorrow.

I step out into the icy cold and climb into my truck, cranking up the heat. Halloween in Arkansas is as likely to be eighty degrees or eighteen, and this year is hovering around freezing. I try to remember last year’s festivities, but there’s still nothing but amnesia when I search for it. It’s like it never happened at all, like I wasn’t there.

I stop and pick up Dixie on the way, and we pull up at the strip behind the tampon factory where I’ve made a little haven for myself. I organize the underground fights at the Slaughterpen nearby and the street races that take place every month or two. My connection down here is a gangster, which is partly why I don’t involve Dad in this part of my life. I also don’t involve Dixie, but she knows about the races and likes to come watch, like a good percentage of the town’s population.

The lot is already filling up with families ready to watch the race when we arrive. A couple cars are there, doing doughnuts and burning up their tires on the asphalt to entertain the crowd. I spot Gloria’s Mustang among them as usual. I was shocked as hell the first time the little princess showed up for a race, but she’s not half bad.

“Hey, Dynamo,” Maverick says, jogging over to join me.

“Mav,” I say, dropping Dixie’s hand to give him a hug and pound him on the back a few times. “Looks like a hell of a turnout despite the cold.”

“The fuck are you wearing?” he asks, pulling back to look me over, his hands dropping to my hips to hold me at arms’ length.

“We’re Romeo and Juliet,” Dixie says, beaming at him as she grabs my arm and pulls it around her shoulders, forcing Maverick to take a step back.

“Dude,” he says, shaking his head and giving me a look that says I’m beyond whipped.

I know I shouldn’t care, but my spine stiffens. I stand up taller, the old resentment at my girlfriend rolling off me. The truth is, I’m as shallow as Gloria Fucking Walton. I shouldn’t care what anyone thinks, and for the most part, I don’t. But it pisses me off when people think I’m whipped by a girl who I used to literally lead around on a leash like a dog.

“Come on,” Dixie says. “You have to get the racers lined up. Can I drop the flag again this year?”

“Sure, babe,” I say, following her when she pulls me away from Maverick.

Not only is he my tattoo artist, but he puts out the word and gets people from this side of town to come to both the fights and the races. He takes his cut, as do the Crossbones for letting us hold events like this on their turf. He and Dixie haven’t spent enough time together to hit it off, though.

“After the race, I hear there’s going to be a flash mob,” she says, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “And then there’s a huge game of zombie tag this year. We can stay for that, right?”

“If that’s what you want to do.”

This used to be an exciting night because Dixie could be with me openly. Now, we’re allowed to date at school, so I didn’t think she’d make such a big deal of it. She chatters on about the rules of zombie tag, but I’m already looking for my racers. Royal is out of town, and he always wins out of sheer recklessness as much as talent. I was afraid his absence and the cold might hurt the turnout, but I shouldn’t have worried. It’s Halloween and Bye Week, and the place will be packed no matter who races. This just makes things more interesting. I catch bits and pieces of speculation from the crowd as people place bets.

Gloria's car skids to a stop in front of us, at the end of the line. "Killing Me Softly" is blaring from her open windows, and she hops out wearing a pair of Levi's, a pink puffer jacket, and pink Ugg boots.

"Are you fucking kidding?" I ask. "That's what you're racing in?"

"It's cold," she says. "You expect me to show skin? Fuck that."

Everyone's relaxed this weekend, even Gloria Walton, who has a permanent stick up her ass. She even spares me a grin as she looks me over.

"I thought you said you weren't a basic bitch," I say, smirking down at her before she can make some cutting remark about my costume.

"I thought you said being basic wasn't a bad thing," she shoots back, smiling up at me with a challenge in her eyes. There's something flirtatious in her demeanor, and I swear it's not just the excitement crackling in the air or the anticipation of the race hyping her up.

"You're supposed to dress up," Dixie interrupts, drawing Gloria's attention and tucking herself under my arm again. "It's Halloween!"

"I always dress up," Gloria says. "I am a costume."

With a toss of her long, blonde hair, she climbs back into the '69 Mustang before waving out the window to the crowd. People stomp their feet to keep warm, huddling into their winter coats and calling out for the race to start.

"Ready?" I ask, looking down at Dixie and trying not to feel like a fucking tool in my tights and ruffled shirt. It doesn't matter that she interrupted my moment with the Queen of Hell. I'm fucking stupid to even look at Lo and I know it. It's just that weird lucid dream I had this morning still fucking with my head.

But that's all it was. A dream.

Dixie assured me it wasn't real, that I didn't even talk to Gloria last year during the month I can't remember. It was just my damaged brain making up

things, mixing memories and fantasies. And fantasies of Gloria Walton are as dangerous as the reality.

This is my reality.

Dixie is what I can get. I don't have friends. I'm not welcome at parties. Hell, they probably wouldn't even make an exception for Bye Week if they didn't need my connections. I don't touch any girl that the Dolces might consider as a future option, let alone one they've already fucked and might call back into rotation, and *definitely* not their queen.

They look the other way and let me have this one thing, this one girl.

I'm grateful she sticks around, that she loves me when no one else can. But I'm also guilty as hell, because this isn't what she really wants. She wants to be at the center of everything. If she could hire someone to follow her around with a boombox to play her own personal soundtrack and a spotlight to shine on her at all times, she'd die happy.

All I can do is give her the flag one night a year and let her start the race.

I fire the shot into the air, she drops the flag, and the cars launch, a row of roaring beasts spitting fire and smoke and thrusting forward into the icy night. The crowd screams and surges closer, trying to keep the cars in sight, pumping their fists in the air. My adrenaline spikes even though I'm not in a car. I can feel the vibration of all those motors running through the ground, my feet, up through my bones. I watch the green Mustang blow the doors off everyone else, and a shiver of some forgotten memory sends goosebumps racing up my spine. Did she win last year?

Dixie turns and throws her arms around my neck and kisses me, and I lose sight of the cars, trying to give her my attention, the least she deserves.

It's not enough. Not for either of us. Shallow as I am, I want to be everything my girl wants. Knowing I can't be everything to Dixie only reminds me every fucking day that I'm not the man I used to be, the man who

could have given her everything. I'm not a star on the football field or off. I'm a pariah.

Maybe that's why Gloria pisses me off so much this year. She's constantly reminding Dixie that she could do better, that she's settling. And every time Gloria reminds Dixie she could do better, it reminds me. I'm not afraid Dixie will realize it and leave me. That would be better than knowing that she's already realized it, and she stays anyway.

Maybe that's even the reason she stays.

"Dixie," calls a voice behind us, and the female demon twins, also known as the other Walton sisters, shove through the press of bodies, gripping each other so they don't get separated in the crowd. "You looked amazing out there. I can't believe you got him to do a couple's costume!"

"It's so romantic," says the other twin, holding onto her sister and gazing at us with a dreamy expression that says she might want to join us for some more intimate moments later. Dixie's not into sharing though, so my days of being able to pull two girls for a threesome are over.

"DeShaun would never do that," says the first twin. I know their names, but I've never bothered to figure out which one is which. They're both as evil and toxic as Gloria, and I only know her name because she's not identical to them.

"I know," Dixie says with a giggle, huddling into my side for warmth. "I've got him whipped."

"I've got some tea for you," says a Walton twin. "It's about Lo and Rylan..."

She wiggles her brows and nods her head for Dixie to step aside.

"I'll be right back," Dixie assures me, like I'm the one clinging to her hand. She and her friends move off to gossip, working their way through the packed spectator area.

“Hey, Romeo,” Maverick says, sauntering along the pavement to join me at the front.

“Get off the road, dumbass,” I say, pulling him into me so he won’t get hit by a returning car.

“They’re not even back yet,” he says, though we can hear a cheer go up somewhere down the street where more viewers are watching. “Got a smoke?”

“Yeah,” I say, digging in my pocket.

Maverick watches, smirking. “Those are some tight pants you got there,” he says. “Or are they tights?”

“Shut up,” I grumble, pulling out my case.

“Hey, I wasn’t criticizing,” Maverick says with an easy grin. “I was appreciating.”

I glare at him and take out a joint. Maverick blocks me from the sharp sting of the wind, huddling over me and cupping his hands around mine while I light up. His cold fingers linger on my hands, and I’m aware of how much more sensation I have in the healthy skin on the back of my right hand than on my burned left one.

I inhale before letting it out in a stream, blowing the smoke directly into his face. Instead of stepping back, he breathes it in, so close we’re practically shot gunning. The gold flecks in his green eyes gleam as he smirks at me, sucking the smoke through his nose, everything in his expression challenging, *Did you really think I’d object to that?*

We’re still staring each other down when I pass the joint to him. He takes it between his finger and thumb and slowly drags in a lungful of smoke without dropping my gaze, his full lips still quirked up at the corners.

“Either of you gay-ass bitches got some more of that?” Duke Dolce interrupts, shoving past the guys behind me to reach us.

I stiffen, but Maverick just grins his slow, guarded smile and lets white smoke creep out the corners of his mouth. “Jealous?”

Maverick knows who the Dolces are, of course. Everyone in Faulkner knows, and on top of that, he’s inked all the D-boys. But like most people on this side of town, he’s slower to bow to their highness.

Of course there’s a hierarchy here too, but it’s different. Everything is different here.

Duke doesn’t hold the power on the Skull & Crossbones turf, but he might not be smart enough to realize it.

Maverick is, though.

“Yeah, because I want your dick shoved up my ass,” Duke says sarcastically. “Seriously, man. Let me hit that.”

Mav tips his chin at Duke and lets his honeyed gaze drip down his body. “You gonna let me hit that?”

I groan inwardly. Duke has a short fuse and not enough sense not to try to kick a gang member’s ass on his own turf. I try to move away in the crowd, but they’re pressing forward as a pair of headlights appears on the home stretch.

“Fuck you,” Duke says.

“I’m trying,” Maverick says, passing the joint back to me.

I take a drag, hoping to calm my racing heart. I’ve never liked fighting, and I like it even less now that I know the severity of a Dolce beating. Not to mention that if a fight broke out right now, on Crosses territory, it would be a bloodbath.

“How much?” Duke asks, pulling out his wallet.

“Now you’re speaking my language,” Mav says, holding out a hand. Duke slaps a twenty into it, and Maverick pockets it.

I hold out the joint, but Maverick plucks it from my fingers and takes a

slow drag, nursing it for a good ten seconds to make sure Duke knows he's not the one calling the shots. Just when I think Duke's about to pop off and knock out a few teeth, Maverick hands it over with a casual smirk. He blows a cloud of smoke my way and grins like I'm in on the joke. I'm not, but I appreciate not being the butt of the joke for once, so I smile back.

Surprisingly, Duke notices, but maybe he's smarter than I thought because he only glowers and takes the joint, sucking on the end like an addict getting his fix while he watches our silent exchange.

"Better be careful," I say. "You might get our gay-ass germs and turn into a raging homosexual."

"Fuck you," Duke growls.

"Maybe if you get down on both knees and beg like the bitch you are," I say. "But even then, I don't think you deserve what I could do for you."

Normally it would be too dangerous to bite back, but we're on even ground tonight. According to the Dolces themselves, nothing that happens tonight will carry over into school on Monday. That means I'm not their bitch this weekend. Duke's still a loose cannon, but if there's a fight, it will be a slaughter, and I'll be on the winning side for once.

The Willow Heights kids will pay the price, but I have no loyalty to that place anymore. The Dolces bought off the school and everyone in it. So, I'd fight for the Crosses tonight, even though Maverick doesn't deserve my loyalty either.

I learned the hard way not to give out loyalty to those who haven't earned it. I'm loyal only to people who deserve it and return the favor—myself and my family.

Maverick is the same way. He looks out for himself and his fellow members of the Crossbones gang. If he was loyal to me, he wouldn't tattoo these assholes, and I'd return the favor. Willow Heights doesn't give a shit

about me, so I don't follow their unspoken rules about crossing the tracks and hanging out with gangsters, but I'm not a member.

So, I wouldn't join the fight for Maverick, but because I'm so fucking tired of losing. It would be nice to win one more time, even though they'd probably retaliate by killing me, despite the rules of Bye Week.

In truth, Maverick is the best friend I've got, even if he won't turn away Dolce business for me. He's the best I can do, and just like with Dixie, I take what I can get. If that means my closest friend is a guy who will ink the men who took my memories and my middle finger and left me with a metal plate in my skull and scars from my fingertips almost to my elbow, I'll take it. After all, I'm just another rich prick in his eyes. If I didn't run the Slaughterpen and the races that put money in his pockets, he probably wouldn't see me any differently from them.

The crowd surges forward, and the three of us are crushed together in a tight knot as Gloria Walton's Mustang comes screaming over the finish line, into the lot. She does a few doughnuts, burning rubber and waving out the window, while the crowd cheers and throws Halloween candy like it's a parade. Duke and Maverick are both jostled against me, their hard bodies crushing against mine. I glare at Duke as he slips the end of the joint back between my lips while my arms are trapped by his chest and Maverick's elbow.

"Don't forget your place," he says into my ear. "The whole school knows you're the little bitch who likes to serve the kings on his knees."

"Maybe so," I admit. "But you and I know otherwise, don't we?"

fourteen

Rumor Has It... Last year's King of WHPA and now the King of the Road may be gone for this week's match, so place your bets elsewhere tonight! Want more Tea? Be there or be square!

Gloria Walton

The guys who come in first, second, and third always have a dozen girls to choose from when the race is over. The rest of the racers have their pick of the remaining pit lizards. Pretty much any guy who finishes is guaranteed to get laid. I get it. Fast cars are sexy as fuck. If I didn't drive one, I'd probably be first in line for a backseat celebration.

It's different for girls. The handful of female racers get wolf-whistles, but the guys who want us don't treat us the way the guy racers get treated. They're weirdly aggressive, like they want to bring us down a peg, show us our place. Like we belong in a kitchen and not on the street with the smell of smoke and rubber filling our lungs and the thrill of adrenaline and nitrous oxide in our veins.

So, when I come in first, I know I'll be mobbed if I stick around. Before the others get back, I do a burnout and leave the lot behind. For the next half hour, most of the guys will be out fucking the adrenaline out of their system, so I can take a minute to clear my head instead of sticking around to soak up admiration and aggression.

I turn away from the street where the racers are coming in, making sure

my hair is still tied back, and then I gun it. June Bug rockets forward, and my stomach drops as I'm flattened against the seat, unable to even draw a breath for a second. I shouldn't be doing this in town. The stretch where the race happens is empty. Crowds of spectators block off the regular traffic, if anyone happens to be out at midnight in our small town.

Even cops look the other way, their palms greased by the bored, privileged racers like Royal Dolce and the dangerous, gang-affiliated ones like Heath Stone. But away from our racing stretch, there's no protection.

I don't care. I'm feeling reckless and restless tonight, haunted by memories of last year's Bye Week festivities. The game of hide and seek where I hid behind a Dumpster so the Dolce boys wouldn't find me.

I should have let them find me. I'd already endured their tortures for a year. One more night would have been nothing in the grand scheme. I probably wouldn't even remember it this year.

So I made the worst mistake in a life full of mistakes, and I hid too well.

And the person who found me instead was so much worse than the Dolces. If someone had warned me before the race that night that Colt Darling would ruin me in ways the Dolces hadn't, that they never could, I would have laughed in their face.

I fly onto the interstate, away from Faulkner, and give her a little juice. I have that urge again, the need to flee, to drive until I'm so far from this town that it can't infect me with its venom.

Words from the past whisper in my ears like ghosts in the back seat, ones I can't escape no matter how fast I drive.

"Look at me when I'm inside you."

"I'm gonna need a repeat every day from now until forever."

"I've already gotten everything I want from you, princess."

"I'll enjoy seeing you around school, knowing I could destroy you."

All the best and worst things anyone has ever said to me come back to haunt me. The best week of my life is the worst because it was the best.

The engine roars louder as I top 150. If I got loose right now, my chances of survival are close to zero. It would be quick, though. No suffering. If I could choose, this is how I'd want to go. With June Bug at my side until my last breath.

My chances of being arrested are higher. There aren't many cops out after midnight on the interstate, but if I drive long enough, I'll pass one. I wouldn't just get a ticket. Going this fast, I'd be arrested.

I picture myself behind bars. No more makeup. No more size two jeans that have to be zipped with plyers. Just an ugly orange jumpsuit.

Like father like daughter.

I smile to myself. It's funny how my real smiles are grimaces.

I wonder if Daddy ever regrets what he did, if he looks back at his life and wonders how he got there, to the place he is. I wonder if he ever traces the threads back, trying to find the first wrong turn that led to all the other wrong turns, the other wrongs he committed. Was there a moment where he had to make an impossible choice? Or was it a collection of little choices he never even noticed until he was so lost he couldn't find his way back?

I don't believe those stories about people selling their souls to the devil. The devil doesn't wear his own face and tell you the wager up front. No one would take that deal. The devil wears a thousand faces, from pretty to plain, and you only find out you've sold your soul when you read the fine print in the middle of a wall of text in the terms and conditions, when it's too late to take it back. When it's too late to go back to the life you lived before, when love was all you had, and it was enough.

I realize I'm further from Faulkner than I need to be, and I pull off at an exit and turn back. If I'm not back for the games, Baron will notice. He

doesn't care that Rylan stayed home, but he'll care if I do.

Probably.

He won't care that I'm there, but he'd care if I wasn't.

I turn up "Midnight Sky" on the radio, and my foot bears down on the gas pedal again. I come up behind an eighteen-wheeler and swerve around it, my heart dropping. For some reason, I'm sure I'll see a speed trap ahead. But there are no cars, no lights. I increase my speed, watching the needle climb, a grim smile on my lips.

Did Daddy ever do this? Did he dream of getting in his Bentley and driving until he hit the end of the road, and then soaring off into nothing? Those days when he took us to the beach, were they obligations to him? While we shrieked off-key renditions of Olivia Rodrigo and Melanie Martinez, was he in the front seat imagining escaping the life he'd built for himself, the one filled with responsibilities and burdens, pressure to make more, have more, do more? To keep up with the Joneses, to surpass them, to buy one more private jet and a bigger yacht?

Maybe he's happy. Maybe, ironically, he's finally found freedom.

The Faulkner exit comes up quick, and I see a car parked at the bottom of the ramp. My heart leaps into my throat, and I slam on the brakes, sure it's the cop I've been looking for every second I've been gone. But as I reach the bottom of the ramp and see it's just an abandoned car someone parked there and left, my pounding heart sinks. That's when I realize I wasn't scared of seeing a police car.

I was praying I would.

fifteen

Rumor Has It... (redacted) (redacted) (redacted) ◆◆ Did you really think I was going to spill the Tea during this night? Told ya! Attendance at this Tea party in-person only!

Colt Darling

The crowd surges back toward the road when another racer turns the corner, leaving twenty feet of skid mark as they scream forward into the lot. When the last car comes limping in, a jacked up Charger that sideswiped a lamp post and bottomed out on the curb trying to pass someone on the way back, the crowd boos and throws debris this time, peppering the wrecked vehicle with half-empty beer cans and convenience store paper cups full of the dredges of their watery sodas and ice.

I'm finally freed from the crush of the crowd and break away, leaving my friend and my enemy with my joint. The spectators have begun to disperse, and Mad Dog is already collecting money from the betting. The families with little kids start to leave, and most of the racers go off with whatever willing girl climbs into their car.

The rest of us gather around on a small strip of dying grass between the factory's parking lot and the train tracks. There are probably a hundred people left, mostly high school and college kids and a few older people who love the games too much to give them up.

People who want to chill make a handful of barrel fires down the strip,

and others collect random sticks and pallets to light a bonfire. Someone finds a stack of buckets tipped over in the dying grass, and people turn them over and use them for seats. I stashed some folding chairs in my truck, so I bring them out, as do a few others who remembered to bring them. Dixie climbs into my lap and wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me. I hold her soft body against mine, pushing my dick up against her ass.

“You sure you want to stay for this?” I ask, squeezing her thigh. “Wouldn’t you rather go home and let me spend the rest of the night making earmuffs out of these?”

Dixie loves Bye Week, but I have no interest in hanging out with a bunch of assholes who treat me like shit every day, pretending we’re friends. I like the race, since it brings in good money and I have a part to play. For a few minutes, I’m the center of things, like I used to be. I love those few minutes, when everyone is looking at me, right up until I point the pistol into the air and hesitate. Every eye is on me, every breath held. It makes me feel alive again.

After it’s over, the excitement deflates, and the rest of the night always feels like a letdown. But Dixie loves every minute, especially hanging out with the elites and playing the Bye Week games.

“Of course I want to stay,” she says, snuggling against me. “We’ve barely even started. And you better not disappear on me again, like you did last year.”

“I disappeared on you?”

“I told you that,” she says, even though I’m pretty sure she didn’t. “Right before you dumped me with no explanation.”

“Once again, I’m sorry.”

I hate how often I have to say those words to her. How guilty it makes me feel every time I think about our past. Sometimes I just want to start over

and meet her for the first time right now, or erase all our memories since we met. But then, a part of me wonders. If that happened, would we even be together? I never chose Dixie. She chose me. Over and over and over, she kept choosing me, until I gave in and accepted her. I just didn't realize I'd be accepting all the guilt that comes with that. But here it is—the consequences of my actions.

