THEY CALL HER REGRET

Books by Channelle Desamours

Needy Little Things
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For my dad, who made me fall in love with stories, and
for my mom, who got me hooked on the spooky ones

CHAPTER 1

The third stall in the restroom of Ozzy's Pizza is my favorite spot in town. It's not anything I'd say out loud because it suggests something . . . well, nasty about the place I've called home my whole life—Fairville, Georgia, isn't great, but it's not public toilet bad. For me, this third stall, with its rusty hinges and eternally sticky tiles, holds sentimental value in the form of small, boxy letters written in permanent marker. CAMILLE + TONY FOREVER, surrounded by a sea of other declarations of love, obscene doodles, and phone numbers. Camille and Tony, my parents. The sixteen-year-old version of my mother wrote their names here, but turns out happily ever after wasn't in the cards. They divorced two years ago. I haven't seen or spoken to Mom since, but she feels so present here that sometimes I wonder if it's possible for a living person to haunt a place. I'm pretty confident that dead people can, but for those who are gone, not from life in the literal sense but gone from *my* life, there must be some sort of gray area, and I'm all up for exploring it—even if it means frequent visits to a bathroom in the back of an ancient pizza shop. My little sad-girl haven and inferno all wrapped up in one.

"Simone, hurry up. What are you doing in there?" my best friend, Kira, shouts, banging on the stall door.

I slip on my happy-girl mask because the sad-girl thing is a secret tightly held between me, these metal graffitied walls, and Cory Gooding—the boy who made me seek refuge here tonight in the first place.

"Simone!" Kira shouts again before her heavily mascaraed lashes and amber iris appear in the obnoxiously large gap between the side of the stall and the door.

I slide open the lock and push out, nearly knocking her over. "And to think you would have been mad at me if you caught a glimpse of something you didn't want to see."

"Oh, stop. That toilet has been out of order since freshman year."

"As if there aren't a dozen other private things someone might do in a bathroom." I turn on the tap and pump some soap into my hands. "Does Rich know what a deviant you are?" I ask even though if anyone's a deviant in their relationship, it's him.

She grins mischievously and retouches her lip gloss. "Of course. Why do you think he asked me out?"

"You two are horrible for each other. You know that, right?"

She blows me a kiss in the mirror, thinking I'm joking around, and that's my own fault. Rich Pearson is your stereotypical hot, athletic, horny teenage boy. He doesn't have any business being anybody's boyfriend. I should have told Kira the truth when she asked what I thought about her dating him. Instead, I drop passive-aggressive hints about his wandering eyes and watch them float right through her head. But I'm going to make it right soon. I have to before she gives up her spot at art school and follows him to South Carolina where he'll play D2 football—and her.

Kira frowns in the mirror, gently pressing her fingers against the frizzy cornrows along her hairline. "Is my hair flat in the

back?" She spins around, her golden-brown coils sending the fragrance of coconut into the air.

It rained for a few minutes at the end of the football game tonight, and shoving her hair under the hood of Rich's jacket did a number on it. I fluff it out for her and twirl a few curls around my finger to redefine them. Without prompting, she turns and fiddles with my braids, swooping some back and securing them with a clip for a half-up, half-down look. We both examine our refreshed reflections in the mirror, then exit the restroom as the version of ourselves that the general populace of Pinegrove Academy knows.

Unbothered. Assured. Unrivaled.

I have many masks.

KIRA and I weave through huddles of our classmates, all buzzing with excited energy after our final-quarter comeback. The captain of the team, Jeremiah Hutchinson, sits on his throne in the center of our curved booth, huge smile plastered on his face, dark skin gleaming. He and Rich replay his game-changing first down for a group of juniors who would kill to claim our booth when we graduate. There's a certain neediness about them that makes my skin tingle with the same sort of embarrassment you feel when you discover no one told you you've been walking around with food stuck between your two front teeth. Sometimes I worry that the neediness I feel every day shows on me as starkly, clings to me as tightly, as dark spinach across white teeth. But I know it's an irrational fear. I am a vault, expertly camouflaged. It's something I've learned to take pride in, which is why the presence of Cory Gooding rattles me so much.

"Excuse me," Kira says, and Jeremiah's fan club parts for us. Knowing their idols' attention won't return to them, they drift

back toward the arcade area. They each wear a white T-shirt with a royal-blue letter painted on it. H-U-T-C-H.

