

chapter one

Of the ways I'd want to start a Monday, finding a car covered in blood was not one of them. The murmurs began just after first period, and fragments of muted conversation led me out to the Heller High parking lot. I was curious to see the spectacle drawing so much attention.

The crush of students flowing out of the school buoyed me along in a tide of bodies. Between gaps in the crowd, I caught glimpses of the word smeared across the car's windshield in blood red relief.

LIAR

Gray clouds hung low, casting the macabre tableau in watery light. The chill that slithered up my spine had nothing to do with the brisk October morning. I skirted a group of girls in front of me, recognizing familiar faces from my geometry class, and found myself staring down at the thick crimson streaks. The letters looked nearly dry, and I couldn't fight the morbid impulse to touch them. A distinct tackiness remained. Was it corn syrup or actual blood? I didn't care to investigate further.

There was no proof that the infamous secret organization made up of Heller High's elite even existed, but this exhibition had all the makings of a Red Court takedown. Whispers from the ring of students surrounding the car reached me and I stepped backward, edging away from notice until I was part of the throng gathered to witness the scene. It didn't seem like anyone was paying attention to plain old jeans-and-a-tee-every-day Ember Williams. Good.

Other words, some so ugly I couldn't look at them for more than a moment, marred the rest of the car's windowed surfaces. My eyes skipped to the girl huddled beside a tree next to the parking lot. Tears stained with mascara ran in inky rivulets down her cheeks. Two of her friends rallied around her, whispering softly.

No amount of consolation was going to wash away the stain from this one. More than a few heads from the crowd were turned in her direction. I didn't know her name, but I had a feeling she'd be remembered as *that girl*, the one whose car was vandalized with blood. She'd been marked by the words we'd all seen: liar, cheater, tramp.

Why did the Red Court target her? Who wanted this girl humiliated—to be brought so low in front of the whole school? Or had she been reckless enough to throw in with them and ask for a favor she couldn't repay? No. The vulnerability in her expression was too raw to fake. This girl was a pawn in the Red Court's game. The pull to learn more about the group known for dealing out ruin and favors in equal measure went beyond cursory interest. I *needed* to know more.

My stomach gave an uncomfortable tug, as if my body was eager to put distance between me and the girl now that I'd seen the damage. A sob shuddered through her, and I tore my gaze away, shifting my feet and noticing a stickiness below my sneakers. A thick coat of red clung to the

bottom of my shoes, marking me too. *Ugh*. I must have stepped in a pool of the blood. I told myself it was fake blood because I couldn't stomach the alternative. I'd have to go change into my running shoes before next period.

"Everyone back inside," a teacher called from the main doors. His tone left no room for argument.

The mass of students quickly dissolved, moving back into the school. The whispers rose to chatter as theories were passed around like mono on prom night. I trailed behind a couple holding hands as they maneuvered through the crowd.

"This is the worst one so far," the girl said.

Her boyfriend scoffed. "Worse than the video of Brett Shultz's keg stand? No way. He got kicked off the football team for that. Brett had Division I schools scouting him, too."

A rogue Facebook account cropped up just after the school year began with some incriminating footage of the varsity running back at a party in a stunning display of upper body strength and chugging technique. The video made it all the way to Principal McGovern, who reluctantly had him removed from the team, along with the school's shot at a state title.

"Do you really think she cheated on her boyfriend?" someone behind me asked.

"Does it matter?" his friend responded.

I shook my head in silent reply. It didn't matter. That was the power of the Red Court; gossip and innuendo were all it took for a star student to fall from grace after accusations of cheating.

As I passed a small cluster of teachers just inside the doors, I stepped nearer to catch the edges of their hushed exchange.

"—needs to do something."

"The district's policy on bullying—"

"I know the policy, but this is beyond 'bullying.' It's the third time since the school year began."

This may have been the third public display of destruction in the last six weeks, but it was hardly the third time the Red Court had struck. Their takedowns were legendary and highly visible to ensure maximum exposure, but they also excelled in the small things no one would notice unless they were looking for anomalies. My eyes were wide open.

For as long as anyone could remember, there have been rumors that the mysterious Red Court was pulling the strings behind the scenes at Heller High School. Its ranks were shrouded in mystery, but its influence was undeniable. Rigged Student Council elections, changed grades, and ruined reputations were all in their repertoire.

Half of the school treated them like the Boogeyman, the near mythical thing that was out to get you. It was easier to deny their existence than to acknowledge the specter of their presence. Takedowns like the one outside were as likely to be attributed to the Red Court as they were to be pinned on anonymous wannabes posing as the Red Court to allay suspicion. It seemed like the other half of the over two thousand students at Heller made a sport of trying to guess which members of the prom court were legitimate and which ones owed their wins to the Red Court.

But I knew the truth.

The Red Court was real, and I needed in.

I pushed my way through the crowded halls to get to my locker. All around me a chorus of voices carried the news of the Red Court's latest victim, the story spreading faster than I could move.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. It was probably my best friend. I ducked into an alcove to check my texts.

Gideon: Did you hear?

Me: I saw, actually

Gideon: And?

Me: It was probably them. Who else would mess around with that much blood?

