

Prologue

'I don't want to talk.' Darcy turned to see that the dark haired man looming behind her was not the one she'd been expecting. 'Who are you?' she asked taking a step backward bringing her back abruptly against the tree she had been using for cover.

'This is my party, who are you?'

'I'm with Lottie,' Darcy said allowing herself to lean forward. 'You're Johnny Sloan?'

'The one and only Cookie... Aren't you a little young to be hanging here?'

Her attention was drawn to the dimple that formed in one of his cheeks as his lips ever so slowly curled upward in one corner. Mostly he was in shadow; the woods around the community hall had been used by generations of manic teenagers for clandestine activities, as demonstrated by the cigarette his long fingered hand was bringing to his mouth when the dimple disappeared.

'I wanted to be alone.'

'You're never alone in these woods, haven't you heard the stories?' he asked.

Stories of the un-dead, scorned lovers taking revenge, and the dangers of drugs were passed from generation to generation. If all the tall-tales were to be believed, the forest was more heavily populated than the town.

'Why are you leaving town?' she asked and took a step toward him. 'Is it true your mother killed herself? Is it true you had sex with Mrs Taylor in the art cupboard?'

'You're a curious little thing aren't you?'

'I heard your dad was sending you to rehab for heroin addiction... Did you really beat Sawyer for buying Josie that Pepsi last summer?'

'Man,' Sloan said on an exhale. 'And you wonder why I'm getting out of this town?'

'You're a legend around here. I heard that Josie was admitted to hospital for a mental breakdown when you told her you were leaving... Did your dad really stab you?'

'Where do you get these stories?'

Darcy's hands trembled as she brought herself ever closer to his static figure that still loomed in shadow. Illumination cut through the trees from the community hall security light, the harsh yellow sliced his cheek, showing the harsh angle of that chiselled jaw and the bulk in that infamous shoulder.

'Lottie says that your father kicked you out for driving your mother to drink... Is that what happened?'

'You're practically salivating there Cookie. Don't you have some drama of your own?'

His tone was as she would have expected: un-rattled. She was nobody and chances were he had heard all of the rumours about himself and then some. Her wide eyes relaxed, her fingers stretched out of the fists that had gathered her skirt against her legs. When she realised she was leaning forward, she straightened and tried to do what any other self-respecting teenager would do in this situation: act cool.

'My drama isn't driving me out of town,' she said and moved back to her original position against the tree. This time she let the tension go from her shoulders and lounged, except the tree wasn't that wide and the roots had broken ground. Sliding from the bark, her shoulder stung and she lost her footing, hooking her heel on a gnarled root that took pleasure in sending her backward into the compacted mud with a thud.

'You ok there Cookie?' His attempt to hide his humour was pathetic.

Growling, Darcy pulled her shoes from her feet and threw them to the ground, she flopped her elbows to her knees and dropped her forehead to her wrists. 'Oh laugh it up Sloan... You'd hardly be the first.'

A sharp inhale followed a low exhale and then his burning cigarette appeared on the ground in her peripheral vision. His heavy black boot ground it out and then before she could wave him off he appeared at her side, landing on the earth much more gracefully than she had.

'What's your name Tyke?' he asked.

'Darcy Holmes,' she grumbled trying not to watch as he took off his leather jacket.

'Ah,' he said as if understanding something. Without a word he hooked his jacket over her shoulders.

Rolling her head on her arm she looked up at him through her rapidly curling hair, the straightening irons never kept it under control for long, even with a whole can of hairspray. 'What?'

'You smell like, cakes and cookies,' he said. 'You're Hayley Holmes kid.'

'Grandkid,' Darcy said.

Her mother had died when she was just a few months old so Darcy was used to the mistake. She and her father had lived with her grandmother ever since, Darcy had no memory of her mother, although living in a small town she had heard all of the stories about how wonderful her mother was; which gave her a lot to live up to.

'She owns that bakery, on Main Street, right?' Darcy nodded. 'It must be great to have access to all of those free baked goods, whenever you want.'

'It means I learned the importance of exercise young.'

When he conceded a smile so did she. The charm in that dimple alone would be enough to bring girls running Darcy realised. Her breath stopped in her throat when he leaned closer, his hair flopping in wide fingers over his long lashed coal eyes.

'What are you doing at a party like this Darcy? You hardly seem the type.'

'For drink, drugs and rock 'n roll... no,' she admitted. 'You're probably right... Ricky said he would get Lottie in and she didn't want to come alone.'

'My cousin Ricky?' Sloan asked.

Darcy nodded. 'He's been trying to get into Lottie's underwear for like two years.'

'Lottie who? Is she even legal?' Darcy snorted a laugh, her hand flew to cover her mouth, but his relaxed smile goaded her on. 'Got something to say Tyke?'

'You and Josie were caught having sex at school when you were fourteen.'