“And once again, I forgive you,” Dixie says. “I know you'll show me how sorry you are one day.”

“Don't I do that every day?” I ask, moving her around on my lap a little, so she can feel that I've got a semi.

She giggles. “Not like that. I mean... Something bigger.”

“Since when is my dick not big enough for you?”

“Hey, what's up?” Gloria asks, dropping a chair beside us.

I frown at her. “That was quick. Shouldn't you still be fucking off the adrenaline with some pit lizard?”

“I have a boyfriend,” she says, giving me a dirty look before turning to Dixie. “What are y'all up to?”

“We were just talking,” Dixie says.

“Yeah,” I say, leaning back in the chair. “Dixie was just complaining about my shrimp dick.”

“Shut up,” Dixie says, slapping me playfully. “I wasn't talking about your dick. I was talking about the future. You know, a ring. A mansion on the hill. That kind of big.”

“You got her a ring?” Gloria asks, sounding personally offended that I'd dare to propose to her friend without asking her permission.

“No,” I say, scowling at her.

I'm not sure if I'm more pissed at her for interrupting or Dixie for bringing up a proposal right now like it's a given. I'm not anywhere close to

being ready to talk about marriage. I'm still in high school, for fuck's sake. Not to mention that I have no career lined up. I don't even know if I want to go to college, let alone what I want to do with the rest of my life and who I want to do it with. For the past three years, I've been too busy planning how I'm going to survive the next day to plan for the shit other people plan for.

I never figured I'd live this long, anyway. Devlin died. My sister tried. Preston and my cousin Sullivan went into hiding. And there I was walking around Willow Heights right under the Dolce boys' noses, reminding them of their dead sister. I figured it was only a matter of time until they put me in the ground.

"I mean, it wouldn't be that strange," Dixie says, noticing Gloria's skeptical expression. "We've been together three years. In fact, Homecoming was our anniversary."

"Yeah, but you weren't really together until this year," Gloria points out. "You've only been his girlfriend for a few months."

"But Homecoming is when we slept together the first time," Dixie says. "It's still an anniversary. And it's when I fell in love. Everyone else broke up and fell out of love, but we made it through all of high school together. Colt's my one and only, and he always will be."

She wraps her arms around my neck, and suddenly I can't get enough air. Her arms are a noose, and I'm smothering in them.

"I'm going to get a beer," I say, sliding Dixie off my lap and into the chair. The combination of these two girls always sets me off.

I head for the truck, tucking a pill under my tongue on my way. When I get there, I spot Maverick leaned up against his El Camino with his hand up a girl's skirt. I sit on the tailgate and smoke a cigarette, ignoring her moans. After a minute, they hop up next to me.

"We bum a couple of those?" Maverick asks.

I hand over a couple, then dig out two beers from my cooler. “Fucking mooch.”

Maverick just laughs and drapes his arm around the girl he’ll no doubt be fucking tonight. She looks like she’s never seen the inside of a tattoo parlor in her life, but then, it takes all types to keep him satisfied. I don’t bother asking her name. I know she won’t last more than a night in his bed.

When I’m done smoking and can breathe again, I force my feet to trudge back to Dixie. A group has gathered around the little fire. Duke is already smashed, but Baron is standing on a bucket, quickly going over the boundaries for the game. Once he’s given a run-down of the rules, we scatter.

“Let’s stay together,” Dixie says, grabbing my hand and taking off for the fence that runs around the factory.

“This way,” I say, leading her toward the boarded-up Fred’s store. We duck along the side of it, between the cinderblock wall and an old, rusted Dumpster that the city must have forgotten to reclaim when the store shut down. A weird sense of *déjà vous* rolls over me, and I sway on my feet. I search for the memory, but it’s like a word on the tip of your tongue that never quite arrives.

“Did we come here last year?” I ask as we squeeze into the space.

I was here.

I don’t need her answer. I know it. I can fucking feel it, every cell in my body vibrating as the energy churns, trying to find the right alignment, the tipping point. The tidal wave of memory builds inside me, but as I grasp for it in the forefront of my mind, the beach is barren, the water drawing back further than it ever has, further out of reach.

“Probably,” Dixie says. “We played hide and seek, and this is a good hiding spot.”

I’m annoyed when a stampede of running feet interrupts before I can ask

more.

“Come on,” Dixie says, reaching for my hand. “Let’s go.”

“Or, we could crouch down behind this Dumpster, and they’ll never see us,” I say, sliding down the wall. Another dizzying wave of *déjà vous* hits me, and I reach for the cigarettes in the top of my pants, trying to steady myself. The night has gotten colder, and I’m freezing my ass off in the thin costume, but I’d still rather hang out here and wrestle with my broken brain than run around and get warmed up. Fun and games with the Dolces never ends well for my family.

“Colt,” Dixie whines, stomping her foot. “You said you’d play. It’s fun. And we’re not playing hide and seek this year. It’s tag. You’re supposed to run.”

A shriek pierces the night, followed by growls and snarls that sound more like a pack of wild dogs than zombies.

I sigh and push myself to my feet. “Okay, but I can’t be held responsible if they kill me.”

“They won’t kill you,” she says, rolling her eyes. “It’s Bye Week. Anything goes. That’s the rule.”

“Like Baron Dolce plays by the rules.”

“They’re his rules,” she points out.

“Never stopped him before.”

She might think the Dolces aren’t too bad, that they’re just making us pay for the death of their sister. But that’s because they’ve taken it easy on her. She’s seen what they did to me, but always after the fact. I’ve been there. I’ve seen the look in Baron’s eyes when he tortures people. I wish I could say they were empty, but that’s more Royal’s style. Baron’s are the exact opposite, like hurting people is the only time he truly feels anything, when he’s most alive.

The zombie hoard turns the corner, Dixie grabs my hand, and we take off running. I glance over my shoulder and see Baron Dolce at the head of the pack. Of course he made himself the original zombie in the game, and he's shirtless and streaked with blood and dirt. It could be makeup, but knowing Baron, he could have killed someone on his way here just to give his costume a more authentic look.

About ten other people run behind him, the zombies he's already caught and turned. The look on his face says he's out for real blood, whether or not the stuff on his face and chest is fake.

Looks like I may not make it home after all.

Sorry, Dad.

They close in on us, and Dixie starts giggling wildly. She releases my hand as we reach the railroad tracks, and I scramble up the slight incline and across the ties, gravel crunching under my boots. I step on the steel rail and jump down the other side, inhaling the stink of oil and creosote. My feet hit the pavement before I realize I'm alone. Dixie is shrieking with laughter as the zombies surround her, moaning for brains and pawing at her. She looks like she's having fun and playing along, so I turn and jog away, toward a row of warehouses.

I have the key to the Slaughterpen at home, but I didn't bring it tonight, since I don't book fights on race nights. The crowd at the fights would be too small to make it worth anyone's while, and I've learned to leave my valuables at home in case of an attack. Technically the Dolces own the warehouse, but I'm not sure how many of them know what goes on there.

I duck around the end of the last warehouse, a new one that's still under construction judging by the scaffolding against the side. I step between the iron bars and lean against the wall where a thin line of dead grass pokes up from a long crack in the pavement. I pull out my cigarettes and light one,

content to be out of the action even though I'm still freezing my balls off. I'm just finishing my smoke when I hear quiet voices and the scuff of shoes on pavement.

I tense, ready to take off again, when Duke Dolce and Gloria Walton step around the corner. They pull up short when they see me. Duke's bent toward her, his arm around her back as he helps her along while she hobbles on one foot, her arm gripping his neck.

"Are you infected?" Duke asks, like he doesn't know who I am.

I wait for Gloria to make one of her comments about me being diseased, but she just stares at me.

"No," I say after a pause. "You?"

"No," Duke says. "I found this one hiding in the ditch by the tracks. She says she turned her ankle running and then hid. She hasn't been bitten."

I look Gloria over and snort. "I guess pink furry boots weren't the best choice for running from zombies."

"I didn't know there would be an outbreak," she huffs, playing along with the game but still never missing a chance to talk down to me.

I drop my cigarette butt and grind it into the pavement with my boot. "Always be prepared."

"Is that why you're not wearing a coat?" she asks, giving me a haughty look from inside her puffy pink coat. Damn, it looks warm.

The sound of running feet echoes on the pavement, and Duke sticks his head around the corner and then jerks back. "We're going to have to climb," he says, nodding at the scaffolding.

"What?" I ask. "Fuck no."

"Why not?" Gloria asks.

"I'm not climbing," I say flatly. "The zombies can have me."

"Fucking climb, dumbass," Duke snaps.

“No.”

“Fine, stay here and die,” Gloria says. “But give us a hand up first.”

“No,” Duke says. “He has to go up too.”

“Why?” I ask, stepping back from them.

“Just fucking do it,” he snaps.

“Sorry, I don’t obey you this one night of the year.”

“Boost me up,” Gloria says. “The zombies can’t climb. It’s in the rules.”

Their footsteps come closer, but we don’t move. We’re frozen in a standoff, and once again, I get the feeling that I’m missing something. Always the last to fucking know.

“Get on the fucking roof,” Duke growls.

I cross my arms and glare at him. “Why? So you can push me off?”

“Just fucking go,” he says as he jerks his coat off and shoves it at me.

“And put on this. Save her. I’ll stay here and fend them off.”

“What are you talking about?” Gloria asks.

“I’m infected,” Duke says. “I already got bitten. It just hasn’t turned me yet.”

“What?” she cries, like he’s an actual zombie.

“Save yourself,” Duke says, both of them acting it up like they’re in a fucking movie. He hugs her and then makes a cradle of his hands, lifting her on her good foot. She stands and grabs one of the iron bars overhead and hangs there, looking down at us.

“I’m not going up there,” I say.

“The fuck you aren’t,” he says, shoving me against the wall and yanking his jacket around me. He leans close, so close even Gloria won’t hear him over the bloodthirsty yells of the growing zombie hoard as they pound along the other side of the warehouse. “Baron ordered anyone who found you to bring you to him. He’s pissed about your cousin getting us suspended. He’s

going to kill you tonight.”

sixteen

Rumor Has It... A certain Elite new boy was seen settling in for the night instead of going out to join the festivities and cheer for the Queen. Did they rekindle things after Homecoming as we suspected, or was it all a ruse?

Rylan Woods

I'm going to fucking kill her.

I sit at the window, fuming. I can't believe Gloria went without me. There's not even a game, but she couldn't go one fucking weekend without seeing her stupid friends. She invited me, of course, but I have to see those assholes every day at school. I don't care to spend my weekends with them too. Not when I know their brother fucked my girlfriend.

Plus, Lo was sure she'd win her race, and I'm not about to show up just to cheer for her like a simp. I hope she won, and it felt hollow without me there to share her victory.

A light goes on in the house across the lawn, and I lift my binoculars. Mrs. Beauregard—now Ms. Walton—is in the twins' room, getting the laundry out of the hamper. I don't know why she doesn't let their maid do it. Even my mom lets the maid take care of shit.

She says she spent plenty of time working, and now she's going to enjoy being a spoiled housewife. It's like she's a different person since moving here.

We all are.

This is how I'm spending my Saturday night. Watching my girlfriend's mom do laundry while my girlfriend is hanging out with her ex's brothers. My temples pulse with anger, like they do every time I think about that giant gym-bro touching my girlfriend, kissing her, ramming his baseball bat-sized dick inside her.

Fuck. I want to kill him.

Or myself. I'm not sure which.

I'm about to drop the binoculars when Ms. Walton holds up a pair of white panties. She checks inside them and sets them aside. I wonder if one of the twins got her period in them. The thought does something funny to me. It's a new level of violation, something too intimate to know about a stranger. If she's cramping, walking around with a warm, wet tampon nestled inside her bleeding cunt.

Keeping the binoculars raised, I watch Ms. Walton sort through the clothes and pick out another pair of dirty underwear. She checks inside, then lifts them to her nose and sniffs.

I about fall out of my chair.

She sets them with the other pair, sorts through and pulls out two more pairs. Then she stuffs the dirty clothes back into the hamper and crosses the room, dumping out the other twin's hamper. She goes through it the same way, complete with sniffing her other daughter's panties.

What the fuck?

She leaves the room, switching off the light and plunging the room into darkness. A minute later, Gloria's light goes on. I hold my breath, watching Ms. Walton sift through my girlfriend's clothes and remove all the dirty underwear.

Maybe it's not laundry day. Maybe she just washes the delicates on Saturdays. I know from having a mom and a sister that they wash their

underthings separately. I try telling myself that, so I won't have to think about my girlfriend's mom having a panty-sniffing fetish. Plus, it's giving incest vibes.

After she leaves Gloria's room, the light goes on in the kitchen. I watch for a while, but I can't see much from this angle. I'm straight across from the girls' rooms, but I can't see very far into the downstairs windows. I decide to head downstairs, since Mr. Montgomery took Mom on a date tonight, and they came stumbling home and crashed hours ago. With the amount they drank, they'll be passed out cold until morning. Cotton's at the party, which means no one will catch me.

I head into our den, which is across from the Waltons' kitchen, and kneel in one of the leather armchairs, resting my elbows on the back and raising the binoculars. Ms. Walton is now addressing a bubble mailer envelope. Boring.

I'm about to find something else to do when she finishes and picks up another envelope, slipping a pair of panties into it.

Again, what the fuck?

Before I can figure it out, a sharp poke between my shoulder blades has me whipping around. Amber stands there, tapping her toe and looking at me like... Well, like she just found her brother spying on the neighbors through a pair of binoculars.

Shit.

"Don't look at me like that," I say. "Something weird as fuck is going on over there."

Amber glances at the house next door and back to me.

"You did a lot of laundry back home, right?" I ask.

She nods.

"Did you ever sniff Mom's panties?"

She looks at me like... Well, like her brother just asked if she smelled

their mother's dirty underwear.

I hold out the binoculars to her, and she hesitates, giving me some serious stink eye before she grudgingly accepts them. She holds them up and steps closer to the window.

Without them, I can see Ms. Walton bent over the table, addressing another envelope.

"Please tell me she's sending them off to some kind of special cleaners to get period blood out of them."

Amber watches another minute, then pulls her phone from the pocket of her pale blue pajamas with clouds printed on them. She taps on the screen and holds it out for me to see.

Def selling them.

I groan and flop down into the plush, leather armchair. "Fuck."

Amber lifts the binoculars and continues watching.

"She got them out of the girls' laundry. You think they know?"

Amber shrugs without looking my way.

I think it over for a minute. I hope they don't know. I like knowing something about Gloria that she doesn't know. I like knowing that her own mother is violating her in some way she isn't even aware of.

Finally, Amber hands back the binoculars and types on her phone again.

One way to find out

"Shit," I say. "I don't even know how to go about finding a website where you can buy teenage girls' used underwear. And I'm pretty sure my name would end up in a database if I tried searching that on the internet."

Amber rolls her eyes and types on her screen before turning it to me.

Intercept the mail?

"Also a crime," I mutter. "But one I'm more comfortable committing."

It's not like I'm opposed to breaking the law. I sell drugs, for fuck's

sake. But there's a line, even if it's gotten more and more blurry since I moved here. I think about holding Lo's face under the water so she didn't cum that time she got close. She says she does now, but I don't know if I believe her. How can I trust anything she says, when she lied to me about Royal?

I've tried to forgive her, but I can't seem to stop wanting to hurt her. And I'm not sure how just yet, but I think I've stumbled upon a way to not only hurt her but ruin her. What would everyone at school think if they knew their queen sold her dirty panties to the highest bidder?

It doesn't matter if she knows about it, or even if it's true. Her mom sells them, which means a bunch of old men are jerking off with their noses buried in the smell of my girlfriend's twat.

The thought pisses me off, but it also gives me ideas.

I'm not about to get arrested for that shit when I could get a pair of her underwear by just taking them after I fuck her. But if I could find one online, buy it, and show the school...

I don't know how to navigate that kind of thing, if I'd have to get on the dark web for it. I sure as fuck can't ask Baron Dolce, the most well-known hacker at Willow Heights. But Colin knows people on the other side of town, people who might be able to find something like that without leaving a footprint. I'll have to find a way to anonymously spread it around school, but luckily, there's a girl who would be all too happy to withhold my name for a piece of juicy gossip like that. Once we expose Gloria to the whole school, she'll no longer be queen.

She'll no longer go to parties with those fake ass bitches who pretend to be her friends. She won't have to impress rich psychopaths like the Dolce brothers. She'll be home on Saturday nights with me instead of out with other people who don't even matter.

I should matter more to her than those assholes.

Pretty soon, she'll see that, when she's brought down to my level. She won't think she's too good for me when she's worse than a nobody. Once everyone knows her secret, she'll be a loser like Colt Darling, but instead of being left alone, she'll be tormented for being a slut.

And I'll be there to hold her when she cries. She'll see that I'm the only one she has to turn to when all her so-called friends disappear. I'll be all she has left, her only friend. Then she'll realize she doesn't need anyone else, that I'm enough.

I'm more than enough, more than anyone else. I'm not just some guy she fucked.

I'm her boyfriend. Her savior. Her hero.

seventeen

Rumor Has It... With WHPA's two kings suspended for a week, anything could happen on the field. Will the parents be angry with a suspension that doesn't affect a game, or has Lady Luck smiled on the Knights this year?

Colt Darling

Duke roughly hauls me away from the building and jerks the hood of his jacket down over my head while I shove my arms into the warm sleeves. It feels so good I want to moan at the warmth on my shaking limbs, but I don't have time to enjoy it. I grab onto Duke's shoulder, and he crouches so I can climb onto his thigh and then shoulder before I reach up, snagging the iron bar where Gloria hangs, about ten feet above the ground. That leaves our feet within reach.

I realize in that moment that Duke didn't give me the jacket for warmth. He gave it to me to disguise me, so no one would know I went onto the roof. If they know it's me, they'll tell Baron where I went. He just fucking saved my life, and though it doesn't make up for the hundred other fucked up, unforgivable things he's done, I'm not like him. I can't just leave him there.

"Duke," I call. "Come with us. They're going to kick your ass when they find out you helped me escape. Grab my legs."

He looks back, sees the crowd rounding the corner, now about thirty people.

"Hurry," I bark.

He jumps, his body slamming into mine as his arms wrap around my thighs. My shoulders pop, and a blinding pain knocks into me as my muscles scream in protest. I don't even know what curses are leaving my tongue, and I can't think straight, can't see, can't do anything except grip the bar with all my strength and wonder what the fuck I was thinking. I should have left him there to face the consequences of protecting a Darling. Even Baron won't kill his own brother.

"Fuck, sorry," Duke says through panting breaths, having scrambled up my hanging body to get the bar. He shoves himself up like he's climbing out of a pool, wraps an arm around the upright corner bar, and holds out a hand to me. The zombies start shaking the scaffolding, and Gloria shrieks, her body flopping in the air with the force. I grab Duke's hand and drag myself onto the bar so they can't reach my feet. Just as I get my balance and reach out a hand for Gloria, a zombie grabs her foot. One of her hands slips free, and she turns in the air, twisting her body. She pulls back her foot and slams it into the guy's face.

He curses and stumbles backwards, blood spurting from his nose. "You bitch," he screams.

Gloria twists, grabs the bar with her other hand again, and scissors her body, getting her leg onto the bar. She hooks her knee over it, then pulls her other foot up and over. Her gaze rises to mine, and she gives me a smug smile. "Guess my furry pink boots do the job after all."

"Take my hand, you psycho," I say, unable to keep from smiling back, even though my stomach is lurching with every tremor of the iron bars. I focus on her and force myself not to look behind her, at the drop to the ground.

She stares at my outstretched hand for a second, clearly contemplating whether to take it. She's in an impossible position, her knees hooked over the

bar like she's going to let go and hang upside from a set of monkey bars. But there's nothing to brace her feet on, and her choices right now are to flip over and land on her feet on the ground if she's lucky, or take my hand and trust that I'm not going to let her fall. She must think I'm as cold-blooded as she is if she thinks I'd drop her ten feet onto asphalt, but then, vicious people always assume others are as heartless as they are.

She swallows, and I smirk down at her. "What's the matter, Butterfly? You don't trust me?"

She winces. "Don't call me that," she snaps, slapping her hand into mine.

"Mufasa then. I guess this is my Scar moment. Seems like a fitting name, don't you think?" I wrap her fingers in my scarred, four-fingered hand.

My stomach swims sickeningly when I look down, and I squeeze my eyes closed and force myself to focus on the sensation of her small, soft, cold fingers against my calloused palm. It calms me momentarily. Still fighting nausea, I pull her up onto the bar.

"Guess you're not Scar after all," she says. She quickly pulls her hand from mine, then eases along to the corner, holds the upright bar, and reaches up for the next cross beam. Together, we work our way higher while the zombies clamor and shake the scaffolding. The only consolation I can find is that Baron isn't in this group, and no one else seems too interested in which of Duke's friends is climbing onto the roof with him and Lo. There's no way they'd ever guess it's not a friend at all, but their sworn enemy.

Five minutes has never lasted so long. With every shake of the iron bars, my head spins and I can hardly breathe, sure I'm going to look down and piss myself at any second. I force myself to look up, focus on the edge of the roof and my desire to reach it. I fight back the flood of memories that charges through me, reminding me of all the reasons I hate being so far off the ground, all the ways I could die from it.