Gideon: Ew. Was it real blood?

I thought of my shoes again and shuddered.

Me: Who cares? The car looked like the prom scene from Carrie. They got their point across.

Gideon: I saw Mrs. Martin leading the girl into her office.

If something like that ever happened to me, I'd want to be put in the hands of the nicest—and most capable—guidance counselor, too.

Me: Yeah, I saw her outside.

Gideon: It's too bad. She looked wrecked.

We were reaching the point in the conversation at which I was supposed to condemn the monsters who did this. I wasn't ready to go there with Gideon. Revealing the true depth of my disgust at everything the Red Court stood for was not something I could do over text. Truthfully, my feelings about the Red Court were this gnarled mass inside of me, too big to start talking about at all.

Me: I gotta run. Lit is calling.

Gideon: Ok, see you after.

Before I'd made it halfway across the school, the warning bell rang. I gave up the attempt to change my shoes and turned to book it upstairs so I could suffer through American Lit with a room full of disenchanting sophomores. Oh joy. On an ordinary day, class was a chore to get through. On a day like today, with my mind busy dissecting the latest Red Court takedown, it seemed like my school would live up to its nickname after all. Welcome to Hell High.

"Ember?" Mr. Carson called my name like a question.

Crap. I must have missed something. I couldn't seem to concentrate on Mr. Carson's analysis of *Leaves of Grass*, which was a shame. Whitman had some serious 19th century game going on. "I sing the body electric" gave me chills the first time I read it.

"Yes, Mr. Carson?"

He sighed impatiently. Or perhaps disappointedly. "Do you have any thoughts on the final section?"

I glanced at my notes from the night before to read the scribbles aloud, but a mocking voice cut in.

"Whitman's talking about the physicality of the body and how it is part of the soul or is the soul. Like it's just as important as the soul, which at the time was elevated above a person's body in significance."

I threw a baleful look toward Chase Merriman—insufferable know-it-all—and was given a smug half-smile in return. He just loved to one-up me. Mr. Carson turned his gaze to me for more input, but my premeditated discussion points wouldn't add anything to the dialogue. I gave my Lit teacher as unaffected a shrug as I could manage even though a sharp retort branded with Chase's name tried to claw its way out of my throat. I pushed it down, not deigning to give Chase the satisfaction of knowing he got under my skin.

Mr. Carson continued droning on, asking for our "thoughts" and "feelings" about the poem. Poor guy didn't seem to understand his audience. Disengaged was our default setting. It really took some doing to rouse us. Though Whitman's work was taboo back in the day, most of the students here had probably seen something more risqué in their Instagram feeds over breakfast this morning.

The bell rang and Mr. Carson's shoulders slumped. Another day of not making a difference. I almost felt bad for him, but this was his chosen career path. He had to know what he was getting into when he signed up to teach freaking poetry at a public school.

"Could you hang back a minute, Ember?" Mr. Carson's words caught me six inches from the door and freedom.

I smiled tightly. The next period was my off-hour, but Gideon would be waiting. Every moment I wasted in the classroom diminished the chances of running out for my caffeine fix, which were already slim since I had to trek back across the school to change my sneakers first. I would not spend a moment longer than necessary in these shoes.

“What’s up, Carson?” He was one of those teachers who thought using “Mr.” in his title meant he was uncool, so I dropped it whenever I needed extra brownie points. Not that my brownie point bank account was in that much need.

“It’s unlike you to space out during an epic poetry discussion. Everything ok?”

Mr. Carson was probably my favorite teacher, and we had a strong rapport, but I couldn’t tell if his use of “epic” was sincere. I hoped for his sake he was being cheeky.

“Just having one of those days, you know?” *Vague, Ember, be vague.* “I’m sure I’ll be back to contributing the only meaningful insight tomorrow,” I added with a rueful smile, which he returned.

“Sounds like a plan. So you know, I’m always here if you need an ear.” He shut his copy of *Leaves of Grass* with a snap, effectively ending our conversation.

“Thanks!” I bolted out the door as fast as I could without seeming rude.

Running down the steps two at a time, I nearly crashed into Gideon as he waited at the foot of the stairs near the school’s main entry.

“What’s the rush, Em?” His words came out in a whoosh as he caught me.

“I need to stop by my locker before we get coffee. Let’s go!”

“Seriously? There isn’t time for a detour if we’re going to make it back before the hour is up. Let’s just hit the library instead.”

He was right of course, but I was in desperate need of a large Americano. I wanted to argue, but once Gideon made a decision, there was no way he’d change his mind. If only there was someone as bullheaded as him on the debate team with me.

Gideon broke down what he’d heard about the takedown this morning as we walked through the halls. I was too busy sulking to add to the commentary. I spun the combination on my locker, wondering how in the world I could explain the bloody shoes to my mom. The door swung open, and I tossed my bag to the ground. I was already toeing off my sneakers when a flash of red caught my eye.

The Queen of Hearts sat alone on the top shelf of my locker, the coy smile on her face said she knew something I didn’t. If the rumors were to be believed, she did. A Queen of Hearts was the eponymous calling card of the Red Court’s leader, and its presence could only mean one thing: my invitation had finally come.

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