'That was different,' he said. 'That was then, no one cared about that shit then.'

'You just turned nineteen,' she said hiding her churlish smile that seemed glued in place when she realised he wasn't breaking their eye contact and neither was she. 'It wasn't that long ago.'

'Half a decade,' he said then his smile disappeared. 'Jesus that makes me sound old.'

Falling back onto her elbows, she let herself laugh. 'You're still a teenager.'

'Just,' he said. 'You know a lot about me.'

'You're a legend around here.'

'So you've said,' he said.

Darcy was sure there was an edge of irritation in his tone. It occurred to her for the first time that maybe being cool and popular wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Anytime anything went wrong in the town everyone automatically assumed it was perpetrated by Johnny Sloan and his crew of renegades. Darcy – having never known any of them personally – always assumed the gang enjoyed the notoriety and, like everyone else, she assumed the reputation was accurate. But if the way he scuffed his boot against the tree root while he muttered under a lowered brow was anything to go by, maybe all the stories about him weren't true.

Suddenly her back straightened as she considered the opposite, what if all the stores were true? What if his mother did kill herself? What if his father did kick him out because he blamed Sloan? What if his girlfriend really was mentally unbalanced?

'Johnny,' she murmured, her hand sliding onto his forearm. Her touch caused him to recoil as though she had burned him. His head snapped around and he pinned her with such a fierce glare that it made her physically shiver.

'What about you Cookie?' he asked. The glare relaxed a little but she could still see anger burning behind his eyes.

'What about me?'

'Are you legal?'

His deep voice rumbled now as he twisted his body and brought himself closer to her. Tension flooded through her and as much as she tried to tell herself it was fear that made her eyes round and her breathing quicken she couldn't help but notice his heat radiating to her own. His nicotine-laced breath warmed her lips and filled her nose, the aroma of his leather jacket and deodorant joined in a heady mix that made her mind fog.

'In six weeks,' she managed to croak.

'Close enough,' he muttered, his lips only a hairs breadth from hers. His fingers combed her hair from her face until his hand cupped her base of her skull and he angled her mouth toward his.

Squeezing her eyes closed she waited for the unthinkable, Johnny Sloan, *the* Johnny Sloan was going to kiss her! Darcy Holmes was about to be kissed by Johnny Sloan!

His hand relaxed and before his mouth made contact with her the heat of his breath cooled. When Darcy opened her eyes she saw him frowning at her.

'What?' she asked still unable to control her breathing.

'Dealers keep dealing? Thieves keep thieving?'

Oh no! Darcy wanted to curl into a ball and die. 'I didn't say that... did I?'

'Aye,' he said his frown relaxing as his eyebrows inched closer to his hairline. 'You did.'

Darcy swallowed down her embarrassment. 'It's a nervous habit.'

'What is?'

'I sing,' she said. 'At least you got Primal Scream, when Tom Welsh kissed me for the first time he got Prince.'

'What?' Sloan was definitely backing off now. His hand left her hair and she wanted to scream in frustration.

'You don't have to be beautiful to turn me on,' she recited, sitting up as he did. 'You know, Kiss.'

'I know the song,' Sloan said running his hand into his hair. 'You weren't attracted to him... and you think I'm a drug dealer or a thief... maybe both.'

'It's not like that,' Darcy said. 'I just... I've done it since I was a child. I don't know I'm doing it... really. Usually it stays in my head.'

Sloan ventured a look over his shoulder and she managed an awkward smile. Just as he returned it her body slackened in relief. The moment didn't last long, a twig snapped and Darcy sprang to alert when she heard her name.

'Darcy!'

'Someone is looking for you,' Sloan said. 'And it doesn't sound like a girl named Lottie.'

'No,' Darcy hissed and pounced to her feet. 'It's Tom.'

'Boyfriend Tom?'

'He dumped me tonight,' she said. 'Rather I caught him snogging Lottie's face off.'

'Nice of her to invite you to the party,' Sloan said retrieving her shoes from the dirt.

'Generous to a fault is our Lottie,' Darcy said wiping the earth from her skirt. 'I better go... It was nice to meet you.'

'Ditto Tyke, take care.'

‘Darcy!’

Tom’s voice grew louder but as Sloan got to his feet he held Darcy’s attention and for just a second, one second, the intensity of those vortex eyes made her heart stop in her chest.

‘You too Johnny. Good luck in the big bad world.’

‘I think I might need it.’

A smile spread to her mouth. ‘No Johnny, I think it’s the big bad world that needs to look out.’

Darcy barely caught the wink he sent her way because she was momentarily mesmerised by his dimple again. The sound of Tom coming ever closer made her spin on her bare feet and rush away from the happiest happenstance of her teenage years. One that she would never speak of to anyone, because who would ever believe her anyway. The only evidence she had of him was his leather jacket that still to this day hung at the back of her wardrobe.