Kira slips into the booth and scoots toward Jere to make room for me. Piper, whose platinum-blond hair is pulled into a tight ponytail and adorned with a ridiculously large cheer bow, has claimed the spot next to Rich. She sits unnecessarily close to him, arm to arm, leg to leg, but Kira doesn't notice. She never notices. And all the guys love to tell Rich how lucky he is to have such a chill girlfriend—one of those stupid not-like-other-girls things. Chill girls don't get jealous. Chill girls can "take a joke." They don't need a text back, or quality time, or any words of affirmation. Chill girls lie to win the affection of mediocre boys. Kira is not a chill girl. She just throws trust out like confetti. I balance my friend's naive energy by giving Rich a critical look up and down. He pulls a confused face, but he knows exactly why I'm shooting daggers because he scoots a few inches away from Piper before throwing himself back into the conversation.

I could not be less interested in the latest pair of beefing rappers, so I turn my attention to the muted big-back TV mounted in the corner across from us. The news shows the smiling face of Natalie Dawson—a nineteen-year-old who attended the local community college and went missing three months ago. I made a terrible mistake around that time, but talk of Natalie's disappearance was enough to distract me from the gnawing regret.

I'm so caught up trying to read the tiny closed captions that I don't register Cory walking over to us until he is there asking what everyone would like to drink. We haven't had a proper conversation in more than two years, but the smell of him will always be familiar to me. Woody and clean, sharp enough to cut through the rancidness of overused frying oil and the bite of cheap tomato sauce that is ever present in this place. I feel his

eyes on me, but I keep my own glued to the TV. These encounters between me and him happen every few weeks, and I hate the way they shake me up. Just a glimpse of Cory and my focus is shot for the rest of the day.

Rich bumps the table with his knee. "Simone, tell the dude what you want to drink."

"No rush," Cory says.

He's traded what used to be his signature fro for two-strand twists, and they look frustratingly good on him. "Sprite, please," I say, eyes back on the news.

Cory points at the screen with his server pad. "Crazy she hasn't turned up yet, huh?"

Everyone else looks over at the TV as if it has appeared out of nowhere.

Rich tousles his wavy brown hair. "Doubt they'll find her alive at this point."

"You would know," Jere snickers.

Kira shoves his shoulder. "That's not funny." She scowls at Rich. "And stop being so negative."

"Sad, but he's probably right," Cory says, angling his head toward Rich.

"What makes you say that?" Piper asks.

Cory presses the back of his pen a few times, the clicking sound filling the space in the air while he decides how to answer. "Mama Dee saw her ghost."

Everyone, except me, sits smiling slightly, waiting for Cory's face to break, for him to reveal that he's joking, but that won't happen.

Jere snorts. "Wait, you lyin'. Mama Dee, that hundred-year-old lady that does psychic readings for like a hundred dollars a minute?"

"Yes."

Cory doesn't joke. Not with people he doesn't know well, at least. He says what he means and means what he says, and he is very intentional about every word he chooses.

Rich laughs. "You really believe she sees dead people?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

Rich points from Cory to me. "You and this dude would get along, Simone. Y'all are both into that spooky stuff."

"Yeah. I think we'd get along great," Cory says, playing like we don't already know each other. "Maybe we can find out at your Halloween party this year?"

"And he's smooth with it!" Jere leans over and daps Cory up.

My annual Halloween party is the biggest event at Pinegrove every year outside of prom. Each student gets a personal invite and I go all out. It's not just an excuse to drink and party. I fully embrace the spirit of the season. YOU WILL HAVE FUN. YOU WILL FEEL FEAR was stamped on the envelope of every invitation last year, and I did not fail to deliver. Horror feels like home to me.

"C'mon, Simone," Rich nudges. "Don't leave him hanging."

"It's Pinegrove only."

Cory shrugs. "That's too bad." He pops his pen once again. "I'll be right back with your drinks."

Rich stares after him, squinting. "Didn't he actually go to Pinegrove at some point?"

Realization dawns on Jere's face and he does a double take right as Cory slips behind the counter. "He did! He was in my ninth-grade math class. Piper, you used to cheat off all his tests, 'member?"

"Do I remember cheating off someone in freshman math? Sure. Do I remember it being that guy? No."