The moment I heave my body over the edge of the roof, I throw myself face down on the flat, rough asphalt surface and suck in one ugly, ragged breath after another. I don't care if I look like a freak. I'm up here with two of the last people on earth I want to spend the next few hours with—a guy who burned my arm until I could smell my own flesh cooking and vomited from the pain, and a girl who has mocked that injury and anything else she could use as ammunition, no matter how low she had to stoop to find it.

“Is he okay?” Gloria mutters to Duke from a few feet away.

“Leave him alone,” Duke says. “He'll be alright in a minute. His sister was like that too. Must run in the family. One time, we held her over the balcony railing and fucked her while she freaked out.”

He laughs and comes over, rolling me over and reaching for the front of his jacket. I grab his bare wrists, my grip crushing with panic. “Don't fucking touch me.”

“Dude, I don't even need my jacket,” he says, shoving me back and wrestling free from my grip. “Just give me the flask in the pocket.”

“Fucking monster,” I curse, patting the jacket and finding a large stainless-steel flask in the pocket. I yank it free and send it spinning across the roof. Anything to get him away from me before I've recovered my senses.

“You better be fucking glad that didn't go over the edge,” he says, standing and kicking my side. “Or I'd be dangling you by your feet over the side until you passed out, and then I'd drop you on your head. Can't get much more fucked up than it already is.”

He stomps off to get his whiskey, and I sit up, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. I swear I can taste stomach acid, even though I didn't throw up. I still feel sick as fuck, and my limbs are shaking like I'm freezing my ass off, even though I'm warm inside Duke's jacket.

“Scared of heights, huh?” Gloria asks, sitting down beside me.

“I’m not scared of them.”

“Is that why you’re approximately the color of Edward Cullen’s taint?”

I pull back and look at her. “How do you know what color his taint is?”

“How do you know who Edward Cullen is?”

“I have a girlfriend,” I remind her. “Though that detail must be in the books, because I’ve only seen the movies, and they definitely didn’t show any taint in those.”

Gloria grins. “But you know it’d be white as fuck.”

“Maybe. Or maybe he doesn’t wipe. Was there toilet paper when he was human?”

“Gross,” she squeals. “Vampires don’t even poop. It’s definitely white.”

“Well, I’m sure you’re the taint expert,” I say, thanking an impossible god when I reach for my cigarettes and feel them still secure inside the waistband of the elastic pants Dixie forced me into. Maybe they’re not so bad after all.

“Seriously, I’m sorry you had to climb up here,” Gloria says, looking genuine for once. In fact, she looks absolutely fucking stunning in her pink puffy coat, with her cheeks flushed from exertion and cold, her long blonde hair rippling in the breeze. It’s loose for once, and she’s barely wearing any makeup. She looks just like the picture I took off Maverick’s Wall of Sluts, the one I realize is still tucked into my wallet at this very moment. *That’s the shit I should worry about carrying around with me. Not a key.*

“It’s fine,” I say, lighting a cigarette with shaking hands.

She chuckles. “Trust me, as the queen of *I’m fine*, I can say with one hundred percent certainty that’s a phrase only spoken by people who are definitively *not fine*.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Can I have one?”

“You smoke?”

“Just give me one.” She holds out a hand.

I scoff. “Try again, Butterfly.”

She bats her lashes and pouts her pretty pink lips. “You want me to beg?”

A wave of *déjà vous* ripples over my entire body, and my fingers twitch to reach out and touch her, see if she feels as familiar as she looks right now.

“No,” I say flatly, shoving my cigarettes across the roof at her. I could make her beg like the brainwashed slut she is in my darkest fantasies, but that shit is not for the real Gloria Walton. She doesn’t deserve to feel as good as I could make feel.

“Oh, but you didn’t even give me a chance to show you how good I am,” she says, fluttering her lashes. “Please, my king, my Darling master, may I have the honor of wrapping my lips around your sexy cancer stick?”

I grit my teeth and glare at her. “Shut up.”

I don’t know how, but I fucking know that I could turn her world upside down in a single night. But I also know that I’d be as thoroughly fucked by that experience as she would, and it pisses me off.

She opens her mouth like she’s going to keep pushing, but then she thinks better of it and ducks her head, pulling out a cigarette. “Sorry,” she mutters.

“Well, aren’t you a good little princess?” I taunt, bitterness edging my words. “So obedient.”

“Now you shut up,” she protests, smacking my arm in a way that gives me *déjà vous* in a whole new way. It seems like another lifetime when girls like her swatted me in the flirty way she just did. Suddenly, my anger is gone as quickly as it came, and all I want to do is tug the strands of hair blowing over her face away from her lips and tuck them behind her ear, and to have

her look up at me with that one moment of uncertainty before I answered by leaning in, and covering her lips with mine, and pushing her back on the roof, and fitting myself between her thighs, and pushing inside her, and fucking her the way I used to fuck girls like her, when I used to fuck girls like her.

She reaches for the lighter, and I close my fingers around it so her hand lands on mine. Her sapphire eyes meet mine, and I can see her swallow, can see the dip of her gaze toward my lips.

“Colt?” she whispers.

“Yeah, Butterfly?” I whisper back, leaning my shoulder toward hers.

A moment of crackling, charged silence stretches between us.

“Hey, can I have one of those?” Duke interrupts, swaggering back over, a drunken lurch in his step that makes my head swim when he approaches the edge of the roof. I shouldn’t care if he falls off and dies. I *don’t* care. It’s only an instinct to preserve the lives of others as well as myself. After losing a brother, I know what life is worth, what it costs.

He doesn’t share that instinct or that awareness. Duke is like a child who never developed the part of his brain that understands consequences and that other people are human like him. He’d push me off the roof just to see if I’d splatter like an egg. Sure, unlike Baron, he’d feel bad for it later. But he wouldn’t understand until too late that his action would have consequences for either of us.

“Hey, Duke,” I say, scooting over and patting the space between me and Gloria. I could use some distance from what just happened anyway. “Come sit here and we’ll keep you warm. You’re in a fucking t-shirt. I’ll share my smokes too.”

Duke sways on his feet, looking back and forth between me and Lo. “Did you fuck?” he asks, his New York accent thicker after drinking.

“What? Ew, no,” Gloria protests, leaning further away from me.

“Huh,” Duke says, staggering over and clumsily stumbling to a sitting position between us. “I wonder who we’ve all fucked.”

“Considering you’re not gay and I’m not into girls, I’d say no one,” Gloria says, sounding annoyed as she drags the edge of her jacket out from under Duke.

“I didn’t say you were into them,” he says. “But you’ve eaten your share of pussy. I bet you’ve gotten more head from girls at school than Colt has.”

I lean forward to stare at Gloria past Duke, since that’s definitely information I haven’t heard before. To my surprise, she looks like she’s about to burst into tears. Did Duke just out the Queen Bitch in front of her worst enemy? Oh, this is priceless shit. Dixie would kill to have this information.

But no matter how bad both these assholes have made my life for the past two years, I know I’ll never tell Dixie. Duke shouldn’t have told *me*.

“I hate you,” Gloria says quietly. I’m not sure if she’s talking to me or Duke, and before I can ask, she stands and stomps away across the roof.

I smack the back of Duke’s head. “Dude. Not cool.”

“What?” he asks.

“You can’t just tell anyone that shit.”

He laughs. “I didn’t say she was gay. We just like to make them suck the next pussy in line while we hit it from the back. Damn, now I’m horny. Maybe I’ll fuck her up here tonight. I haven’t hit that since the first week of school.” He adjusts his monster cock inside his jeans, and I try not to look.

“Just do it on the other side of the roof,” I grumble. “I don’t want to see that shit.”

He takes my cigarette without asking and takes a drag, his eyes raking over me. “Want to spit roast her? She gives good head. She can depththroat you while I fuck her from behind.”

“No, thanks. I’d rather not have my dick bitten off.”

He laughs and pulls out his flask, turning it up and chugging whatever's left. "Hey, it's Bye Week," he says, lowering the flask and licking whiskey off his pouty lips. "Anything goes. And Lo's always down for a double team. She's freaky as fuck. Dude, you have no idea what I can make her do."

Annoyed, I take my cigarette back from where he set it on the roof. "I have a pretty good idea. I may have brain damage, but I'm not blind."

"Whatever," he says, laying back on his elbows and looking up at the bright, cold stars piercing the sky. "Don't tell me you've never done it. I've heard stories about the shit you and your cousins used to do. Hookers, girls on leashes, orgies at your grandpa's place ... I heard you stuck a vodka bottle in Dixie's ass and pickled her like a watermelon one time. Is that true?"

"That's my girlfriend you're talking about."

He laughs again. "Pretend that makes you better than me if you want, but you'd still be doing that shit if it weren't for us. You only hate us because we took the life you used to live and made it ours. You'd be just like us if you could, and it pisses you off that you can't anymore."

"I'm going to check on Gloria," I say, standing and dusting off my tights, which are snagged from the rough surface.

Duke's laughter follows me across the roof.

eighteen

Rumor Has It... After a certain viral video on this girl's account, WHPA's two kings have been gone all week. Missing their regal presence? Bye Week is your only chance until Monday!

Colt Darling

I find Gloria on the other side of some foil ventilation ducts, smoking her cigarette and staring at the tampon factory. She looks small and alone huddled down in her big puffy jacket, leaning on an electrical box.

“Are you here to call me a dyke and laugh at me some more?” she asks, not turning my way.

“No,” I say, parking my ass beside hers on the box. “I wasn’t laughing at you.”

“Funny, since I heard a lot of laughing after I walked away.”

“Yeah, your boyfriend’s drunk and trying to pimp you out for a threesome up here.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Okay, then your pimp.”

“Fuck you, Colt.” She stands and tosses her cigarette at my feet. “Is that what you’re here for? Duke said you could fuck me, so you’re taking him up on it, never once taking into consideration that I am a sentient human being who might want a say in what happens to her body? I’m just a collection of warm holes, right? And the Dolces own me, so they can rent out one of my

holes whenever they want. Which one did he offer you?”

She crosses her arms and glares at me, her chin held high, like she doesn't realize how fucked up every word that just came out of her mouth is. But then Duke's words come back to me, and I hate that I can't deny them. Maybe I'd be better than them, but maybe I wouldn't. Didn't I sweet talk Dixie into having a threesome with me and Preston, when I knew she despised him?

But the thought of trying to sweet talk Gloria into the same thing makes me want to hurl myself over the edge of the roof.

Maybe that's the difference. I've changed. They haven't.

“Well?” Gloria demands, tapping her toe. “What did you tell him you'd do to me? He doesn't need money, so I know you didn't pay cash. You don't have anything he wants, and usually he only makes me do stuff with other girls or his brothers. So you must have offered to do something pretty sick. Not that I'm surprised. After all you've been through, you're probably more fucked in the head than any of us. Let's hear it, Colt. Tell me what you want to do to me.”

I tuck my hands into the pockets of Duke's jacket, finding another flask in one of them. I'm not going to tell Gloria what I want to do to her. That's private, a fantasy that's just for me, not for her to know. But it strikes me how well she knows me after all these years of tormenting me. She's hurled enough insults to know which ones hurt. She probably knows all my tells. She's had plenty of time to study her victim. She guessed I have sick, sexual revenge fantasies about her without me having to say a word.

“I don't want to do anything to you,” I say, lifting myself onto the square metal box and scooting back until it hits the backs of my knees. “Except maybe shut you up.”

She stares at me a long minute, some mixture of emotion in her eyes that

I can't read. I haven't studied my tormentors like they've studied me. I've avoided them, hidden away like the goblin she says I am, trying to hold on and survive one more day, and then one more, and then another. But now I study her back, this inhuman brute of a girl that the Dolces shaped in the basement of the school, where the secret society meets. *She's* the goblin.

"Are you sure?" Gloria asks, a challenge in her voice as she stares me down. "It's Bye Week, Colt. My masters have given you permission. What if I gave you permission too?"

I shrug, ignoring the way my cock is stirring at the images her words put in my head. "I'm not interested, so your permission means nothing to me."

She prowls forward, her hips swaying like a snake, until she reaches me. She rests her hands on my knees, then slowly slides them up my thighs, her gaze locked on mine. My cock stiffens, and I have to control my breathing so I don't give myself away. "What if I said you could have me, do anything you wanted to me, just for tonight?" Her voice is a silky, seductive chant, as hypnotizing as her body when she leans up, her warm breath feathering over my cheek. "What if I said I wanted you to. What would you do to me then?"

"Nothing," I lie.

"What if I begged?" she whispers against my lips, so close I can almost taste her strawberry lip balm, the pinkness of her lips, the soft quiver of her tongue...

I close my eyes and take a breath, trying to calm my raging hard-on. Her hands press down on my thighs as she leans in, standing on tiptoes, and my eyes fly open. I lean back just in time to avoid her poison kiss. She must see my startled expression before I can hide it, because her lips curve into a smile that says she knows exactly what she's doing. That she sees my refusal to kiss her as a challenge, and she likes it. No one's probably ever said no to Her Majesty before.

With a gleam in her eye that's half triumph, half pure naughtiness, she moves her thumb slowly from the top of my thigh and onto the hard ridge of my erection. The sensation of her thumb grazing over the thin fabric makes my cock throb and an involuntary shudder wrack my body. She smiles wider, showing no evidence that I'm affecting her the same way. Her only response is to rise higher on her toes, leaning in closer and running her thumb higher, over the first ball of my cross piercing.

My senses come back to me in a single second.

Of course she's not affected. She's Queen Gloria the Wicked, a girl whose mission for the last two years has been to destroy me. She's just found another way to do it, one she's never tried before. She's a spider winding her prey in her web before she devours it. I know better than to trust a black widow's kiss, no matter how fucking sexy those plump pink lips are. I know it's all a disguise. She's not a beautiful girl asking for a kiss. She's a predator going in for the kill, a snake that never misses when it strikes.

I lift my hand and slide it under her hair, gathering it into a ponytail at the nape of her neck and tugging gently. I don't force her back to her heels, though I could. My tug is only a suggestion, a test to see what she'll do, and what I'll do.

Because she may be a predator, but I'm no one's prey.

Gloria Walton may have won every game she's ever played, but she's never played with me.

She sinks back on her heels, uncertainty entering her gaze.

"Take your hands off me," I say slowly.

She swallows, pulling her hands back from my thighs.

"Atta girl," I say. "Now put them behind your back."

"What?" she asks, her voice small now, suddenly meek. My suspicions are instantly aroused. No one flips the switch that fast. She's still playing, but

now she's playing my game.

I don't answer her. She heard me.

After a pause, she slowly puts her hands behind her back like a naughty child facing her punishment. Her obedience makes me want to push, to see how far she'll go, to see if she'll break as beautifully as she does in my mind.

But I won't.

"You don't deserve to touch me," I say, running my knuckle down the side of her throat, where I can see her pulse racing in the faint light lining her delicate neck.

"And you think you deserve to touch me?" she demands. But she doesn't pull away, even though I'm barely holding her hair, putting only enough pressure on it for her to feel it. She could twist away if she wanted. She doesn't, and that makes me wonder what she's up to, why she's playing along. This night will probably end in my death anyway, so I have nothing to lose except myself.

I won't ever lose that again.

"Yes," I say. I reach for the zipper on her jacket and lower it slowly. I watch her eyes, so filled with uncertainty, even fear. I watch her throat as she swallows, as her pulse increases. I move the zipper until it reaches the bottom, and then I spread her jacket open with my free hand.

"What are you doing?" she whispers.

"You want to know what I'd do to you?" I ask, tugging the top of her t-shirt down. Her bra is pink satin, and I can see the faintest point of her nipple through the lining. My cock throbs hard in my pants, but I refocus on her beautiful, terrible face to center myself.

"What?" she asks.

I pull down the cup of her bra, folding it under her soft, perfect tit. "I would destroy you."

She shivers, but she doesn't slap the fuck out of me or scream for Duke. She doesn't even drop my gaze. "How?" she challenges, but there's an edge of wariness in her demand.

I run my thumb slowly across the little pink rosebud of her nipple, watching her lips part in a silent gasp, her pupils dilate. "I would take you somewhere else, where no one else could even think about touching you, or seeing you, or hearing you."

I fold down the right cup of her bra and thumb her other nipple. "I'd spread your legs and make you cum, and cum, and cum until you were sobbing for me to stop, and then I'd make you give me one more. And then one more. And then one more."

She's breathing hard, and I leave her tits exposed and move lower, undoing the button of her jeans. I'm ready for her to strike, to scream and tell Duke I'm touching what's his, so he'll push me to my death, the way she wants. But she doesn't move. She lets me undo her button.

"I wouldn't stop until I used up every single minute of tonight and every single inch of your body. Until you couldn't speak or walk for a week after I was done with you."

One rung at a time, I slide her zipper down as I speak.

"So it's a good thing you don't want me to."

"What?" she breathes, clearly not comprehending that she won't win this round.

I chuckle and pull her zipper back up.

"How would you destroy me?" she blurts out, her voice breathy.

"You want me to, don't you?"

"Yes," she admits, rocking her hips forward.

I should stop. I should, but the thought of being this close to hearing Gloria Walton beg for my touch is irresistible. I smirk and lower her zipper

again, dipping my fingers inside this time.

She sucks in a shuddering breath when my cold fingers meet her bare skin. The sensation of her warm, silky-smooth skin without a trace of stubble has my cock aching to the roots. God, I'd fuck her so good if she wasn't so bad.

"Beg," I order.

"Please," she cries without hesitation, her hands coming forward from behind her back. She reaches for me, but when I withdraw my fingers, she quickly clasps them behind her again. "Please, Colt."

She drops her head back and closes her eyes, and I see her lashes darken, like her desperation has her in tears. Combined with the sound of my name on Gloria Fucking Walton's lips, the way this prissy little princess begs so pretty, it's the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen.

I slip my finger between her lips, ready to get her worked up, but she's so wet I lose my focus for a second. "Why are you wet?" I ask, tightening my grip on her hair and forcing her head up, so she has to look at me.

Her lids flutter open, and I can't tell for sure in the shadowy night, but I think her cheeks color. "Because you're here," she whispers, her voice so faint I can hardly hear it.

And for one second, I forget that we're locked in a battle of wills at this very moment, that she's playing me as well as I'm playing her. Better, even, because for one moment, I believe her.

"You like that?" I ask, stroking over her tight, swollen clit. "You want the dirtiest scum of the earth fingering your precious little pussy?"

"Yes," she says on a sigh. "Yes, please, my king."

A shuddering wave of *déjà vous* threatens to crash over me, but I shove it back this time. I'm barely holding onto control, and I don't need distractions.

“Tell me.”

“It feels so good,” she moans, dropping her head back.

“That’s a good girl,” I murmur, unable to take my eyes off her. She’s captivating, and I never want to stop drinking her in with my eyes, my mouth, my hands. I want to own every inch of her skin, taste it and lick it and bite it, take my time and leave nothing behind.

I’ve never seen Gloria with even a single hair out of place except on race nights, when she doesn’t wear her full face of makeup. At school, she’s a cartoon, a robot, not even a real person. She’s an evil villain with red lips and slick hair and heels that pierce hearts, a forked tongue that can cut down the strongest man.

But now... Now she’s a mess in my hands. I slowly sink a finger into the slick, hot grip of her cunt, my head spinning as I watch her perfect pieces slip out of place.

“Oh god,” she gasps. “Colt, my god...”

She rocks her hips, her hands losing their grasp again.

“I am your god,” I growl at her, pumping my finger into her. She rocks her hips, moaning and biting down on her plump lower lip. I watch her come undone, and it nearly undoes me. She’s a wreck, for me. Her tits are bare above her bra and shirt, rising and falling with each breath in the cold night; her nipples hard little points in the pale orange glow of the lights. Her jeans are open, undone, and my hand is buried in her panties as she begs for the man she’s caused so much pain to give her back nothing but pleasure.

“Destroy me,” she whispers. “Oh god, do it.”

“I will,” I say, circling my finger slowly inside the hot suck of her cunt until she whimpers for relief. “Someday.”

“Tell me how you’ll do it,” she pants, clearly getting off on this. “Would you film it? Put it on Dixie’s blog?”

“No,” I say, sliding my finger from her, even though my entire being is screaming at me to keep going, to feel her cum on my fingers. “I’d never tell a soul.”

She stands there looking stunned, and I know it’s not just because of what I said I’d do to her, or what I did to her. It’s because she understands what I mean by saying I’d never tell. It’s like telling her it means nothing, that *she’s* nothing. She’s not even worth finishing off.

“Pull yourself together,” I say harshly, nodding at her bare tits and gaping jeans. “You look more like a whore than a queen.”

She swallows, her eyes narrowing and her nostrils flaring. She blinks rapidly a few times, then reaches down and slowly zips her jeans, letting me see that she’s not ashamed of her body. Not its reaction to me, and not the way it looks. She doesn’t rush to cover herself. She lets me stare at her tits a few more seconds as she buttons her jeans, watching me the entire time.

I tear my eyes away so she won’t know that I’m fucking memorizing them, adding this night to the fantasy of the girl in the pool house and the fantasy of making her crawl. I examine my finger, still glistening with her arousal, her desire—for me. I resist the urge to slide it into my mouth.

I will not let her know how much I want to taste her.

I will not give in and greedily suck her wetness from my fingers like a man dying of thirst.