Sloan was a legend and through the years became a myth, a cautionary tale told to youngsters seen to be heading onto a similar path. Life went on in Inverquay after Sloan left. Those who knew him personally spoke of him fondly, but he had his share of enemies, most notably his father. As such, Sloan didn’t come back to Inverquay and through time, the stories became fable. Darcy wondered if he had really ever existed at all, and if he did, would he remember the serendipitous few minutes when their lives collided and they were the only two people in the world.

Chapter One

'I'll kill him,' Sloan muttered, shuffling from foot to foot as he watched the fog of his breath curl out into the night air. 'Here I am, busting my balls; I'm a fucking idiot... Yeah Sloan, I'll be there Sloan, don't worry, I'll be right on time... bastard.'

On an almost deserted side street in the centre of the city, Sloan dug his hands into the pockets of his zipper and pinned his arms to his body. Backing into the secluded residential doorway he leant on the scarred wooden door and closed his eyes thinking of the most effective ways to murder Doug with the least amount of mess and the most amount of pain.

The time had to be after midnight now, but in these Baltic conditions Sloan wasn't about to take his hand from his pocket to look at his watch. 'The story of a lifetime,' Sloan groaned again and banged his head back on the door; he was an idiot who got everything he deserved. Since when had Doug ever been reliable? He screwed his best friend's sister; his best friends married sister for goodness sake.

A rush of air and what sounded like a pant made him crack open one eye. Ready to scream bloody murder at Doug he was surprised to see a waif of a woman sharing his doorway. Not only was she short and skinny but her wild curly hair almost covered her face as it cascaded to her more than ample chest. He could make that observation because she was also barely clothed. Clutching a pair of platform spike heels to her cleavage the rest of her chest was covered by what appeared to be nothing more than a bikini top that tied in a neat bow between her breasts. His eyes travelled down across her flat abs and to the skin tight siren red micro miniskirt that started at her hips and ended, well a few inches below that. Short she might be but as his gaze moved further south he noted she was all leg, long, slender, shapely—

'Hold these,' she barked and thrust her shoes against him.

His choice to take them was not his own but his curiosity was piqued. She had to be a working girl, this naked, this deep in the city, had to be.

'Are you ok?' he asked hazarding a closer look.

'Oh just dandy pal, thanks.'

Her obvious note of sarcasm was aimed at him but her attention slid out of the doorway to peer up the street the way she had come. Scooping her hair from her face she came back into the doorway and took a hair band from her slender wrist with her teeth. Shaking her head back, Sloan became fixated on the line of her neck. Taming her hair took her a few seconds but she deftly secured it back and peeked out of the entryway again.

Only now, when the line of her neck and her cleavage was out of his sight did he realise she was talking, muttering to herself... No, he thought and found himself going slack jawed; those weren't words, they were lyrics.

'You're singing,' he said.

Her attention snapped back to him. 'What? Who are you? Please don't tell them you saw me.'

Narrowing his eyes he stared into those fathomless green eyes. Eyes filled with such innocence that he couldn't help but recognise them. 'Darcy,' he breathed and found himself smiling at her.

Something in the way her innocent pleading melted told him, she recognised him too. When her hand went to his face and her thumb traced his dimple he saw nothing but wonder in

her eyes. Their quiet appreciation of each other was abruptly ended when he saw the vibration in her chin and he realised her lips were blue.

‘What the fuck are you doing out here like that?’

He unzipped his hooded sweatshirt, dropping her shoes to the concrete he stood on, and pulled it off to wrap around her. She didn’t hesitate, which he took as a sign she was grateful. Shaking fingers failed to do up the zip so he swiped her manicured nails away and did it up for her then took his time rubbing her arms through the cotton.

Heavy make-up tried to hide the girl she once was but her body betrayed the woman she had become and his own body found himself all too aware of the fact when he pulled her into his arms and began to rub her back.

Though shivers wracked her whole body she forced her hands between them and pushed herself away. Just at that he heard what sounded like voices, a lot of voices, and stampeding feet. He watched as her eyes slowly closed, her lips were moving again but the lyrics were silent this time. Bouncing on her bare feet he saw her pull his hood up over her hair and pull the strings tight. ‘Good to see you again Sloan,’ she whispered.

Before he could open his mouth, she slid out of the doorway and bolted down the street. Nimble on her tiptoes he thought, but realised the concrete would be like ice under her toes. The voices grew louder, as did the footsteps. Actually it was more like thunder now, Sloan looked over his shoulder and he realised the voices were shouting after her. Ducking back into his doorway to avoid the stampede, his jaw fell again when he absorbed the scene. These voices, the thundering feet running belonged to dozens of men and women, most with camera’s, some with notebooks or smartphones and some with pictures just waiting to be autographed and they were all shouting for Darcy. Darcy Holmes from Inverquay, a girl he hadn’t thought about for ten years and yet somehow the world knew her, better than he did apparently.