"Not surprised. You cheated off—and on—a lot of people that year."

Piper opens her mouth to retort, but Jere keeps talking. "I wonder if he can hoop. Coulda used his height on the basketball team."

Cory cannot hoop. The thought of him trying to do anything remotely athletic almost makes me crack a smile. He and I have that in common. Long limbs everyone expects us to put to use in competitive feats. We've both gone our whole lives letting people down when those limbs don't match their expectations. *A waste* is what I overheard my eighth-grade volleyball coach call my height. *A bitch* is what she overheard me call her. That was my last day on the team. That was my last day on *any* sports team.

"Hey, man," Rich says as Cory returns with our drinks, "I think you can get an invite to the party on a technicality. Once an Eagle, always an Eagle."

"Yeah? What do you say—"

"See you on the thirty-first." I rush the words out, just wanting him to go away already.

"Bet. I'll be there." He passes out straws to everyone. "Do y'all know what you want to eat?"

"One large pepperoni and one extra cheese for the table, please," Rich says.

"Anything else?" Cory asks, eyes on me.

"Nope. That's it," Rich answers.

Cory waits to see if I have anything to add. When I say nothing, he taps his notebook and smiles. "I'll be out with your order soon."

"Thank you!" Kira supplies in the overly cheerful way she tends to do when she senses any tension or awkwardness.

Jere waits until Cory is out of earshot but still whispers when he speaks. "He was friends with that kid who got run over the summer before tenth grade, wasn't he?"

My gut clenches, and goose bumps erupt across my skin. This conversation is taking a turn in the exact direction I wanted to avoid. Toward the exact reason I don't speak to Cory anymore.

"Yeah, you're right," Rich says. "Hit-and-run. What was his name? He went to Eastside. Trenton James?"

Jones, I correct in my head. Trenton Jones. I grit my teeth as they debate about his name. *Trey? Tristan?* Piper throws in *Michael* out of nowhere and I have to take a sip of my drink to busy my facial muscles and keep from scowling. But when they turn the conversation back to the accident, I pray for them to continue the name game. Because I can't hide how I feel about that. Not for long. My eyes dart around the shop, searching for something else to focus on. The news segment on Natalie is over, and a cringey used-car commercial plays. I recite the jingle in my head three times, trying to drown out the conversation around me. After that, I switch to counting ceiling tiles. I get to twenty-one before switching to the number of hat-covered heads and then to the number of posters on the wall. I can't concentrate on anything for long. Snippets of their conversation continue to break through, making my armpits sweat, making my throat dry. I tear at my paper straw wrapper, and when that's obliterated, I go at a bunch of napkins.

"Did they ever find the person who hit him?" Rich's question cuts through all my attempts to tune the conversation out.

"Yes," I say, fiddling with the row of piercings on my left ear. "Some old guy who should have been off the roads a decade ago." I shrug, trying to seem less affected than I am. Trying to pretend that I am okay with the fact that I will never have closure. "The news said he had a stroke and died before they were able to bring formal charges."

"Dang, that's messed up. So is that why Cory left Pinegrove? Couldn't cope?" Jere asks.

Kira places a firm hand on my bouncing thigh. "Um, y'all? Can we maybe not talk about the beginning of sophomore year?" she snaps, eyebrows near her hairline, head leaning in my direction.

It takes a few seconds before it clicks for Rich and Jere. A few seconds before sincere apologies pour out of them. The beginning of sophomore year is when Mom left. They know how hard it was on me and were surprisingly supportive despite typically showing the emotional intelligence of a brick wall. What they don't know is that I made friends with both Cory and Trenton a few months before that. They don't know the mess losing Trenton only two months before my mother made of me. The way it imploded the deep friendship Cory and I had so quickly formed. The way it destroyed the blossoming flirtation between us. They don't know because I never told them. Because that part, the part where I spent the summer playing video games with two nerdy boys while my parents finalized their divorce—while the friends in front of me went to fancy summer camps or flew to foreign countries for vacation—doesn't fit the version of myself I spent all of ninth grade formulating. My mom taught me how to do that. How to protect myself with smoke and mirrors. Me and all my masks. It's no wonder I throw the best Halloween parties.

I spot Cory staring at me across the room, always with an expression of knowing, and I'm suddenly feeling eager to outdo myself.