I will not lick her off my fingers.

While she zips her jacket, I gather my thoughts. She’s tough, but I know I hurt her. She deserves it. I shouldn’t feel bad. I wanted to. That’s the game, after all. To get back even an inch of the miles and miles of my life she’s burned to ash.

“So that’s it?” she asks, tucking her hands into her pockets like nothing happened.

“I have a girlfriend.”

“I have a boyfriend.”

“I’m not like you,” I say, hopping down off the box. “And don’t think about me when you get home and finish what I started.”

I walk away, back to where Duke is still lying on the edge of the roof. Gloria doesn’t follow, and I tell myself I don’t care. I sit down next to Duke and slide my finger into my mouth, closing my eyes and letting the taste of Gloria Walton’s cunt spread over my tongue. I draw a slow breath, smelling her on my fingers, tasting her, almost feeling the flutter on the tip of my tongue when she cums.

I pull myself back from the sensation and glance around, the moment of transcendence gone. Duke is staring glassy-eyed up at the stars. Gloria is still on the other side of the roof, licking her wounds and doing whatever demon queens do when injured—probably planning to push me off the scaffolding when we climb down.

I don’t care. I played her game, just like she played mine. I know her world because it used to be mine, before her demon kings stole it, as Duke so succinctly put it. I know how the female half of her world works because it’s how Dixie’s works. Pics or it didn’t happen. Gossip is air. Validation is water. It’s meaningless if no one weighs in on it. How else do they know who to love, who to hate, who’s in and who’s out?

If I didn’t talk about it, brag I fucked the queen, that means she’s not worth talking about. And her life depends on being the most worthy of gossip, the most relevant, staying in the spotlight and on everyone’s news feed on every social media app. If I don’t fight her hellfire with fire, is she even worth fighting? If someone’s not petty enough to try to take her down when he has ammunition, is she no longer a worthy opponent?

Her entire life, her value, is based on how others perceive her. If no one

wants gold anymore, it's worthless. If she's not the most feared, hated, and envied; if the boys don't covet the kings for having her as their queen, her value is gone. Telling everyone that their queen crawled and begged for the leper to fuck her would ruin her in their eyes.

Telling no one would ruin her in her own eyes.

nineteen

Rumor Has It... Despite their cozy public appearance, the Queen and her boy toy have been notably separate during a few key recent events. Could there be trouble brewing between the Queen and her consort once again?

Gloria Walton

I hate him.

I stand on my side of the roof, resting the heel of my hands on the edge of the metal box, trying to get my breathing under control.

Put yourself together.

You look more like a whore than a queen.

Damn him. I can't even give myself my usual pep talk without his words echoing in my head.

He thinks I'm a whore.

Stinging tears force their way through my lashes, and my throat hurts so badly I think something must be broken inside there, like it is inside every part of me.

God fucking damn him to hell.

I take shaky breath, dropping my head and letting the tears drip from my lashes straight onto the ground so they won't leave tracks on my face.

After everything the Dolces have done, they didn't destroy me. They couldn't.

Why am I so fucking weak when Colt Darling touches me?

He's my kryptonite.

And now...

Now he knows it.

A gust of icy wind whistles over the roof and I shudder, my shoulders shaking as the tears drip faster.

Does he know everything else?

He pretends he forgot it all, but what if he's lying? What if it was all part of his plan to break me all along, to shatter me once and for all? He could do it in an instant, telling the school what we did. But what if he's more like Baron than I ever knew, and he's biding his time, studying me?

He knows.

He's as good as told me he remembers. That it was all a lie. Because what he said he'd do to break me... That's exactly what he did.

I shudder again, a sob wracking my body this time.

He destroyed me, and he did it by never telling a soul. And now, he wants me to know it. He wants me to know it was all by design, that he's been plotting it all along. That all along, he knew. He never forgot. He just doesn't care. It means so little to him that he's forgotten it by choice.

He made me crawl. Beg. Call him my king.

And he was.

I was nothing to him.

He's filled my heart and soul with anguish and shame and hope and love and agony every fucking day of the past year.

I was so forgettable I didn't even register for him.

He was my everything, the lifeline I held to when the storm of the Dolce boys got too rough, too brutal.

That's not a word I'd use to describe sex.

I remember him saying that last year. I remember everything.

And it's too much. I can't hold it in. He made something live inside me again, and it's grown too big for the cage I made to contain it. It's going to tear out of me, and when it does...

It's going to kill me.

It's too much. I can't hold it all inside anymore, and I don't know how to get it out.

I want to slice my skin open to let it out.

But I can't leave marks because Mom will see them. I can't punch things like Royal does. I can't cut myself like Harper does. She doesn't know I've seen the marks she cut up her arm, but I have. I know those marks, not because I have them, but because a hundred thousand times I've wanted to do the same.

I can do two things—I can drive, or I can drink.

Or I could do both.

I think that over. But as much as I would love to go out in a blaze of glory, cocooned in the safe space of my June Bug, I would hate for them to have to cut me out of her. I would hate to destroy her, and I'd hate to leave a gross mess of a corpse for Mom to identify. It's the same reason I can't step to the edge of the roof, spread my arms, and fly. I wonder what that moment would feel like, the few seconds before I hit the ground. I bet they'd be exhilarating, worth dying for.

But that would traumatize the entire zombie horde. I don't want them wondering if I'm dead, poking my body. I don't want them joking they thought I'd bounce because surely I'm made of plastic.

No, if I was going to make it all go away, I'd need to use something neat and pretty. Something that would let Mom be proud one more time, and everyone at Willow Heights stand over my open coffin and say, "Perfect even in death."

I lift my head and take a few deep breaths of the cold air, letting my exhale billow as a plume into the night. I can smell that Colt is smoking again, and a craving claws along my insides like a branch scratching at a window. I run my ring fingers along the rims of my eyes, making sure no traces of tears remain.

If I want to be perfect in death, I have to be perfect in life.

I can fake it as good as Colt Darling. I'm the fucking queen of fake. What am I doing, over here crying like a little bitch instead of fighting back?

I could tell him I know he's faking the memory loss. That would take care of him.

Duke would ask what I meant, and Colt would challenge me, not believing I'd out myself and admit I fucked a golem like him. And when I did, Duke would push him off the roof.

Fuck. Why can't I just do it, let him get it over with?

I've spent a year trying to forget him, and I can't manage to go a single day without him invading my thoughts, burrowing into my veins like a poison that's infected my mind, my heart, my soul. I tried to lock Colt in a memory box of sacred treasures like I did my memories of Rylan. I tried to focus on my job, to be a good queen and satisfy the Dolce boys and obey their every command, but Royal dumped me anyway. I tried to love Rylan again, but I can't even do that right.

Colt ruined everything. He ruined *me*.

Shouldn't I jump at the chance to do the same to him, the way he would?

I don't owe him. Yes, I've been a bitch to him, but in the end, he won. In the end, he's the one who destroyed me, and he knows it. He's reveling in it, with every smirk and touch. He's been rubbing it in my face all along, but I was too dumb to see it, so he had to come right out and tell me. Maybe it was even a challenge, deliberately given to show me that I'm not as strong, not as

cruel. That I won't retaliate.

That proves to him everything he needs to know. Not only did he let me know he'd won, but he let me know I'm defeated. Because I still care. I still care enough to keep my mouth shut and not tell Duke. I love him even when I try to stop, even when he burned me to ash over and over every fucking day this year by not acknowledging what we had. By showing me it was nothing to him. I am nothing.

I'm a ghost.

So like a ghost, I'll float back over to them. I won't fight back. I'll keep smiling, and I'll keep pretending that I'm a victor even though everyone on this roof knows it's a lie, one that grows more and more transparent every day. We all know that I'm the furthest thing from a queen or a victor.

I'm not a victim either. I'm something so much worse.

We all know that in the sick and twisted games between the Dolces and the Darlings, I am and have always been the loser.

twenty

Rumor Has It... With the King's of WHPA suspended and the upstart queen on a college trip last week, we got a glimpse of what the future may look like once so many of the Elite graduate... Or what it could look like with a different set on the throne. Will the current reign last, or will some new players make a power move before then?

Colt Darling

"I took some molly," Duke says after a while. "I have extra if you want it."

"I'm good," I say.

"You can split it with Lo."

"Tonight's already fucked up enough."

We sit in silence for a minute before I take out a cigarette. Duke must be freezing his ass off, but he hasn't asked for his jacket back, so I don't mention it. I can hear the game in the distance, people still shrieking and yelling. I take a drag and then look over at Duke.

"What you thinking about?" I ask, tipping my chin at him.

"Quit being such a girl," he says.

I hand him the cigarette, and he takes a drag before passing it back. I blow smoke rings into the cold night, watching them rise and dissipate in the darkness.

"One time I heard that stars were ghosts or some shit," Duke says. "You think that's true?"

“No, dumbass,” I say. “That’s from *The Lion King*.”

“It’s a cool thought, even if it’s not true,” he says. “Your brother would be up there with my sister, you know.”

“You really want your sister watching over you, seeing the shit you do?”

“Not everything,” he says. “Not that video your cousin released of me with my dick out in the café.”

“Magnolia didn’t post that,” I say, annoyed by the reminder. My cousin didn’t post it, but my girlfriend did. She’s been getting tons of attention since it went viral over Homecoming weekend. I know going viral is a dream come true for her, and I’m happy for her, but I wish she hadn’t done it at Magnolia’s expense. Dixie’s changed this year, though. Or maybe she’s always been like this, but I always kept distance between us before. Now that we’re closer than we’ve ever been, I’m seeing a different side of her.

“Is everyone in your family afraid of heights?” Duke asks, reaching for the cigarette again.

“I’m not afraid of heights,” I say. “I just don’t like them.”

“Your sister was scared,” he says, chuckling. “She shrieked like a banshee when we held her over. Hey, if I hold you over the edge will you scream like that?”

“No,” I say, glowering at him.

He sits up suddenly, hinging at the hips like a fucking puppet. He gives me an impulsive, slightly lopsided smile that makes my skin crawl and my balls climb back up into my body. I know Duke’s crazy eyes. He’s as inhuman as his twin when his demon mode activates.

“I bet I could make you scream,” he says, his sloppy grin sliding away as he jumps to his feet. “I could probably even fuck you in the ass while your head’s hanging over, just like your sister. You’re a fucking homo already, aren’t you?”

“Duke,” I warn, not moving even though every muscle in my body is tensed to spring. Duke’s got fifty pounds on me, and I’m still hoping I can talk him down. “You brought me up here because your brother was going to kill me tonight. What’s the point if you do it instead?”

“Who said anything about killing you?” he asks. “I just want to have a little fun. Don’t you like fun, little gay boy?”

“I’m not gay,” I say, glaring up at him.

“That’s not what I remember,” he says. “I remember you deepthroating me like a champ. I bet Gloria remembers too. Lo! Where are you? Remember when Colt sucked my dick?”

I’m sure Gloria remembers that day in the basement as well as I do, even if neither of us would ever speak of it to the other. She comes when Duke calls, though, ever the obedient little pup, eager to serve her master.

He stops and stares at her for a second before turning his attention back to me.

“Come on,” he taunts, backing toward the edge. “I bet you’re dying to have some fun with a stud like me.”

“Watch out,” I snap, adrenaline nosediving in my chest when he backs up to the very edge of the roof.

“What’s the matter?” he asks, balancing on one foot and holding his arms in the air, waving one foot off the edge. “You scared I’m going to fall?”

“No,” I say, gritting my teeth. “Fucking jump, for all I care. One less of Satan’s spawn for this town to get rid of.”

“Don’t give me ideas,” he says, feinting toward the edge, like he’s about to jump.

My stomach drops out, and I can’t breathe. “Get back from the edge, you fucking psycho.”

“Come and get me,” he taunts. “Let’s play a little zombie tag up here.”

He starts dancing around, not even paying attention to where the drop is. I know he's not like Royal, who doesn't seem to care one way or another if he lives, or Baron, who's already dead inside. Duke's just fucking delusional. His dad's gotten him out of so many scrapes he thinks he's invincible. It would never occur to him that he might actually fall. And if he did consider it, he'd think that he could fall off a fifty foot roof onto asphalt and walk away without a scratch. He thinks boys like him are as impossible to kill as superheroes.

I barely remember a time when I thought that, when I trusted the world so much. Ironically, it only took one fall to change my mind too.

That's when I really grew up, not the first time I got laid or the first time I had to shave; not starting high school or getting my first car. All those rites of passage are just markers, like numbers on a clock. It's what happens between those clearly defined marks that changes you—the last time you think life is a right and not a privilege, the last time a hot girl wants to fuck you at a party, the last time you sit down across the dinner table from your sister or your brother or your mother. There are no pictures in frames on the mantel from those nights, no parties to celebrate the occasion. Usually, you don't even know it's the last time until it's over.

I wonder what Duke would have said to his sister if he'd known. I wonder what Gloria would have said to her brother. I wonder what I would have said to mine. And what I would say to Duke.

"Duke," Gloria pleads, hurrying over to where he's still clowning. "Get away from there. You're drunk!"

"Come and get me," he taunts again, waving his arms and watching me with those dark, crazy eyes.

I stand and start toward him. I know he won't stop for Gloria. He wants me to stop him. It's one of his sick mind games, to see if he can break my

cool, piss me off, get a reaction out of me that proves I'm as bad as him. Or maybe it's to prove to himself that he's loveable, that what he's done to me isn't so bad, because I'll still save his life.

He hangs his heels over the edge, then starts tottering, pinwheeling his arms. He doesn't look scared. A giant, psychotic smile stretches over his face, and he whoops in triumph when I grab his flailing arm.

"I knew you'd be a hero," he says, gripping my arms with both hands and letting me haul him away from the edge. Cackling, unhinged laughter echoes across the roof, and I can't help but wonder if he's being loud to summon his brother or someone from the zombie group who gave up on us and forgot for a while. They're bound to remember us eventually, especially when Baron can't find his partner in crime.

Before I can get him more than a few steps away, he drops my arm and lunges, wrapping his arm around my neck. He yanks my head down, wrenching me toward the edge in a headlock.

"Let him go," Gloria screams over Duke's maniacal giggling.

I brace my feet, but he wrestles me to the side of the roof. "Squeal like a pig, pussy boy."

"Fucking let me go," I yell, ramming my fist into his stomach. Punching his abs is like punching a tree. He thrusts me forward, and I stumble, only my feet on the roof now. My head is hanging over the edge, and Duke's thick arm is wrapped around my neck, his balance swaying drunkenly.

"You can't kill me," I blurt out. "You need me."

"I don't need you," he snaps. "I need you dead. You know too fucking much."

"I'm your hookup," I say urgently. "Where are you going to get your fix if I'm dead?"

He jerks me further over the edge, and my heels leave the ground, and I

think I'm going to vomit on the way to my death. The ground below seems to recede, and my ears echo as if I'm in a tunnel. Pure, incinerating fear climbs my limbs, liquifying them. Suddenly, I can't see anything except black spots. I'm blind with terror, and I feel myself plummeting feet first through the air.

I hear the laughter of my friends, the shriek of the girl holding my hand as we fall.

I'm not afraid anymore.

I feel free. I feel joy. I feel alive.

I feel the shock of slicing into the cold water from the warm night. I feel a jolt go through me, a wrenching sensation as our hands are torn from each other's.

I see blood in the water. All I see is red.

"Stop, you asshole," Gloria screams, throwing both arms around Duke's hips and hurling herself backwards. He stumbles back a step, and I break his grip and spin around, the drop swimming sickeningly as I do. Without thinking, I lurch away from death and throw my arms around any anchor that's more solid than air.

It takes a second for my brain to kick in and realize I grabbed Duke, the person who was just trying to shove me over. I cling to his neck, breathing so fast my head spins. I want to throw him over that edge, to kill him, and kiss him, and shake him until he stops being such a fucking psychopath all the time. He tries to shove me off, but I can't let go yet. I can still feel my feet starting to lift from the ground.

"Get off me, you freak," he says, punching my stomach and ribs until I'm forced to release his neck. He steps back, his harsh breathing dank with whiskey fumes. He looks as confused and freaked out as if he just woke up, and I know he's not in demon mode anymore. He's just a kid who's high and realizing he almost killed someone.

And I'm the freak who just freaked the fuck out—in front of two of the last people on earth I want to show my weaknesses.

“We should get down,” Gloria says, glancing at the sky.

I'm so relieved that she's not going to drag me for what just happened that I almost feel guilty about how I treated her earlier. Unlike Dixie, who pounces on any opportunity to make me feel like shit about myself, Gloria spares me for now, just like she spares me the humiliation of explaining why I just hugged Duke like I wanted to fuck him after he tried to kill me. Instead, she nods to where dawn is just starting to lighten the east.

The game is still going. Distant zombie-like groans echo onto our rooftop from somewhere on the far side of the factory.

“I don't think he *can* get down right now,” I say, tipping my head toward Duke, who's holding his arms toward the sky and staring at his palms, transfixed. “He's all kinds of fucked up.”

“Shit,” Gloria says, taking out her phone.

“What are you doing?” I demand.

“Texting Baron,” she says. “He'll know what to do.”

“So he can kill me?” I ask. “Besides, there's nothing to do but wait it out. When he comes down, we can climb down.”

She looks back and forth between us, a frown creasing her pretty brow.

“Or call him,” I say with a shrug. “I'll climb down and go. I think Duke's past his murderous impulses for now. You should be fine up here with him until Baron gets here.”

“No, it's okay,” she says. “You're right. He can't climb down like that even if Baron is here.”

Shaking my head, I take a seat a little further from the edge than last time, so Duke won't have it so easy if he tries to drag me back over. Now that my life is not flashing before my eyes, adrenaline is pooling inside me,

making me feel light and stupid. I'm so fucking relieved that Gloria's not bringing that up that I decide to play nice while we're stuck up here together.

"Are you telling me you'd rather hang out with me than Baron Dolce, your number one boyfriend?"

She rolls her eyes and stomps over in her pink boots, dropping beside me on the roof. "He's not my number one boyfriend. I got back together with Rylan at Homecoming."

"I'm surprised Baron's content being second to anyone," I say, leaning back on my hands. "The rumors must be true."

"What rumors?"

"That you have a golden pussy."

She winces. "Can we not talk about that right now?"

I chuckle. "Sure. What do you want to talk about, Butterfly?"

"I told you not to call me that."

"Whoops," I say, smirking at her. "I keep forgetting. Must be all the brain damage."

She huffs and pulls her knees up, wrapping her arms around them and staring toward the east, where the light is increasing every minute. "You never answered my question earlier."

"What question?"

"Why you're so freaked out about heights. Were you always like that, or is it because your sister jumped off the bridge?"

So much for her letting me off the hook. I rub my bootheel against the asphalt. "Neither. Both."

"Come on, tell me," she says, pushing me with her shoulder. "I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

"Your what?"

"Your secret," she says. "Your greatest fear."

My greatest fear isn't heights, but I'm not in the mood to share that with my tormentor, so I don't correct her. "Okay," I say, picking up my pack and taking out my last cigarette. "My first girlfriend died jumping off a balcony into a pool. I was holding her hand when we jumped. I felt it. The vibration through her arm, the sensation of her skull cracking on the tile, before I lost my grip on her hand. That'll teach you not to face your natural fear of heights just for kicks."

"Oh my god," Gloria says, sounding horrified. "I—I'm so sorry, Colt."

I shrug like I don't think about Destiny every damn day. "It was a long time ago."

"I know, but... Damn. No wonder you're so fucked up."

I laugh bitterly, rolling my cigarette back and forth between my thumb and finger to loosen the tobacco. "Yeah, that's why."

She reaches over and lays her hand on my knee. "I'm not being a bitch. I'm genuinely sorry, Colt."

"Her best friend Dolly said she always got lucky, until the one time she didn't. But maybe she did, y'know? Maybe dying was her biggest stroke of luck yet. Just think what the Dolces would have done to her if she was alive."

"They leave Dixie alone."

"Yeah, well. Destiny was not Dixie. They would have done to my girlfriend what they did to my sister."

"Let's get down," Duke says, stumbling over. "I want to move. Let's go back to the game and catch some zombies."

"You're not going anywhere," I say flatly.

He scowls down at me like he's not sure if he should follow orders from a lowlife like me. I know he will. It just takes a while for him to accept that.

"Here, I'll put on some music," Gloria says, pulling out her phone and appeasing her king so he doesn't have to bow to a peasant. "Why don't you

dance?”

“You’re just trying to get me to take my clothes off,” Duke says, grinning. “I’ll strip for our favorite little whore any time. All you had to do was ask.”

He peels off his T-shirt and slides it between his legs, riding it while Gloria’s phone plays “Back to Black.” For a minute, I just watch him move. His body is so ripped it’s hard not to stare. It’s fucking annoying how good he looks. The whole lot of them are as beautiful on the outside as they are ugly on the inside. The only thing marring his perfect body is an angry red scar on his chest that almost looks like it says “Doll,” but it’s hard to read from our angle.

After a minute, he loses interest in us and lets himself go to the music. It’s a spectacle to behold, watching a demon dancing alone on the roof while the first colors of sunrise begin to streak the sky. His jeans ride low on his hips, and his muscles stretch and bulge in the glimmer of the security lights as he moves his bare arms and torso.

“Good call,” I murmur to Gloria, finally placing my cigarette between my lips. Her gaze follows the movement, locking on my mouth while I turn my head and angle the end of the cigarette into my palm to meet the flame from my lighter.

“I’m surprised he’s comfortable enough around you to let you see this side,” she says.

“Why?” I ask, exhaling a cloud of white smoke into the chilly morning. “I’ve known him longer than you have.”

“You think you know the Dolces better than me?”

“Not better,” I say, giving her a meaningful look. “Just differently. I knew them before their sister died. Before they sold their souls to the devil. In some fucked up way, I think they like having me around because of that.

Same with Dixie. They let us stay because we're the last people who knew her."

"I think he's the best one," Gloria says, watching Duke move his body in the completely unselfconscious way only someone who's high can do. "Even though everyone else treats him like an afterthought."

Maybe that's why I can tolerate and even understand Duke at times. That was my place in my family too. But I'm not going to reveal that to Gloria Fucking Walton.

"So, is the Goblin Queen going to tell me her deep, dark secrets now?" I ask.

"What do you want to know?"

"Something no one else knows."

She watches me for a second, then swallows and looks back at Duke. "I never wanted to be queen," she says quietly, hugging her knees to her chest. "They chose me. I never chose them."

"Aw, is the crown heavy on the poor princess's head?" I tease.

"You should know," she says glumly. "You used to wear it."

"I do know," I say. "It was the happiest time of my fucking life. You think I'm going to feel sorry for you because you didn't ask to be popular? You still have everything—everything you took from me. You know what I'd give to have it all back, even if I couldn't change the dead girlfriend part?"

"I thought you of all people would understand."

"I understand you perfectly," I say through gritted teeth. "But don't fucking pretend you understand anything about me, Prom Queen."

She doesn't answer. For a while, we sit in silence, watching our tragic, beautiful monster dancing in the light of the rising sun. All I can think is, what a damn waste. What a waste we all are. The people who died are the ones who should have lived. None of us deserve it.

When the sun comes up, we finally climb down. Gloria already texted Baron that she took Duke home so he wouldn't come looking. I wonder if he looked for me, if he's pissed he didn't get to murder someone tonight.

I'm sure he'll have other chances.

I walk them back to Gloria's Mustang. "You're wrong, you know," she says, stopping in her open door.

"Undoubtedly."

"I'm just like you," she says. "But inside out."

Before I can ask, she slides into her seat and closes the door.

"Time to pay the piper," Duke says over the top of the car, giving me a toothy grin.

"Not now," I say. "You're fucked up."

"Seems like the perfect time to me."

I raise a brow. "So we're going to stop pretending now?"

"You owe me," he says, glowering at me. "You don't get to decide when I come to collect."

I give him a cool look, refusing to drop his gaze. "Get in the car, Duke."

He doesn't move for a long minute. Finally, he grumbles, "You owe me," again.

When I stand there staring him down without answering, he yanks open the door, throws himself into the seat, and slams the door so hard the whole car rocks on its wheels. I shake my head and walk away.

At home, I find Dixie in my bed, fast asleep. I crawl in next to her. She murmurs in her sleep and throws her leg over me. I'm exhausted, but I can't get out of my head long enough to fall asleep. When I'm too frustrated to try anymore, I prowl downstairs and out onto the back deck. We live on a couple acres, so it feels secluded even though we're on the outskirts of Faulkner. It's a chilly fall day, but the leaves are still on the trees, surrounding me with a

collage of lemon and lime, rust and honey. I sit in one of the chaise lounges, laying back and watching the handful of leaves that drifts down every time the wind blows. I know I'm lucky to have all this, even now.

Pulling out my phone, I thumb it on.

I scroll through my contacts, trying not to do the thing I know I shouldn't. I should go back inside and jerk off to my fantasy of the girl in Cotton Montgomery's pool house. But somewhere along the way, it stopped being about the hot girl and started being about me, about that being the last party where girls like that wanted to fuck me. She seems pale and insignificant now, the ghost of a paper doll.

I barely remember her. Instead, all I can think about is the last girl on earth I should ever want to fuck.

I toss my phone down and reach for my wallet, wanting to unfold the pictures and look at them, just for a minute. They're not a faded dream from years ago. They're real, as real as tonight on that roof, with my finger inside her and the way she wanted more...

She wanted me.

Whatever she's done, the demon queen wanted me. She would have let me fuck her. She wanted me to.

The pool house wasn't the last time a girl like that wanted me.

Last night was.

When I reach for the pictures, I find my pockets empty. I wasn't planning on going anywhere, so I didn't grab my wallet. I sigh and lean back in the chair, trying to forget it, to forget her. To look at the leaves blowing down in a gust of wind, and to think about the girl sleeping upstairs. My girlfriend. The girl who has been loyal to me for three years. She was in love with me from the moment I put a dog collar around her neck for the first time, when I was a king and she was nothing.

I used to like that, the way it made me feel to put a girl on a leash.

But I ruined that, like I ruin everything in my life.

There comes a point when you're pushing someone's limits when you realize they have none. That they'll never say no, and not because they're enjoying what you're doing, but because they're scared to lose you if they say no. That's when you should pull back, but I learned that the hard way.

At some point I crossed the line where even if it wasn't too much for Dixie, it was too much for me. Where I had pushed her so far that I didn't respect her anymore. There is no limit to Dixie's love, to what she'd do for me. Knowing she has no boundaries makes her submission pathetic instead of thrilling. It makes the kinky things I did to her cruel instead of hot. So I stopped doing them.

Sometimes, I miss it.

But I can't ask Dixie to do that again. I can't ask, because I know I wouldn't have to.

It's not fair to her, but then, nothing else is fair, so why would that be an exception? It's not Dixie's fault she's the one who taught me that I have boundaries even if she doesn't. She didn't try to show me my limit. She didn't mean to ruin my kinky fun and make me feel sick at the thought of putting a collar around her neck. But she did.

Maybe it was all the way back when we stuck the vodka bottle in her ass at the last Darling New Year's Eve party, the last night Devlin was alive. Maybe it was when she let me share her with Preston, and seeing the way he treated her, and knowing she hated him, but she still said yes. I couldn't put the collar on her after that. It disgusted me to even think about it.

But fuck, wouldn't it be hot to put that collar around the Bitch Queen's neck, to make her crawl for me?

I'm halfway hard just thinking about it before the guilt strikes, hard and

sharp like an anvil to my chest. Dixie stayed loyal when I was nothing, less than nothing. Gloria crushed me under her stiletto with joyful malice.

I don't deserve Dixie's loyalty. No matter how hard I try, the truth is, I've never felt the way about her that she feels about me. I've been trying, and I do love her in some way, the way you can't help but love a friend who has been there for you through everything and let you fuck her when you needed release.

She doesn't deserve me—she deserves better.

Gloria doesn't deserve me, either. She doesn't deserve to be the person that I feel the other way for, the way I should feel about my girlfriend. She doesn't even deserve to be the girl whose face replaces the innocent girl in the pool house who just wanted a Darling boy to fuck her. She's the opposite of that. The opposite of Dixie. The opposite of everything I should want.

I pick up my phone again, and this time, I open the *OnlyWords* app. I never use the texting app that everyone else does. Why would I? I don't have friends. It's logged into Dixie's account because I don't even use my account.

But in case Dixie snoops through my texts, it's safer.

My thumb hovers over the button. I should erase it. I should delete her number from my phone. I shouldn't have checked her name in Dixie's contacts on the app before I logged back into my own account.

But I did.

Dynamo: WYD?

I instantly regret sending it. What am I doing?

She's probably sleeping anyway. We've only been home for a few hours.

ThatsLo: Who is this?

Dynamo: Its you

Dynamo: turned inside out.

ThatsLo: WTF

Dynamo: WYD?

There's a long pause, and the dots disappear and reappear on the screen as she types multiple times before the message finally pops onto my screen.

ThatsLo: Thinking about u

Dynamo: WTF. What r u doing to me?

ThatsLo: What r u doing to me?

Dynamo: U have a bf

ThatsLo: U have a gf

Fuck. She's right. I'm the one who texted her. I sit back in the chair for a while, watching the bright blue sky through the kaleidoscope leaves.

Dynamo: Do u believe in karma?

ThatsLo: yes

ThatsLo: the TayTay kind, not the religious kind

Dynamo: whats the difference?

ThatsLo: I dont believe in reincarnation. I believe u get back what u do here n now.

Dynamo: Then why do u do what u do?

ThatsLo: y do u?

Dynamo: idk. Survival ig.

ThatsLo: Same

I think about that day in the basement, how I gave her a chance to survive. And instead of taking it and running far from the Dolces, she joined them. That's not surviving. That's profiting off their status, their evil.

I think about the last half of my sophomore year, right after Crystal and Devlin died. Preston was in the hospital most of that semester because they tried to kill him. My sister was dating one of them. And I was so, so angry. I fought back then. I wasn't trying to survive. I was trying to make them pay. For the death of my brother. For making *us* pay for the death of their sister. I

ended up in the hospital more times than I can count. Being like them never helped me survive. It did the opposite. Every time I fought them, I risked not surviving. There were four of them and only one of me.

I didn't want to be like them. I didn't want to be the kind of person they were.

So I stopped. And I survived.

Their evil queen won't be the one to change that. For all I know, she's operating under instructions from her masters, exploiting a new weakness, finding a new way to torture the Darlings. I know better than to think brute strength is their only weapon. And Gloria Walton hates my guts. She's a fucking good liar, but there's no way anything that comes out of her mouth is genuine. She's a snake, not a butterfly.

I'm smarter than this. Better than this.

I tell myself that, anyway. But maybe, like Duke said, I'm no better than them at all.

After all, I'm the one with a girlfriend sleeping upstairs in his bed while I sit down here texting another girl. Gloria didn't text me. She didn't pursue me on that roof. I went to her. And the most fucked up part is that I don't want to stop. I want to catch her. I want to hold her in my hand like something beautiful and delicate, like the butterfly on her wrist. And then, like the anguished butterfly in the tattoo Maverick drew on her flawless skin, I want to tear her to shreds.

twenty-one

Rumor Has It... Things were unusually quiet in the halls of WHPA last week with so many major players gone. What drama will unfold now that they've all returned at the same time? Check back here for all the latest!

Gloria Walton

Now that Rylan's my boyfriend again, I don't have to walk around school like a dumped loser while Colt flaunts his happily coupled-up status. Not that anyone would compare us. They think I'm the queen, too cool to care if I'm single. Or that I'm the luckiest girl alive, on call for the D-boys. They'd never think to compare me with scum like Colt Darling.

Only I know how it stings when Harper doesn't show up at lunch, and I know she's outside smoking under the bleachers with him. I know if I told her I liked Colt, she'd never touch him. But how can I tell her that? We're friends, and I trust her more than any of my other friends, but even she can't crack the fortress I've built around my heart.

She disappeared on me last year. What if she does it again? I can't rely on her any more than I can rely on the Dolce boys to hold me up when I need it. I hold myself up. I trust no one. I don't triumph, but I fucking survive. I alone am queen, sitting atop the throne made from the bodies of those she conquered.

That's what I choose. To keep breathing. To keep smiling. To keep dancing.

It's just another day of picking my way through the minefield of popularity at Willow Heights when we walk out of the café after lunch and run into Colt and Harper coming in from smoking. Every day, when I have to see Colt for our project, I watch him, but I don't wait for him anymore.

I'm not waiting for him to remember.

I know he does.

I'm not waiting for him to tell them about that, or about what happened on the roof.

I know he won't.

He called me a whore. He doesn't want me and he never will. It's time for me to move on.

So after Bye Week, I erased the text I sent him so I won't see his number in my phone, even without a name. I deleted the messages he sent on *OnlyWords*, and I blocked him, so he can't text me again. For the next few weeks, I've dedicated myself to rekindling things with Rylan, making sure to be the kind of girlfriend he wants. Every night after bed checks, he climbs through my window. I lie under him while he ruts into me until he cums, and afterwards, while I wait for him to get done holding me, and I tell him I did too.

Everything is fine. I have a boyfriend. The throne is securely mine. The Dolce twins are busy fighting for dominance against Harper. Colt is busy living his best life with Dixie, apparently on the way to buying her a ring and living their happily ever after. If that's what he wants, who am I to interfere? I've made his life miserable enough already. The kindest thing I can do is let him silently gloat in his victory, ignore him when he smirks at me during our assignment, and slap a smile on my face to show him I'm fine.

And I am.

I'm fine until Harper walks in the side door next to the café with him.

Until Baron starts giving her shit about hanging out with another guy when she's back with Royal. Until, in one of those reckless moments, Colt bites back. I want to scream at him to stop being so fucking stupid, but it's too late.

Baron's already started in on him.

And then, without thinking, I open my mouth.

One slip. That's all it takes. I always knew. That's why I've inched along the tightrope for three years. Knowing exactly how precarious my position is. How easily everything I've worked for, everything I've built, can turn to dust. That's why I never speak without thinking.

Until I do.

"Leave him alone," I say, when Duke threatens to repeat the scene in the basement that haunts my nightmares.

The moment the words fall from my lips, my blood turns to liquid nitrogen. I try to backtrack, but Baron's too quick.

"You're defending him?" he asks.

I see the switch flip inside him. This is what he's been waiting for since he put us on our senior project together. He wanted me to get comfortable so I'd slip up. And now I have.

"No," I protest. "I hate Colt!"

Everything in my body has turned to ice. I think I'm going to piss myself with fear. I don't know what I'm saying, arguments and apologies pouring from my mouth as I scramble desperately to fix this.

It's too late.

I already know.

I want to scream and rage at the unfairness, at the way someone can be executed with no trial, no defense, no second strike. I can't speak fast enough. All I can do is watch it crumble, this carefully constructed world I've built around me, watch each delicate thread of the finest blown glass turn to

shards that pierce my skin as the kings of the school, the Dolce boys I have served for two years, degraded myself for, sold my soul for every single day, turn on me for a single slip.

Queens aren't allowed mistakes, not even one. There are no second chances. The whole school watches, crowding into the hall to see the spectacle. No one wants to miss the fall of their queen.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Baron says. "You've already been run through by all the guys on our side. Guess you had to go pretty far to find someone desperate enough to fuck you now that you're so loose a guy can't feel a thing when he sticks it in you."

His words hit home. As well as I know the Dolce boys, they know me. They know my deepest shames, the things I've done to stay in their good graces.

"He must be desperate if he'd fuck a pussy that's so used it looks like a worn-out old baseball glove," Baron says, shoving me toward Colt and Harper.

Every word is a cut with a jagged piece of broken glass as he peels back my skin, peeling away the only defense I have, the face that caught me in his web to begin with. They leave me exposed for the whole school to see, my naked ugliness, the huddling, deformed, hideous creature inside my shell.

Duke, the one I said was the best one, joins in with gleeful malice. "You're not even hot."

His words are simple but effective. Everyone in the school follows their lead. If the Dolces say I'm hot, I'm hot. If they say I'm a whore, I'm a whore. My protection is gone. Theirs, and mine.

Now everyone at Willow Heights sees what Colt has known all along.

There's nothing special about me, nothing worth admiring behind the smile. I'm a product of the Dolces' creation, and without their decree naming

me queen, I am nothing.

I thought I had the key to my armor, that I could open my cage and escape one day. But all along, they held the keys. It was never mine, just as the choice to step inside it was never mine. It was the Dolce boys' all along.

Of course it was.

I snarl at Colt like a wounded animal when he reaches for me. Some instinctual terror has gripped me, and all I want is to grab onto something to save me, the way he grabbed Duke on the roof that night. I reach for Rylan, the life raft that has saved me in my dreams all these years, the hero who loved me so much he tracked me down and moved his whole family across the country to rescue me.

But my hands grope at thin air.

Rylan just stares at me like I'm a stranger. That's what starts snapping the threads of my control as the world crumbles around me. I'm holding on so tight, curling my toes into the sand, but the beach keeps receding, and I can't stop it.

"Rylan, he's lying," I plead, tears threatening to destroy the last vestiges of poise I hold at this school, the last wisps of the illusion that I am untouchable. "Please."

This is our chance. This is his chance to be with me, to show me the words he said were true, that we don't need any of them. We only need each other. He can save me, stand by my side and support me in a way the Dolce boys never have, be my hero. If I only have him, like Colt only has Dixie, it will be enough.

"Did you fuck them?" he asks, while the whole school strains forward, gagging with anticipation at the reveal that Baron predicted would be too good to miss. The moment when Rylan finds out I didn't just fuck Royal, but that I'm every bit the whore everyone knows I am, will be the highlight of

their senior year.

“I didn’t have a choice,” I whisper.

Before he can answer, Duke captures Rylan with an arm around his shoulder, answering his question and the one I didn’t get a chance to ask, showing me that I can’t even take my boyfriend with me, the one they never wanted me to have. The one who never fit with them the way I did, who never even tried. Just as I denied Rylan’s words when I told him I had to obey, just as I bought into the hierarchy when I was on top, now he does the same. I can’t blame him. I know how addictive the allure of fame and power and status can be.

“You lying whore,” he says quietly.

It’s the nail in the coffin, the last piece of evidence the crowd needed. Their wishes have been confirmed. Not even my misfit boyfriend wants me.

When he turns away, I try to follow, but Harper pulls me back. I know I’ll be grateful later that I didn’t chase him through the school begging like a pathetic bitch. But I can’t even summon that now.

I’m done.

It’s over.

I should be relieved, but the storm of grief and frustration and fury and pain crashing over me sucks away all rational thought. I collapse into Harper, and the next thing I know, Colt is carrying me across the grass to the bleachers, where they sit with me while I implode. The waves keep hitting me, the screams buried in my throat coming up one at a time, so forceful I can barely hold them back. I choke them out as sobs, letting them wreck my throat, the beast inside me wanting to tear out of me and leave me in tatters before it razes the whole world with its fury.

I cry for a while, letting out the turmoil and anguish in a way that’s at least slightly more acceptable, even if it does make me look weak. What does

it matter anymore?

You don't deserve to cry, you stupid bitch. You deserve everything that's happening to you right now.

By the time I've gotten myself together, I feel Colt's hand gently stroking my back, and it nearly undoes me again. It's the first time he's touched me in a non-sexual way, and the intimacy is a shock to my system. I've done so many sexual things I wasn't into, performed so many acts in group settings with spectators and participants, that nothing sexual could short-circuit my brain the way his casual, comforting gesture does.

How does he always know just how to fuck with me?

Instead of being cruel to me, calling me a whore the way he did on the roof or making me kneel and bow to him now that I'm no longer queen, he soothes me.

Is this what Duke feels like when I hold him?

I sit up and he stops. Tears threaten to return at the loss, and I want to scream and grab his arms, wind myself up in them like a blanket. So this is why Dixie clings to him like she does. Because his touch delivers care instead of violence, because it leaves loneliness instead of bruises.

I force myself to sit up straight while Colt and Harper talk like I'm not having a fucking breakdown beside them. I'm thankful they don't make a big deal of it. I take a minute to open my phone, though dread sinks like a stone inside me. I have to know. I have to see what they're saying about me, if I'm truly finished, if the last two years were all for nothing in the end.

Dixie's blog is already up. It hasn't even been an hour. She couldn't wait that long to destroy me.

And why should she? I fucked her boyfriend. She should have done it a long time ago.

Willow Heights Gossip Grrl

Fallen Queen or Exposed Imposter?

The whole school watched as drama unfolded among the elite outside the café this afternoon. Our 'queen' lost her boyfriend and her crown when it was revealed that not only had she warmed the bed of last year's King, but also the court's executioner, its jester, and so many more it's impossible to keep track. A better question than who has she been entertaining might be, who hasn't she?

More secret trysts are revealed by the minute, the scandal including everyone from the crown princes of every Founding Family to the lowest of the low. Which begs the question: why did we ever think she was fit to be Queen?

This Just In: I have it on good authority that not only are her morals questionable, but so is her financial situation. Our so-called queen is a scholarship student.

That could explain why a reliable source came forward to expose another secret: She sells certain used undergarments to men on the internet.

Such shocking revelations make us wonder. Was she ever our Queen at all? Or just a clever imposter whose pretty disguise enchanted us all?

The Scoop:

It goes without saying that this is not the kind of person we want representing us. Willow Heights holds the highest standard for students, and it might be

time for the admin to rethink who belongs on top of the pyramid—and in our halls. As for the students, one thing's for sure. We've let ourselves be fooled for far too long. It's time to take back the throne from the desperate upstart!

Must have item of the week: An appointment at the clinic if you're among the false queen's former conquests or currently dating one. Can't be too careful!



I close the blog and talk to Harper and Colt for a minute, like it's no big deal. Like my life isn't over. This wasn't a blog post. It's a hit job. One that, if Colt's casual words are true, she's been planning all along.

I close my eyes and take a breath. Of course she was. She's always been jealous of me.

Or maybe she knows.

A cold terror winds around my body, the words of the blog circling in my head on repeat. She said I fucked everyone, even the lowest of the low.

That's Colt.

The twins will kill him. I have to get him out of here.

twenty-two

Rumor Has It... The Queen has fallen! The Queen is dead (socially) in spectacular Marie Antoinette fashion! Rejoice! At last, we are free of the tyrant! For the full scoop, see Willow Heights Gossip Grrrl blog, now posted.

Rylan Woods

What can I do to make her hurt like me?

There has to be something. Why can't I find it? I know her better than anyone.

I'm seething after the lunchtime revelations.

Sure, it was nice to see her feathers ruffled a little when Baron and Duke cast her out, but it wasn't *me*. I didn't hurt her.

Fury swells inside me, and I retire to the gym.

Not to work out—I'm not one of those clowns—but because the first week of school, my stepbrother told me there's a peephole between one of the storage rooms and the girls' locker room. I wasn't going to use it. It seemed disloyal to Gloria, and I watch her through my window all the time anyway.

But fuck her. Fuck being loyal to her.

If she can fuck random guys, I can look at other girls showering.

It can't make me feel like a bigger creep than I already do. I should have defended Gloria, should want to protect her. What kind of man is pissed because when someone hurt his girlfriend, it wasn't him?

Once I find the hole behind the box where Cotton said it was, I park my ass on a box and wait for the next class to start while I think through my dilemma.

There has to be something, some way to hurt her. Something to get back at her for the stomach-churning agony I've been in since I found out, unable to think of anything or feel anything but the depth of her betrayal.

She didn't just sleep with one ex-boyfriend.

She's a slut.

I probably got diseases from fucking her without a condom. If she's pregnant, our baby will come out blind or whatever happens when a diseased whore births a baby through her festering vagina.

I shudder and lean into the wall when the class comes into the room. I don't care if my next girlfriend is a virgin. But that's because I won't be one. It's not about purity. It's about Gloria being a filthy piece of lying shit. I can't believe I trusted her.

I trusted her, and this is what I get.

I moved to a place full of entitled, rich pricks, and now I'm spying on girls in the locker room. No one showers before class, so I don't get any full nudity. Still, seeing them strip to their bras and panties without a care in the world, not knowing I'm watching, makes excitement pound in my chest. For once, I feel powerful.

Here, I'm not the scrawny guy of the group, the guy with rings in his lip and eyebrow instead of championship rings on his fingers. Here, I'm the king of all these half-naked girls. I wish I could put them all on strings like puppets and make them do whatever I wanted.

But most of all, I wish Gloria was in the class. I want to watch her be vulnerable and not know it, to violate her here like I do at home.

I want to make her suffer the way I'm suffering.

She must have a weakness that I can exploit. But what?

Her only goal was to be popular, and the Dolce assholes already took that from her. What's left for me to violate that they haven't already gotten to? She lost everything today. What's left for me to take?

The problem is, she doesn't care about anything else, so nothing else gets to her. She's as artificial and cold as a porcelain doll, her painted-on beauty unreal and untouchable. Inside that cold exterior, she's completely devoid of emotion, even for the boy she promised to love forever. She didn't care that whoring herself out all over town would hurt me. She only cares about the fucking Dolce boys and their muscles and their big name. She doesn't care about me any more than I care about the girls in the locker room.

I stick around long enough to jerk off when a couple of them shower after PE, not because I care about them, but because I want to do something with a girl who isn't Lo. It still counts, even if the girls don't know about it. And it's not like any of them would give me the time of day if I went up and asked them out. So I steal what they wouldn't give me if I did ask.

Now I just have to figure out what Gloria has left so I can steal that too, leave her with nothing the way she left me with nothing. I uprooted my entire life for her, and I didn't even get a girlfriend out of it. If it's the last thing I ever do, I'm going to find a way to hurt even the unfeeling bitch she's become, so I can leave her as hollow and desolate as me.

And I know just the guys to ask.

I find the Dolce twins in the weight room.

"Look at that, he came to us," Duke huffs, hoisting a bar that probably weighs more than me over his chest. His bare arms flex, his ink straining over his ridiculous muscles. I'm surprised they haven't busted right out of his skin they're so big. He smirks when he catches my baleful glare. "Good boy."

"How many guys did Lo fuck?" I demand.

“Spot me,” Baron orders from the next bench over.

DeShaun moves out of the way, and I approach cautiously. There’s no way I can keep those weights from crushing Baron’s ribcage if he drops them. They’d rip my arms off my body like a cartoon if I tried to hold them up.

“Is this a test?” I ask, trying to mirror my stepbrother’s stance as he stands over Duke.

“A test?” Baron asks, watching me with that relentless, creepy stare of his while he defies the laws of nature and gravity as if to emphasize just what a pussy I am.

“Why would we need to test you?” Duke asks. “You’ve proven your loyalty.”

“Yeah, but I’m only popular because I was dating Lo,” I point out. “I left the group when we broke up before.”

“That was before,” Baron says.

“What, you want me to stay in the elite group?” I ask incredulously.

“You’re a Montgomery now, little bro,” Cotton says, shooting me a crooked grin. “It comes with benefits. Get used to it.”

“Yeah, but why would you want me?” I blurt out, gesturing around. “I’m not a jock. I don’t fit in with you guys.”

“You know our motto,” Duke says, his dark gaze locking onto mine. “If it don’t fit, we make it fit.”

A prickle of discomfort makes me want to turn and walk away as fast as I can. Is this how girls feel when guys look at them like a piece of meat? Duke looks like he’s seriously considering cannibalism.

But DeShaun’s already on another machine, and I don’t know what Baron would do if he got hurt because of me.

“You’re useful,” Baron says flatly, setting the weights back in the cradle

and sitting up. “You sell our shit.”

I hand him a towel like the obedient little bitch I am. “What happens if I don’t anymore?”

While he towels sweat off his absurd muscles, he studies me like a future serial killer studies the ants under his magnifying glass as he burns them to a crisp in the sun.

I’m not sure which is worse, him or Duke. Gloria said they were dangerous, but I’ve barely scratched the surface, and something tells me it’s better that I leave it at that.

“You’re asking the wrong question,” Baron says at last.

“What question should I be asking?”

“What happens if you *do*,” Duke answers for his brother, sitting up and holding out a hand. I guess Cotton’s too good to serve him like a dog, so I fetch him a towel.

“What happens?” I prompt.

Be eaten alive or burned to a crisp, my mind supplies helpfully.

“You get to be one of us,” Duke says, dragging me down on the bench beside him. He throws a sweaty arm around me, and Cotton does the same on the other side. “All the sex, drugs, and rock and roll you can handle, baby.”

“Doesn’t that sound good, little buddy?” asks the smug, condescending dickhead who is now my brother.

Suddenly I know this isn’t an offer. It’s an order. They don’t care what I want. They’re not putting their arms around me because I’m their best bud. They’re caging me in.

To prove it, or because I’m a dumbass who doesn’t know when to shut up and take it, I try to stand. I don’t make it an inch off the seat before Duke’s arm tightens around me, and he slams my ass back down.

“You ever tested the product?” Baron asks, standing over us. He’s a step

too close, like he's lording his huge dick over us even when it's concealed by his baggy basketball shorts.

"No," I say sharply. "I'm not an idiot."

"That's debatable," he says. "Since you believed Lo was a virgin."

Duke cackles beside me. "Yeah, dude. We banged that bitch so many times. Ran whole trains on her ass. Ain't no way she's tight enough to feel like a virgin."

"Unless you went in dry," Baron says, watching me like he's expecting something.

I glare back at him, refusing to be intimidated by their *Thugs R Us* routine. I'm not dumb enough to fight them. But if he's going to reach down my throat, drag out my intestines, and hang me with them, at least I can go down without cowering like a pussy little bitch.

"Interesting," Baron says with a slight nod.

"Little bro's a savage," Cotton says, laughing and squeezing my shoulder. It's not a warning squeeze like Duke's, though. It's a bro hug, good-natured and filled with comradery. For the first time since I moved to Arkansas, someone seems impressed by me.

Duke laughs with him, and an indulgent smile ghosts over Baron's lips.

I wish I could say it didn't affect me, that I was too cool to care. What a couple 'roid heads and a date rapist think of me should be less than irrelevant. But the relief is palpable, like I've finally spotted a fire up ahead in the dark, through the barren trees of the winter wasteland I've been trudging through for months. A little ball of warmth glows to life inside me. I want to bask in it until I die.

My shoulders slump under the weight of their arms, and I let out a breath and laugh along with them.

I tell myself it's Amber I'm looking out for, that it's on her behalf that

I'm relieved. Though the Dolce twins have shown no interest in her so far, they make no secret of how they treat girls. I can't count on her voicelessness keeping her invisible forever. If I'm in the group, really in, they'll respect me enough to leave her alone.

And it's reasonable not to want to be strangled with my own intestines. That doesn't make me a bad person.

"Tell you what," Duke says. "Since you're such a good boy you didn't even take a sample, we'll give you one for free. On the house."

Cotton gets up and goes to one of the metal lockers.

"What?" I ask.

Baron nods. "You should know your product."

I open my mouth to say I don't do drugs, that I'm committed to living sober, and I don't care if that makes me lame to everyone else.

But then I see the flat, uncompromising look on Baron's face, and I play out the next minute in my head. You don't say no to the Dolce boys. You just don't. If I try, Baron will keep staring at me in that relentless, unblinking way and say, "Take it."

If I still refuse, they'll shove it down my throat, laughing all the while.

I might as well keep my dignity and do it myself, not losing face by getting my ass handed to me and my mouth pried open like a dog who won't take his medicine. At least this way I won't lose whatever ground I gained by admitting I treated Gloria the way they treat girls.

My stomach churns at the thought, and I sit frozen with sick as Cotton approaches. He holds out a hand, palm up, offering me a little round pill, pale blue and pearlescent.

"Welcome to wonderland," he says. His mouth is smiling, but his eyes are glittering with something else.

"What's it do?" I ask, reaching for it without waiting for the answer. I

swallow it dry before they have a chance to tell me. That should impress the bastards.

“Dude, you don’t take it at school,” Duke says, hooting with laughter. “It’ll make you want to fuck so bad you think your dick’s going to fly off and lodge itself in the nearest orifice on any living body—man, woman, or dog.”

“I wouldn’t say *living* is a condition,” Baron says.

“Good thing school’s over for you,” Cotton says. “You’d be humping us on the football field if you had practice.”

I shrug. “So I just go fuck someone?”

“Not someone,” Baron says. “*Anyone.*”

“What’s the difference?” I ask.

“You’re with us now,” Duke says. “You can have any girl you want, do anything you want to her. Girls never say no to us, no matter what we ask them to do.”

“Any girl?” I ask, my heart starting to hammer.

“Yep,” Duke says. “We’ll make the call and tell her you’re on your way. She’ll be waiting with her pussy already wet for you when you get there.”

“Or dry,” Baron says, flipping his towel behind his neck. “If that’s the way you take them.”

“So who’s it going to be, little bro?” Cotton asks. “You got about fifteen minutes until that shit hits your system.”

Duke pulls his phone out of his pocket and waits expectantly. “Just say her name, and she’s yours for the night.”

Gloria, my mind supplies helpfully.

But I’m not a simp anymore. She fucked half the guys in school and lied about it. Payback’s a bitch. It’s time for the bitch to pay up, and time for me to catch up. I’m not wasting a single night. As a poet once said, I’ve got miles to go before I sleep. She made a fool out of me, and now it’s my turn.

I'll fuck so many girls that no one ever remembers that I was once a dumbass virgin who couldn't tell when his girlfriend wasn't one. I'll make her endure the same torture I do. For the rest of the year, she'll be forced to see the faces of everyone I've fucked, hear how I had orgies at parties with all the girls who couldn't get enough of my dick, and know that I chose them over her because she's such a used-up, worthless whore that I'd rather fuck anyone than her.

And it starts tonight.

"Them," I say at last, nodding at Duke's phone.

"What?" he asks.

"Not her," I say. "*Them.*"

They stare at me a second, and then Cotton throws his head back and laughs. "My brother's got balls."

"Yeah, he does," Duke crows, slapping my back so hard I'm pretty sure I hear a rib snap in half.

Even Baron chuckles, his eyes filled with something I've never seen there before—respect.

The little glow of warmth inside me swells into a flame, and heat spreads outwards through my limbs. I've been accepted at the fireside. I won't die of exposure out here in the cold and barren hellscape of this town's social climate.

And so what if I sold my soul to the devil for a seat at the fire? The world is run by the soulless. The Dolce boys do just fine without them. Why not me?

twenty-three

Rumor Has It... Though the false queen is gone, her former consort remains unscathed by her evil and firmly among the Elite! What lucky girl will snatch up the newly eligible bachelor and heal his broken heart?

Gloria Walton

When we start back for the building after I've calmed down, I let Harper go ahead to class, assuring her I'm fine and I'll call her later.

Then I turn to Colt. "We should get out of here," I say.

"We?" he asks, arching a brow.

"You," I correct. "The Dolces... They'll be after you, Colt."

He gives me a funny look. "They're always after me."

"Yeah but... Dixie insinuated... That we'd... We..."

"Damn," he says, crossing his arms and leaning against the locker next to mine. "Don't tell me the Bitch Queen lost her tongue as well as her crown?"

I scowl, trying to summon my usual cutting response, but my heart is careening wildly in my chest. I can't look him in the eye or I'll break down again, so I stare at the way he tucks his scarred, disfigured hand under his arm. I can see the faint lines of his tattoos through the sleeves of his white shirt, and I want nothing more than to dive into those arms, feel their comforting warmth, their false security.

You don't deserve comfort, you bitch. You don't even deserve to live.

I swallow and pull my gaze away. "She made it sound like we fucked."

A slow smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. “Did we?”

“Shut up,” I say, glowering back at him.

“You can tell me now,” he says. “Since I’m no longer beneath you.”

“I can’t believe she’d put that in her blog,” I say, turning to my locker and dragging out my backpack. “After…”

I can’t tell him. Not what happened last year, and not what his girlfriend did. He loves her. He’s happy. If I broke them up, it would be out of spite, and I can’t be that petty when he was just there for me in ways I never expected and will never deserve.

I can’t make things worse for him.

“After?” he prompts.

“After they almost killed you last year,” I say, slamming my locker and turning to him. I don’t add that it’s Dixie’s fault they almost killed him. It’s too cruel.

“They probably wouldn’t care,” he points out. “Now that you’re not going to be their fuck doll, what do they care who you fuck?”

I don’t want to think about that, so I shoulder my pack. “Just be careful. Promise?”

He gives me a long, searching look, like he thinks I must have ulterior motives for being a decent person for once in my life. Then he reaches out and tugs at the strap on my bag. “Where you off to?”

“If I’m getting kicked out of school for being a slut, skipping one afternoon probably won’t make much difference.”

Colt pushes off the locker. “Come on. I’ll get you a bubble tea.”

“Why are you being nice to me?” I ask, narrowing my eyes.

He gives me a cool look. “Because I’m not like you.”

“I had bubble tea this morning,” I mutter, but I can’t help but fall into step beside him, like he’s some kind of magnet.

“I know.”

I draw back, giving him a look. “How do you know?”

He shrugs. “You drink one every morning.”

“Stalk much?”

“It’s noticeable,” he says. “I’d expect a basic bitch like you to drink one of those fluffy coffee drinks.”

“Coffee stains your teeth,” I mutter. I might as well get used to people knowing I can’t afford to get my teeth whitened or do anything else that rich girls do. The whole school knows I’m poor. Just another way I’ve tricked them.

Colt holds the door, and we step out into the cold November sun. I slide a pair of sunglasses on, grateful for the layer of protection. “So, where we headed, if not bubble tea?” he asks cheerfully.

Of course he’s happy to see me fall. He deserves to revel in the glory more than anyone. “You don’t have to come with me,” I say.

“I know.”

“I’m driving.”

“Cool.”

He strides ahead, opening the door to June Bug and reaching for my backpack. He turns me around, pulling it off my shoulders and down my arms. I stand there like a mannequin, not sure how to process the fact that guys do that kind of thing. He sets my bag in the back, and I climb in and reach for the seatbelt, thankful I have something to occupy my hands. But then Colt’s hand closes around mine, and a ball of white-hot electricity shoots up my arm like wildfire. A gasp tears from my lips, and I drop my head back on the seat, trying to breathe while he leans over me, reaching around to buckle my seatbelt.

Kill me, why don’t you?

Without comment, Colt closes my door and circles around, swinging down into the passenger seat with such easy comfort it makes my head swim. I gulp at the sight of his strong, masculine body in my passenger seat, the angle of his hips just begging for me to wrap my legs around them...

Get a grip, you fucking pervert. He doesn't want you. You just ugly-cried in front of him.

"Right," I breathe, my heart racing as I fumble the key into the ignition and fire up the engine. The chatter calms my nerves, and I shift into gear and pull out of the lot.

"Where we headed?" Colt asks again.

"It's a surprise."

"I thought you hated surprises," he points out, looking so fucking smug it makes my thighs clench. God, that should not make me hot.

"I thought you liked surprises," I shoot back, grinning as I gun the engine.

Colt jolts back against the seat, then grins when he recovers from the sudden speed. "God damn," he mutters, looking at me like...

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Why is he looking at me like that? He hasn't looked at me that way since last year, and he doesn't know he ever did. My heart is wheeling like a butterfly finally set free in the wide, wild sky.

"What?" I ask, skidding to a stop at a light. There are too many cars around to drive as fast as I am, and way too many to drive as fast as I want. But I'm feeling reckless and undone.

"Nothing," he says, shaking his head.

"What?" I press, laughing a little this time. "Tell me what you're thinking." The appreciation in his eyes makes me fucking giddy, especially when I jet through the intersection when the light turns green, and I see Colt

still watching me drive.

“I can’t say.”

“Of course you can,” I say, shifting and weaving between cars. “If it’s about me, you have to tell me.”

“I really can’t.”

“Why?” I ask, so frustrated I could shake the answer out of him.

“I just can’t,” he says, looking out the window.

I want to scream. But I know. I know what he was thinking. My whole body shakes as I take the plunge, daring him to be honest with me in a way I am never honest with him.

“Because you hate me, and you don’t want me to know you think it’s hot that I can handle a car?” I guess. “Don’t worry, Colt. You’re not that special. Every guy gets a boner for chicks with sticks.”

“It’s not that,” he says. “You know you’re hot. I don’t need to tell you.”

“Now you really have to tell me,” I insist, pulling up at Two Scoops of Love, the local ice cream shoppe. “Or at least tell me why you can’t.”

“Because I have a girlfriend,” he says quietly, his dusky blue eyes pinning me to the seat, leaving me helpless. I can’t even breathe. His words sucked all the joy from inside June Bug and thrust me back into reality. And that’s the very last place I want to be.

I reach for the door, but Colt doesn’t move.

“I can’t go in here,” he says, staring out the windshield at the place he took me at midnight a month ago, when we snuck in together.

“Why?” I ask. “Oh my god, did you get caught?”

“No,” he says, still not moving.

“They had cameras?” I ask, my heart thudding in my ears. “Am I banned too?”

“Nah,” he says. “I just... I’m not allowed in. You go ahead.”

I know it's stupid to care. I didn't invite him. He tagged along. I should just go in, get ice cream because it's my comfort food. That's what I wanted. Not a date with Colt.

But now that he's here, I don't want to go in and eat ice cream while he sits in the parking lot alone. Especially not when I realize the reason he's banned.

"You can't go in because of the Dolces?" I ask. "What the fuck?"

His jaw clenches, but he doesn't answer.

"Shit," I say quietly. "What would they do to you if you ate here?"

"Nothing," he says. "But they'd burn it to the ground if anyone served me."

"That's why you come at night," I whisper, horrified by the knowledge that this is the family I chose to align myself with for the past two years.

I know the Dolces hate him, that they've run Darlings out of Faulkner, forced them out of positions of power, and turned the founding families against those who remain. But it's a whole other level of petty to ban them from an ice cream parlour. God forbid Colt have a little taste of joy in this town.

"Fuck it," I say, climbing out. "I want ice cream. Don't go anywhere."

Five minutes later, I slide back into the Mustang and hand Colt a cup. "What's this?" he asks.

"It's a root beer float," I say, passing him a spoon. "If you get any on my seats, I will sue for damages."

"Now it's my turn to ask," he says, taking the spoon and setting it on his thigh. "Why are you being nice to me, Lo?"

"Because you were nice to me," I say. "And because... I'm sorry."

"So you're being nice to me out of pity?"

I could say yes. It's on the tip of my tongue, programmed into me after

years of scornful remarks directed his way. It would make things easy, keep things the way they are between us. Continue our little play of cutting each other down.

But I'm done with that part of my life, so I take an even bigger plunge, this one as terrifying as diving off a cliff into the ocean. I take a breath and turn to him. "I'm sorry I was such a bitch to you for the past two years."

"Well, I wasn't here last year," he points out. "So it was really just one year."

I swallow. "Well, I'm sorry. And... Thank you."

He fits the drink between his thighs, which has me staring at his lap, my mouth practically watering when I remember the cross piercing he has down there, how it felt in the back of my throat.

"What are you thanking me for?" he asks, his brow cocked like he knows exactly what I was thinking. God, am I fucking blushing right now?

I really am a whore.

Maybe I always was. I got in his bed before I even saw his face, didn't I? Maybe I was ruined from the start, and that's why the Dolces chose me. Not because I'm pretty, but because I'm thirsty, and they could tell somehow. They knew I'd be a girl they could run trains on, a girl they could share with their friends. Maybe I liked it, even the first time, when I begged Royal to stop but he couldn't hear me. After all, if I really wanted him to stop, why would I have fallen in love with him after that?

"For what you did in the basement that day, sophomore year," I whisper to the lid of my cup.

The silence hangs like a dead weight between us. There's been an unspoken agreement since that day, that we never, ever speak of it. In the worst days of bullying him, no matter what I said, I never brought that up. I never whispered a word of it to anyone, not even my sisters, who were there

that day and witnessed the same thing I did.

Colt stopped them.

He probably wouldn't have if he'd known what would happen next. That they'd climb off us and descend on him, hold his arms pinned, push him to his knees. That Duke would shove himself in Colt's mouth, with my sister's blood still on his cock.

After a long minute, Colt picks up his straw. "Take me home," he says. "I'm not going to eat in a car like this, Lo."

"Okay," I say, watching him from the corner of my eye as I pull out of the lot. "I'm sorry I brought that up. I really am grateful, though. You didn't have to do that for me, and I know what it cost you. Don't think I don't."

"If I'd known what it would cost, I would have turned around and left you there," he says flatly. "I'm not your hero, Gloria."

"Right," I say, adjusting my hands on the wheel. But he's not right. He is a hero. Not the fantasy kind like Superman, like I wanted Rylan to be, but the closest thing real people get. He saved me that day. He saved me last year. He saved me before he even knew my name. He just doesn't know it.

We drive in tense silence until I pull up at his house just north of town.

"You know where I live," he muses. "Interesting."

Now look what you did, you stupid cunt. He's going to think you're the stalker.

"The Dolces know where all y'all live," I say, trying to laugh it off so he won't know I just made a stupid blunder because I was so busy mooning over how he was my savior instead of my downfall. If only I'd kept my mouth shut today, let the Dolces cut him down like they have a thousand other times. What would it matter? He doesn't even care. He doesn't care about anything.

I hate him.

“Come on,” he says, swinging open his door. “We can eat on the patio.”

He slams the door and walks away, not waiting to see if I’ll follow. He knows I will, and it pisses me off. So I let myself be petty because it’s all I have left, and I make him wait. I sit there watching him walk away. God, his ass is nice.

But it’s so much more than that. It’s the way he moves, the way he carries himself so confidently, like he’s still a king instead of a pariah. It’s not cockiness, like he thinks he’s all that, the way he says he used to, when he was a rich prick like the Dolces.

This is something deeper, something the Dolces could never take away, no matter how hard they’ve tried. His whole demeanor is gilded, steeped in the natural born refinement of a boy who’s never known life without a silver spoon and a trust fund. It doesn’t matter if his former friends ostracize him and call him a loser, if his conquerors strip his title and beat him into the ground. The town could take every penny he owns, even his name, and they still couldn’t touch the aura of privilege that drips from him like molten gold. His very blood is royalty.

And I guess I’m a dumb bitch just like Dixie, because after a minute, I follow after him like a fucking dog at his command. After all, I’m not royalty. I’m a commoner obeying her king.

A big wooden patio extends off the back of the house. Colt is sitting at one of the round, wooden patio tables, rolling a joint on top of his phone. Another table sits next to his, along with a few chaise lounges at the end next to the steps where we came up. Along the edge of the patio is an outdoor bar with twinkle lights along it. In the center of the patio is an elevated firepit with gorgeous stonework, and beyond that, I can make out a large hot tub with the top closed beyond two more tables.

“This is really nice,” I say, sliding into a chair across from Colt.

He raises his brows but doesn't look up from his task. "You sound surprised."

"No," I say lightly, setting down my float. "Most all my friends are rich. I've been to bigger places."

He lets out a scoff of breath.

"Sorry," I mutter. "Bitch mode is kind of my default."

"Not that," he says, glancing up as he runs his tongue along the edge of the paper. When he finishes, I'm a little lightheaded. "Did you just call me your friend?"

"No," I say, scowling at him. "I said my friends are rich like you. More than you."

"I don't know," he says, finishing the seal and cracking a smile. "I think you did. Don't worry. I kind of liked it."

Our gazes hold, and a fluttering butterfly wing catches in my throat. Finally, Colt slides his hand across the table, holding the joint erect between us. I reach for it, licking my lips as I tear my attention from his gorgeous, unreadable face. What is happening to me?

And why am I agreeing to be Colt Darling's friend?

I don't want to be his friend.

Now that I've been cast out, maybe...

Maybe I can finally have what I've wanted for so long.

I see him stretched out on a bed dotted with rose petals, not a stitch on him as he casually tugs his pierced cock with one hand, the other folded behind his head as he waits for me...

God damn.

I know it's too good to be true. He's not even allowed to have friends. He already has Dixie, and Josie, and now Harper. And there's no way in hell they'll let me be his friend, even if they're done with me. For one, I know

way too fucking much about them to consort with their enemy.

I can't even think about what they're going to do to me after this. It was bad enough being their Queen. If they declare me an enemy...

I shudder and push my spoon away, not even bothering to open my float. I don't know what I was thinking. There's no way I can eat right now, not even ice cream.

Colt holds out his lighter, an old-fashioned Bic that he has to flick open to make a flame for me. I lean in, my hands trembling as I cup his to light up.

"So, Gloria Walton smokes," he says, leaning back in his chair and crossing his ankle over his knee. "Who knew?"

"You've seen me smoke before."

"Cigarettes."

I shrug, passing the joint across. "No use pretending now."

"Yeah," he says quietly, nodding at his phone. "I read the blog."

Of course he did. I'm surprised it took him this long. If there's one person who has every reason to celebrate my downfall, it's him.

Still, it stings to know he read those words, even knowing he thought I was a whore already. I wait for him to say more, to gloat about what a good job she did, or even apologize, as ridiculous as that would be. But he doesn't say anything else, just watches me as he puffs on the joint.

"You and everyone else," I mutter.

"Is it true?" he asks, tipping his head back and blowing a smoke ring. "About the underwear."

We both know it doesn't matter. It's true to the whole school.

"Why?" I ask. "You want to buy a pair?"

"No," he says slowly, taking another puff and holding my gaze as he hands it back. "I want to buy all the pairs."

I stare at him a long minute, not sure what to say. I could tell him he

already has a pair of my underwear, but there's no way to do that without telling him why. Besides, he probably burned them a long time ago. Finally, I take the joint and shake my head. "Sorry, that part's a total fabrication."

"Huh," he says, digging his cigarettes from his pocket and leaning back in the Adirondack chair again, crossing his ankle over his knee. "Dixie may put her own spin on the story, but she usually doesn't post shit unless it's true. She says otherwise people won't trust her."

"Well, I guess now that she's so trustworthy, she can slip in a little lie now and then, and people won't question it," I say.

"Maybe," he says, sounding unconvinced. "She sure covered all the bases."

"Make sure to congratulate her for me," I say, blood pounding in my ears.

One blog post, and my entire empire was razed to the ground. It was always a house of cards. I just didn't know she'd be the one to topple it.

"You okay?" Colt asks.

"Got anything stronger?" I croak, nodding to the joint in his hand.

He gives me a guarded look. "Like what?"

"Like those pills you're always taking."

"Stalk much?" he asks, a little smirk on his lips.

"Seriously," I say. "Where do you get those?"

"From my doctor," he says. "They're pain pills."

"You don't think I could use some of that right now?"

He sighs and leans back, dipping his fingers into a pocket in his pants. I try not to eye-fuck him, but the way he's sitting makes it impossible not to imagine sliding onto his lap, straddling those sexy-as-sin hips, and riding him bareback until he was forced to remember everything that's come and gone between us.

He sets a little white oblong pill on the table. “These are really strong,” he warns. “You probably only need half.”

“Why so stingy?” I ask. “If you can get more from your doctor, hook me up. I know you have more than that on you.”

He sighs and digs in his pocket again, and I’m not sure if I wanted the pills more, or to see him working his fingers into his pocket while he sits back in the wooden chair. He produces two more pills and sets them on the table with the first one. “That’s all I carry on me,” he says. “Half a pill a day should last you almost a week. Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll take it,” I say, picking them up and slipping them into the pocket of my white shirt. “Thank you.”

He raises a brow and picks up his Bic again. “Sure, Butterfly.”

I thumb on my phone, opening Dixie’s blog post again. There are dozens of comments already. My head swims and her words blur. I wish I could erase them from my mind. Everyone knows I’m a whore. Everyone knows I’m a fake. That I’m poor.

But exposing me wasn’t enough. She’s on student council and is supposed to get to speak in front of the school board after she posted some video that made a publicity scandal for Willow Heights. She knows she has power now, that she has to cash in on her fifteen minutes. This was divine timing for her. The admin might actually listen to her, take me off the cheer squad or even expel me. Will she come for my sisters next, make sure no one stands in her way of the throne?

My sisters.

I lurch to my feet, my stomach churning so hard I think I’ll be sick. “I have to go.”

The panic I’ve been holding back all day is going to surface any moment.

“What the fuck, Lo,” Colt calls, but I’m already stumbling away.

My world is spinning out of control. My heart is swimming drunkenly in my chest. I can’t breathe.

“Gloria. Stop.” His voice is so commanding that even in my reeling state, it cuts through. My feet have stopped before I even know I’m going to.

“Look at me.”

I turn slowly, my heels grinding into the wooden planks. I don’t know who’s moving my body. It’s like one of those ballerinas in the jewelry boxes we had as kids, back in Savannah. Wind me up, and the music plays, and I twirl.

Never stop dancing.

A laugh threatens to bubble up inside me.

“Come here,” Colt orders, tapping the knee of his navy slacks. I move robotically, on autopilot, until I’m standing in front of him.

He shifts his knees together. “Sit.”

I sit.

“Atta girl,” he says, stroking a strand of hair back from my cheek. “Keep looking at me. Now breathe. In through your nose. Out through your mouth.”

I breathe, as if in a trance, hypnotized by the quiet, firm command in his words. Like a fucking robot with faulty programming, I can’t even breathe without instruction. If I stop focusing on it, I’ll stop breathing, stop living.

“Now tell me what you need,” Colt says, his hand gentle but firm my hip.

I don’t have enough fight left to lie this time.

“You.”

His lips tighten, and then he grips my hip, holding it in place as he slowly slides forward in the chair, until he’s fitted himself between my thighs.

Of all the choices I've ever made, this one is the worst.

The moment our bodies connect, a thousand memories assault me, and the sensations raging through my body are so overwhelming I think I'm going to detonate. The shards of my body will be found two towns over, and they'll say it's all that's left of Faulkner after the blast.

"Gloria," Colt says, his other hand cupping my cheek. "I'm going to need you to get out of your head now. I want you to focus on your body. And keep breathing. Can you do that?"

I nod, still trying to get air through the constricting stranglehold on my throat.

"Good girl," Colt says with a little smirk, watching my face as he starts to move my hips against his, using the same firm, dominating grip as he grinds me against his length. My core flutters, and I find the control to swallow at last.

"Why are you hard?" I whisper.

The smirk on his lips never fades as he leans in, until the sensation of his warm mouth ghosting over mine makes me want to expire. "Because you're here."

And then his lips are on mine, and I can't answer, and I can't breathe, and I can't think, and there's only his warm lips teasing mine, the sharp edge of his teeth bringing me fully into my body as he bites down until I gasp at the twinge of pain. I start to rock my hips against his, whimpering like the pathetic bitch I am. But god, I've wanted this for so long. It's like water in the desert, the first time seeing after living in the dark all my life; like the first touch after a year of sensory deprivation, both too much and not even close to enough all at once.

I bury my hands in his hair, fisting it and angling my head, opening for his tongue. When it meets mine, and I taste him again, I moan like a frantic

animal, thrusting my tongue against his. I tear at his shirt, yanking it from his pants. I hear buttons hitting the wooden planks around us, but I don't stop. I can't stop. I need him. I need more.

I yank his shirt open, spreading my hands wide as I move them up and down his abs, his strong chest. My core clenches and quivers when my fingers hit the new piercings in his nipples. I rake my nails down his torso, drawing a sharp intake of breath and a deep grunt of pain from his throat. I swallow it greedily, seeking more. I go for his belt, yanking at it as he bends me backwards over the edge of the table. It bites into my back, and I relish the pain, squeezing his hips with my thighs, grinding harder.

I bury my other hand in his hair again, dragging him deeper into our kiss, biting and sucking at his mouth like it's the only thing feeding me life.

It's not enough. It will never be enough.

"Colt," I cry, tearing my mouth from his. "Please, fuck me."

"Right now?" he asks, his lips shiny with blood I didn't know I'd drawn, his eyes unfocused and his breathing coming as quick as mine.

"Yes, right fucking now," I bark, clawing at the front of his pants, too frantic to figure out the zipper. "Throw me on the table."

"Fuck it," he snaps, standing and slamming my back onto the surface. His eyes are crazed with lust, and he yanks his pants open. I feel the heat of his erection burning up the tender skin of my inner thigh, and I almost cum with sheer relief.

And then he reaches for my panties, and a barrage of images flashes through my mind—Colt staring at me over Cotton's head, his eyes hard as flint; my mother saying she was getting tired of us ruining panties, so she was going to put a new pack in our drawer every month; Baron's words in the hall today, saying I was so used I look like a worn out baseball glove.

"No," I scream, shoving back against Colt's chest when I feel his fingers

hook under them. He stumbles back, and I feel the material tear, and he's standing there with the scrap of lace in his hand and a bewildered look on his face, and I'm bare, and he'll see... He'll see me, and he'll hear those words too, and he'll call me a whore again because he'll think I let anyone fuck me, even my enemy.

I pull my skirt down and roll away, scrambling off the table, but my heel lands in a crack between the boards, and I fall. My hands and knees hit the hard surface, but I don't feel pain. All I feel is terror, because his dick is out, and I'm on my hands and knees, and there's nothing to stop him, not even underwear covering me. I scream and lurch to my feet, yanking my heel free, and I run. With every step, I wait to feel his hands in my hair, yanking me to a stop, or on my back, pushing me down in the dirt where he can fuck me where I belong.

I hear his voice, but it can't cut through to me now. Nothing can get through.

I'm in my car, and my hands are shaking, but my June Bug starts like a dream even though I don't know how the keys got in the ignition. I have to get out of here. Fear is the only thing I know. I fly backwards out of the spot, not bothering to look behind me. If he tries to get in my way, if he's coming to hurt me, he deserves to be hit. I shift and stomp the gas, boiling the hides and kicking up a spray of gravel before she gets a grip on the dirt underneath. We shoot forward suddenly, and I wrestle to control the car on the shifting gravel at that speed. My stomach drops out, and then I'm gone, and he can't get me because I'm flying out of his reach.

I hear my phone ding on the seat beside me, and I don't remember grabbing it in my mad dash to escape, but I must have. I don't answer it, though. I ignore a few more notifications and focus on the road.

I'm safe. I got away. I'm okay.

He didn't hurt me.

twenty-four

Rumor Has It... Today's lunchtime revelations have shaken the school to the core. Will a new Queen emerge to take the place of the fallen one, and if so, which deserving girl will ascend now that the imposter has been ousted?

Dixie Powell

I won.

I cuddle down against Colt's chest, smiling to myself. He's breathing heavy, deep in sleep, but I'm not ready for this day to end. I play with his nipple ring and bask in my victory. I told my parents I was staying at my cousin's, and I surprised Colt by showing up to make cookies and watch a movie in celebration. Colt's dad doesn't care if I stay over, so I have all night. I just wish Colt hadn't fallen asleep so soon.

I want him to congratulate me on my victory, to tell me how much he admires my brilliance. It took long enough, but in the end, I won, like I always do.

And this time, I did the impossible. I took down the unbeatable queen.

I have that power.

At long last, I beat Gloria Walton.

The queen herself should have feared me more. She should have known not to cross me. Her position was always tenuous, always handed to her on silver platter because she's hot.

I earned my position. No one handed it to me. I got here on my own, so

no one can take it away from me. I became a queen all on my own. And now, I can take away anyone's power with the stroke of a pen.

I don't just have Colt. I've already named myself queen of the rebel side of the school, the one Harper started to oppose the Dolces. Without a queen on the Dolce side, I'll be the only queen left, and therefore, the queen of the school. I kept my hand hidden, but all along, I was playing them all like my own personal marionettes. I played my cards so flawlessly that Gloria Walton herself won't be able to help but be impressed, even though I took her out of the game with my last move.

She never saw it coming.

Not because she's dumb like Eleanor, but because I'm better at the game. Beating Gloria is that much sweeter because she's smart and conniving just like me. She's a match for me—almost an equal.

She knew I could destroy her, but she never guessed my plan—that I'd already set myself up to replace her. She should have seen it, but like everyone, she underestimated me. I'm the perfect opponent, a master of manipulation, so underestimated that it will take no effort for me to convince people that things will be different when I'm on the throne. Of course they won't, but no one will know that until they've already placed the crown on my head. Things never really change at a high school, and a queen can't help but rule any more than a slut can't help but spread her legs.

I glance up at Colt's relaxed face, seething with the knowledge that he fucked her. If only I had the power to make sure he never remembers, power over his mind. I need to work on getting him down on one knee, but it can wait a day. For tonight, I'm going to revel in my victory.

Everyone in the entire school already knows me because of my blog. I'll appeal to them and pretend I'm one of them, that I'm not like the elites because I wear all black and carry a few extra pounds. And they'll buy it

because I've spent the last three years making sure they trust me. They think I'm edgy and different. After all, I sided with Harper, a tough scholarship chick with tattoos and a temper who never really fit in and stood for the other students who don't conform. They won't even notice that I'm just like them, that the only thing that sets me apart is my appearance.

Sure, I may be as fake as Gloria Walton, but I did it better. She put a target on her back. I ingratiated myself. People feared her. They love me.

I learned so much from watching her all these years. All this time, she was as poor as Harper, but she tricked everyone into thinking she was the perfect elite. People will be wary now, but I don't have to prove myself. They already trust me. When I ask them to vote for me to win Prom, they'll think they know exactly what they're voting for.

After all, people like to see girls behaving themselves, not sleeping around and being bitches. I've set myself up to be everything they wanted while under the reign of Queen Gloria the Wicked. I'm the opposite of her. I'm a nice girl. I live in a subdivision, my parents are still married, and I've dated my high school sweetheart since freshman year. I'm on the dance team and Homecoming court—not too popular to be relatable, but always in the center of things, in the periphery of the spotlight.

I was furious I didn't win Homecoming, but it was a blessing in disguise. If I'd won, people would envy me. Instead, they sympathize with me as the underdog, the one they'll definitely vote for now.

I run my fingers through Colt's long hair, but he doesn't wake. He started to fall asleep during the movie, and when I told him we'd have fun after, he said he was too tired for sex tonight. But what guy doesn't want to wake up with his dick in a girl's mouth?

I squirm down the bed and tug down the top of his grey sweatpants, taking him into my mouth. He makes a little sound, stirring at last. Even if he

doesn't fully wake up, he gets hard in his sleep all the time. It'll be easy to get him ready and climb on. I'll do all the work, so he doesn't have to lift a finger.

Despite his flaws, he's the perfect partner for me right now, when I'm poised to take the throne. He won't take the spotlight from me. He'll be grateful I got him out of the doghouse, and he'll be happy to sit back and support me while I rule. Plus, no one can say I rode his coattails to popularity. They'll admire that I'm loyal even to the loser, that I let him share my throne, even if he's only a figurehead with no power of his own, a hot guy to show them I'm desirable without taking away from my victory.

Even if they still consider him a loser, they'll admire my dedication to him and accept him as the king I chose to sit beside me. My loyalty to him gives me moral high ground that the elites never even saw me carving out, one day at a time, over the past years. Everyone else fell in line with the Dolces, but I never did. I never bowed.

I've always played the long game, and now, it's all coming together more perfectly than I could have dreamed. Now, they will see me as their benevolent queen and beloved ruler, and they will all bow to me.

twenty-five

Rumor Has It...The self-proclaimed queen was seen consorting with the fallen queen amid the scandal. Was her rebellion all an act, a scheme she plotted with the fallen queen to make them both look relevant? One thing is certain. We all deserve better than either of these options... A true Queen who is worthy of our dedication and trust.

Gloria Walton

I drive around for hours. I can't go home like this. My sisters walked away when the Dolces turned on me, and I'm too ashamed to face them. If they told Mom about my fall from grace, she'll be devastated.

I think about what Dixie said in the blog about our underwear. How can I ask my upstanding, proper southern lady of a mother something like that? Is that how she pays the bills?

After leaving Colt's, I don't want to hear her excuses or slink past my sisters with downcast eyes and hide in my room, so I turn onto the highway, add ten, and fly. "Nightmare" by Halsey comes on, and I turn it up and try to drown my thoughts.

I should keep a record of the wreckage in my life, but I wouldn't even know where to begin. As the night slips by, I think about how far I could go on this one tank of gas. Is this the day I'll be brave enough to keep driving and never come back?

The Dolces wouldn't stop me. They're done with me.

What do I have to go back to?

Everything I've built is gone.

Everyone knows the truth now. That I'm a twisted, terrible thing like Colt Darling, but worse, because I committed the unforgiveable sin of surviving while female. Maybe they could sympathize or at least pity me if I was used against my will. If I was a victim.

But they all saw me make the choice to join the Dolces instead of fighting them. It's permissible for the Dolce boys to use my body, my beauty, my face for status. They're kings, after all. If that's what they value, they can make it into currency like gold. But for a girl to use those things to her own advantage is deplorable, despicable, the cowardly act of an opportunistic whore.

For over two years, I've done their dance, never missing a step, to prove to them I was useful.

For this whole year, I've fought for Rylan, for something I didn't even really want, to prove to him that I was worthy.

But all I proved—to all of them, to Rylan, and to myself—is that I'm not.

The nights of lying under him, letting him use me, are gone. They were all for nothing.

The year of being pulled under Royal, of teaching myself to feel nothing, to be empty while he filled me with his rage, was for nothing.

Every day that I painted my face and smiled, made fake friends and empty enemies, drank nothing but water to fit into my uniform—meaningless.

The months of waiting in paralyzing fear for someone to find out about Colt; of parading around school listening to whispers behind my back; of living in a state of constant dread knowing the twins would call me to their beds again... It was all for nothing.

Every single move I've made in the last three years was erased in a single sweep of Baron's hand. And Duke, who likes to be held like a child and give pleasure instead of pain, who's told me secrets that I kept like they were my own, the very best one, didn't lift a finger to stop him. He was happy to participate in my downfall.

I expected nothing less.

Those betrayals don't hurt. They were just doing what every man in my life has done—used me, hurt me, or disappointed me. Dad ruined our lives with his greed. My brother didn't protect us from his own friends. The Dolce boys are monsters. Colt made sure I knew that I was nothing to him. Even Rylan, whose pure love always gave me hope, turned out to be more villain than hero.

The ones that took me by surprise were the girls. I'm not delusional enough to think all girls would have my back, that we'd stick together by some girl code, the way boys do for the bro code. Half the girls in school would put a knife in my back if given half a chance. I didn't expect loyalty from the other girls on the cheer squad and dance team. I never risked myself for them, so why should they do it for me?

But my own sisters turned their backs and joined the Dolces.

And then there's Dixie.

I've always seen her as a threat, but I never knew just how vicious she could be. I knew she wasn't just harmless and annoying, the way my sisters thought. Her blog has always made her dangerous, giving her the power of invincibility, something that even a queen doesn't have. Knowing she'd be a formidable opponent, I've made sure not to get on her bad side.

We were at least friendly, if not friends. Sure, I hated her for getting Colt while I had to endure the Dolce boys, but by the time I realized Colt was something worth envying, I'd lost him. Dixie refused to lose him. Even

though he dumped her after we hooked up, she stuck by him for all of last year, after he almost died. She didn't move on the way she could have. No one would have blamed her. But she knew what she had, knew he was worth fighting for, and she wasn't about to let him go.

I don't know how she found out, but she must have. There's nothing else that would have made her come for me that hard, not to mention the line about me fucking even the lowest of the low. *She knows.*

She knows, and she wanted me to know it.

Other people may not have read between the lines to realize she was talking about Colt. They just think she was saying I'm a whore with no standards. But she knew my guilty conscience wouldn't be able to miss it. She wants me to know that's why she destroyed me so thoroughly. She wants me to know what game we were playing, and that she won.

And she did.

I should be impressed, but I know it spells the end for me, and I'm too devastated to admire her brutality.

What happens tomorrow at school? How bad will it be for me? I've seen how they treat Colt, who did nothing wrong. I did everything wrong. It's all crashing down around me, and not even my sisters had my back. The only person in my corner is Harper, and thank fucking god for that.

The thought of my sisters brings tears to my eyes and finally has me turning the Mustang around. What if the fallout hurts them too? Even after they walked away, I can't let that happen, not when it's my mess. I can't leave them to clean it up. The Dolces might let them take the fall with me. Everyone knows we stuck together, that we did everything together. I can't bear the thought of them being tormented at school, called sluts, and worse. If I'm not there to take the blame, will people remember that and turn on them? Dixie's blog only mentioned me. If I can keep the focus on me, maybe my

sisters will escape the worst of it. After all, they went along with the crowd when it turned on me.

By the time I get home, I'm calm. I have purpose. I have to protect my sisters in any way I can, even if it means taking the hits for them. I'll do it. I'll be the whipping girl at school if it keeps them from the same fate.

I climb out of the car and finally look at my phone. I have a message from Baron that stops my heart.

We need to talk.

I can't deal with that right now, can't deal with him. I'm raw, my shell cracked open and left in ruins, the way only Colt can manage. I can't let Baron get to me right now.

If I open my messages, he'll see that I read it and ignored him, so I only read the messages on the home screen. My heart cracks down the center, and tears of hope fill my eyes when I see that he's not the only one who sent a message.

TheseDarkWoods: This can't be the end.

TheseDarkWoods: Where are you?

TheseDarkWoods: I'll wait for you in your room.

Rylan.

He came through for me. Some part of the boy I loved is left inside him.

He's not done.

The butterfly inside me lifts her wings, reaching for the barest sliver of hope shining through every jagged crack in my armor.

Maybe when he almost lost me, he saw that he can't let me go any more than I can let him. We're bound together by the ties of our old life, when things were good for both of us. After all he did to get here, he can't let it be

for nothing. He told me that. Maybe we're both holding onto a fantasy, something precious from a past that doesn't exist anymore, but I'm not alone in that. I'm not alone, and that's as much as I have any right to hope for.

I'm not naïve enough to think he's forgiven me. But I need someone right now, and he's all I have. The alternative is the Dolce boys, the boys who chose me and groomed me to be their female counterpart, and then threw me away at the first sign that I'm human. I don't even want to think about why they want to talk to me. One day, they're going to kill me.

But it won't be today.

Rylan's not like them. He's normal. Sure, he's angry, but his roughness is the kind that any boy would dish out when he's been hurt by the girl he loves. When he punishes me, I deserve it.

It's worth enduring a little pain just to know I have someone on my side, that he can't quit me, even when everyone else has. To have something familiar and comforting, even if it's bittersweet and painful and nothing like the dream of puppy love that kept me going for so long. Pain is better than nothing. If you work hard enough, you can even trick your brain into thinking it feels like pleasure, like love. I've been doing it for so long I don't even have to try anymore.

I climb the stairs, my mind spinning with so many conflicting impulses I can't keep up. When I reach the top, I stop in the shadowy hallway. The only light is coming from my room, where the door stands open about a foot. I see a shadowy figure move opposite the door, and I freeze, my breath catching in my throat.

Maybe I don't get to decide whether I die today after all.

But then he steps through the light, and then past it, coming toward me, and I see he's not big enough, his hair not dark enough, his eyes not feral enough.

“Cotton,” I choke out. “What are you doing here?”

“Stepbro just needed a little backup,” he says, taking my elbow and marching me toward my room. I try to plant my heels, but he gives a little jerk, and I stumble forward, unable to combat his strength. He may not be a Dolce boy, but like all their lackeys, he fits a very specific mold—he’s an athlete, toned and muscular, and over six feet tall.

And this time, I don’t have a gun.

“Let me go,” I grit out, but he drags me into the light streaming from my partially open door and steps behind me, twisting my arm behind my back. His other hand clamps over my mouth before I can protest.

I don’t know him well, despite the fact that we’ve been in the elite social group together for three years, and we’ve seen each other without clothes on more than one occasion. We keep a wary distance. I know he likes to fuck unconscious girls, and he knows how truly fucked up I am, and neither of us are quite comfortable with the other knowing the worst thing about the other.

He doesn’t push me into the room, the way I expect. Instead, he holds me there, giving me time to register what’s happening in my room.

Rylan is lying on his back on my bed, his pants around his knees, while Eleanor rides his dick. Everleigh is on his face, dragging her pussy from his nose to his chin while he grips her thighs.

“Usually the little creep likes to watch, but tonight, he wanted to be seen,” Cotton mutters into my ear, sounding amused by the whole thing.

I try to turn away, but his grip tightens. “Watch,” he growls, nudging my arm higher up my back until I gasp out in pain. He could break my arm, end my cheer career, but he doesn’t. For all his creepy, loathsome predilections, Cotton Montgomery is not a sadist. In all the years we’ve lived next door, the orgies the Dolces have dragged us both into, he’s never hurt me. For all I know, he was as reluctant to participate as I was. Somehow, in this moment

of shock when my brain still hasn't comprehended what's happening before us, but it knows it's going to hurt, I find solace in that.

I lean back into Cotton, reassured that at least he won't hurt me. He won't push me into the room. He won't force me to do anything I don't want to do. At least not violently. He tried to blackmail me once, and it didn't work out so well. Maybe this is his payback. I have no doubt he reveled in my downfall today, that he crowed with the rest of them that I got what I had coming. We've had a healthy hatred for each other since that fateful night last year, when I did the worst thing I've ever done.

Now we're bound together by it, just like I'm bound to the boy in my room, the boy fucking my sisters on my bed. The boy who told me to come upstairs because he knew I'd see this and it would break me. And he must really know me after all, even after all this time and all the ways in which we've both changed, because he's right.

I don't try to move again. I sag into Cotton, my knees giving way. Silent tears track down my cheeks, over his fingers still clamped around my face. I can't remember when I started crying for boys again. Maybe it's not for boys at all. Maybe it's for girls, the girls in my room who know what this will do to me.

Get it together and stop being such an ugly fucking mess.

I can't obey the voice in my head tonight. I can barely hear it through the blunt force of this pain.

Cotton decreases the pressure on my mouth so I can draw in shuddering breaths as silent sobs wrack my body. His grip on my arm loosens, bringing it down so he's just holding it behind my lower back, his thumb stroking gently over the torn butterfly tattoo on my wrist. Pulling my head back against his shoulder, he supports my weight with his strong body. But he doesn't let me turn away, into his arms. He doesn't let me stop watching.

“Let’s switch,” Eleanor says, climbing off Rylan’s dick. It bobs up against his stomach, slick and shiny from being inside her, and I nearly choke out loud. He’s fucking her without a condom.

Everleigh climbs off Rylan’s face and kneels up on all fours, flipping her plaid skirt up to bare her ass.

“What do I do?” Eleanor pouts.

“Come here,” Eveleigh says, patting the bed in front of her. “We can make out for him.”

Rylan sits up. “But... You’re sisters.”

Eleanor giggles. “We do it all the time for the Dolce boys,” she points out. “You’re popular now, so we can do it for you too.”

“Okay...” he says, looking doubtful. While my sisters get situated, he glances at the door. Our eyes meet, and he holds my gaze while he kneels up and grips Everleigh’s hip with one hand and his cock with the other. A sob chokes out of me, and his jaw clenches as he pushes his bare cock into her from behind.

Whatever is left of my heart incinerates in that moment. All I see behind his eyes is pure, raw hatred. He’s not just a hurt boy who loves me but is angry. He hates me. He wants to hurt me in the most devastating way. The Dolce boys’ cruelty—Royal’s casual indifference, Baron’s sadistic malice, and Duke’s barbaric relish—could never break through the armor I placed around my heart. They never hurt me this way because I never loved them this way.

When I loved Royal, I loved him despite already knowing what kind of monster he was. I didn’t know what kind of monster Rylan was. I loved him in the purest way, loved the very idea of him, with a love so sweet and innocent it pierced my diamond heart. And now that love has turned deadly, the blade of it slicing through the innermost layer of my armor, the last

threads holding me together.

“Please,” I choke out behind Cotton’s hand. “Please let me go.”

“Gotta see it through to the end, babe,” he says, almost apologetic as he gives me a little squeeze.

I close my eyes. I can’t watch anymore, can’t see my sisters making out while Rylan fucks them both. I try to find sympathy for them, the way I always do. I know how much the Dolces have fucked them up too. I know what it takes to be a victor in this town.

But tonight, I can’t find anything left in my decimated heart.

They know what Rylan means to me, even if our love was tarnished and bruised. They know, and they don’t care. As long as he’s popular, they’ll fuck him. Probably to stay in the good graces of the elite circle, to make sure they have someone to fight for them if the Dolces try to toss them out like they did me. I protected my sisters as best I could all these years. I never thought they’d choose popularity over me.

When it finally ends, I’m so numb I don’t even need a cold bath. Rylan climbs off the bed and pulls up his pants, all black with chains and zippers. He walks to the door, and Cotton backs up a step and releases my mouth so I can speak, as if there’s anything left to say.

Rylan stops in front of me, flicking one of his lip rings with his tongue and giving me a cool look. “Now we’re even.”

Cotton releases me, and together, they walk off down the hall.

I stand there watching my sisters grab up their clothes. Eleanor holds her shirt and underwear to her chest and races out on tiptoes, giggling when she passes me. Everleigh pauses and then shrugs. “He’s not your boyfriend anymore, and he’s popular,” she says with a self-righteous little tilt to her chin, like she thinks I’ll argue.

She follows her sister into their room, and I hear them giggling a

moment later. On wooden legs, I walk to the bathroom. I stare at my tear-stained reflection in the mirror. I'm a mess. Mom will have a fit in the morning if my eyes are puffy.

I rest my elbows on the counter and lean over the sink until my nose almost touches the mirror. "Get it together, you stupid fucking cunt."

The words are meaningless now. I'm about to push back when something clicks into the sink. I look down and see one of the little oval pills Colt gave me.

I stick out my tongue and put the pill on it, looking at it in the mirror. Then I dig into my shirt pocket and pull out the other two. He said they were strong, so strong I should only take half. I put another one on my tongue in line with the first, then the last one, forming a neat little track down the center.

Three seems more fitting than half.

Three years in this cursed town.

Three siblings I lost.

Three people in the family mom will have lost when she finds me tomorrow morning.

I try to find the shame in that, in doing this to her after she lost Dawson in this exact way, and Dad in a different way. But I've lived for everyone else all my life, and all I have to show for it is regret. At least I can die for myself.

I pull my tongue back into my mouth, but I can't swallow. My throat is frozen, and my heart hammers as I think about Mom in the living room, watching *Local News with Jackie* after Dawson died. I can't leave her a mess.

I straighten and spit the pills into my palm, deposit them in my pocket, and wash my mouth in the tap the way Dawson always did, the way Mom says ladies don't do. She'd laugh when he did it, maybe affectionately scold him for being raised in a barn. I feel bad for it, as if I chose to flip her off as

my last act.

I take in my appearance, and I know it won't do. I'll cause Mom enough pain when I swallow the pills. I don't need to make it worse.

What I need is a plan.

I start to hum "Die Young Stay Pretty" as I wash my face. I heard that when you die, your body empties, so I use the bathroom so I won't make a mess for anyone to clean up. Then I go to my room, avoiding even a glance at the bed. I sit in front of the vanity and carefully apply makeup, contouring my face and adding bronzer and heavier blush than usual so I won't look pale in death. I lean in, setting my lashes and applying mascara to replace the coat that tracked down my face. Last, I make sure my lipstick is perfect and there's none on my teeth.

I pull on my favorite jeans, even though they have rips in the knees and Mom didn't like them. I'll make things easy for her, but this is the one choice I've gotten to make in three years. I'm going to wear what I like. I pull on a simple, fitted tee, one that matches my sapphire eyes, and stand back, running a brush through my long blonde strands before I decide I'm perfect.

I turn away from the mirror. I guess I chose something last year, if only for a few days.

I think of Colt giving me those pills, and I send a silent thank you to him for coming through for me one more time. He's always saved me, since the first day we met, before we even knew each other's names. Then there was the day in the basement, the day the Dolces caught us and pulled us into their web. There's always been a thread of understanding between us, both of us knowing what the Dolces would do to us if we disobeyed.

I send Mom a text saying I love her. I think about lying on my bed, but I can't bear the thought of even touching the sheets where the betrayal happened. That's not my mess. My sisters can clean that up.

I go to the door at the end of the hall and open it, climbing the creaky old wooden stairs into the attic. There, I find the chain for the bare bulb and pull it, switching on the light. When I was a kid and we'd visit, my great aunt would bring us up here to play. Everything was old even then. My sisters and I would sit at a tiny wooden table on tiny chairs and drink lemonade, or take turns on the ancient rocking horse, or put our great-grandma's dolls into the cradle that actual babies had slept in once upon a time. I liked to watch my great aunt sew on the antique, treadle sewing machine, her feet moving up and down to make it go.

Now the attic is full of ghosts, furniture covered by white sheets. I make my way to the fainting couch under the eaves, where I remember lying with my book and listening to the rain that sounds so loud up here. I pull the covering off the red, velvet seat, my favorite part of the room when I was eight or ten. I'd curl up on it and read *The Secret Garden* or *Anne of Green Gables* or one of the other books from the shelf.

Tonight, I lie down on it, taking the pills from my pocket and staring up at the two portraits on the wall at the end of the room. One of them is a big painting in a frame, featuring four generations of Walton girls. My great aunt said it was up here to show that this was a ladies' space, the place she found refuge and brought her friends for tea and gossip. Even Dawson wasn't allowed up here.

My mom is a baby in the portrait, a chubby blonde thing with ringlets, perfect even then. My grandma was only a few years older than I am now, and the resemblance is unmistakable. Next to her is her sister, my great aunt who lived here. I wonder if they ever did something unforgivable to each other. How they got over it.

In the painting, their mother is the same age that my mother is now. And then her mother, my great-great grandmother, is in her sixties, still blonde

and formidable looking, with a rigid jawline and tight mouth.

Next to the gaudy gold frame holding the oversized family portrait is a simple, black and white photo of Jackie Kennedy in her pearls. My great aunt put up that one herself. She said she liked to look at it and remind herself what strength looked like.

“Sorry, Jackie,” I whisper under my breath, opening my palm. I stare down at the three little pills that can save me from this life the way humans never do.

There’s one person who can save me, though.

I always thought people with no friends were losers, pathetic and sad and alone. That’s what everyone says about Colt. What they said about Harper when she moved here.

But maybe it’s not a weakness to be alone. Maybe it’s a strength—the only strength. Because without my sisters, I have no one to save.

No reason to stay.

I sit up and close my hand around the pills.

When Rylan asked if I slept with the twins, I told him I didn’t have a choice. But everything’s a choice.

Being strong is a choice.

Being a victim is a choice—even a victim of my own hand.

One choice at a time, we decide who we are and what our lives look like.

I’m tired of being strong. But being strong when you’re tired of it is the real test of strength. I’m tired of winning. But pulling out your last reserve of energy to win one more game when you just want to lie down and rest is the true victory. I’m tired of looking at my life and seeing who I’ve become. But changing it instead of giving up is a choice I’ve never gotten to make.

Tonight, I get to choose. And I choose to fight.

I drop the pills back into my pocket and pick up my phone.

That'sLo: You're right. We're even. You could never love me and do the things you've done, and now, I can never love you. If you ever touch me again I will scream so loud the whole world knows what you did. We're done. Forever.

I don't need a response, so I leave my phone on the seat before descending the stairs. I grab my keys and slip out the window, so I don't pass my family on the way out. I'm no longer a perfect Walton girl. I don't belong with them anymore.

I belong to myself now.

I climb inside June Bug and start the engine, closing my eyes and taking in every sensation of her, letting myself become one with her. I'm too strong to cut ties with the world, but I'm unmoored, my tethers to this town severed.

For the first time in three years, the choice is mine.

I pull out of the drive and through the neighborhood, past the Montgomery house, past the Dolce house.

I didn't choose Royal. I didn't choose the twins. I didn't even choose Rylan.

When I reach the gate to the neighborhood, I glance to the right, the direction that would take me on the winding two-lane blacktop road north of town, where another road leads Colt's house.

Butterflies swarm in my belly. *Colt.*

Every beat of my heart cries for me to fly to him. But I already chose Colt, and he chose someone else.

If that didn't break me, I sure as hell won't break myself.

I spin the wheel to the left, peeling out onto the road. My knee bounces as June Bug eats up the road into town, and then onto the ramp for the highway. A smile begins to tug at my lips—a real smile. I never have to fake a smile again.

Tonight, for the first time, I can do anything I want, choose anyone I want.

I am free.

Free to tear through the walls of my crushed cocoon, leave the twisted pieces of steel and shards of diamond in my wake.

Free to choose the one person I never did—me.

I know that should be enough, that I should streak onto the highway, add ten, and let June Bug fly. But even Thelma had Louise.

Being alone might make you strong, but I've had to be strong for too fucking long. If I choose me, if I let myself decide what I want, I don't want to be alone. I'm tired of fighting for myself, of being the only person who cares. In truth, I've always been alone. I want someone to take care of me, to love me, to let me rest.

And I know exactly who that someone is—the only person who's ever done that, if only for a week.

I turn the wheel, pulling a U-ey in the middle of the road. Another car honks, but traffic is light. I speed back the way I came, my heart beating so frantically I can't breathe, as if a thousand butterflies have hatched from my heart to fly through my bloodstream.

I press my foot down harder on the pedal, smiling wider, a whoop of joy rising inside me. I'm going to do it. I'm going to tell him.

I owe him that much. After everything that happened between us, he deserves the truth. He deserves to know, even if he can't remember.

Maybe, if he knew the truth, he wouldn't choose someone else. Maybe once I tell him, he'll remember. He'll know I'm not just a bully and a bitch. That I'm someone worth loving too. And maybe, just maybe, when he finds out he risked everything and chose me before, he'll choose me again.

*

This is the conclusion of Gloria and Rylan's ill-fated love story, but the series continues! Keep reading to see if these broken characters find their hard won happily ever after:

<http://books2read.com/filthyelite>