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A dark, atmospheric illustration. In the foreground, a human skull lies on a surface, with a hand holding a dagger pointing towards it. In the background, a large, textured face or mask is visible, possibly a stone or wood carving. The overall tone is somber and mysterious.

SHALLOW  
RIVER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

H. D. CARLTON

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## Important Note:

*Shallow River* is a dark romance that contains *very* triggering situations such as graphic domestic violence, graphic rape (not between main love interests), all forms of abuse, manipulation, gaslighting, graphic violence, graphic language, graphic sexual scenes, murder, mention of child assault (not depicted), familial abuse, and kidnapping.

**Please take these warnings seriously.  
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# One River

*PAST*

**M**Y FIST CONNECTS WITH THE fucker's nose. The crunch of bone is satisfying as it gives beneath my knuckles. I haven't even pulled my fist from his face yet, and I already want to do it again.

Expletives burst from his mouth as blood trickles down his nose. The flashing colored lights from the disco balls above us wash the blood in different shades of red. One hand clutches his broken nose while the other rises to backhand me. I gear up, ready to take the slap, but a hand shoots out to catch his arm. Said hand is attached to a man whose looks rival a god. I give him a once over, and I'm immediately attracted to him.

He's the dark, rugged type. The type your mom insists is bad for you even though she secretly wants to fuck him, too. Well above six feet, with dark hair and pretty eyes. I'm willing to bet the fake diamond ring on my finger that he has a wicked smirk capable of disintegrating any straight female's panties off.

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I turn and walk away. I don't even say thank you.

"Girl, can we go out just *once* without you murdering a guy's nose?" my best friend, Amelia, playfully pleads from beside me. It's our freshman year of college and I managed to land the best roommate. I never had friends before her.

I snort. "Apparently not. It's not my fault he was grabbing my tit. We'd been dancing for literally thirty-eight seconds," I say with exasperation.

"Thirty-eight seconds, huh?" Amelia repeats, cocking a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. I'd kill for her eyebrows.

"I was counting to an appropriate time to move on to the next guy, but I suppose I shouldn't be so gracious next time."

She tips her head back and laughs. I grab her hand and guide her the rest of the way through the crowd and up to the bar. I shoulder-check a few on the way since saying "excuse me" politely only grants me a dirty look and silence.

I'd never been the patient type, anyway.

When I reach the bar, I lean over, showing an ample amount of cleavage, and wait for the bartender to notice me. Impatiently, might I add.

The bartender that notices me first is a chick. Honey blonde hair, hazel eyes, and a dainty nose ring. She glances down at what I'm offering. When I chose my skin-tight, emerald green dress, it was specifically for the way it makes my ass and tits look photoshopped.

*One... two... and here she comes.*

I return her wicked smile.

"Two Long Islands, please," I order.

"Sure thing," she says, adding a saucy smile. I like her.

"And two lemon drops!" Amelia shouts from beside me when the bartender turns to make our drinks. She acknowledges Amelia's request

with a sexy wink. I lick my lips in response.

"You're determined to give me a hangover, aren't you?" I complain to Amelia, still eyeing the bartender. Her ass is cupped perfectly by her ripped jean shorts. I pull my eyes away, refusing to leer like the dirty men invading this club like cockroaches.

"Says the bitch ordering a *Long Island*. You only need two of those, and you're on your ass."

I sniff. "Whatever."

The bartender comes back with our requests, sliding them toward us. Before I can say thank you, another girl is calling her away—one with a much curvier body and gorgeous red hair.

I'd ignore me for her, too.

"River, quit eye fucking the bartender. You're not even into girls," Amelia chides. I slurp on my Long Island, ignoring the people wanting to get in to order their drinks.

She's kind of right. I've never been with a girl. But that doesn't mean I haven't thought about it. Doesn't mean I *wouldn't*.

"How are you and David doing?" I ask, changing the subject. She and her boyfriend have been together for a couple of years and were best friends for even longer. The puppy love hasn't faded even to this day, despite his parents not approving of her.

A dreamy look takes over her eyes, and just for a split second, I want to stab them with my straw. Not any reflection on her or her boyfriend. I love them both.

But I'm jealous.

I've never had that. Not with any man. And sometimes—well, sometimes it fucking hurts.

The feeling fades in plumes of smoke when a gorgeous smile spreads

across her face. After all, her happiness does bring me peace. Stars twinkle in her eyes when I mention David. If I could snatch a couple from the sky and put them in her eyes, it'd only tarnish the glow. Amelia hasn't had the easiest childhood, either. She deserves someone who will love her unconditionally.

"He's amazing," she croons. "He's taking me on a surprise date tomorrow. Won't tell me what it is. I even coerced him with a blowjob."

I cock an eyebrow. "And it didn't work?"

A blush creeps into her cheeks and a guilty smile tugs at her lips. "It kind of backfired. He ended up making me completely forget about it, actually."

I laugh at her sheepishness. "That sounds like a good problem to have," I comment, gulping more of my Long Island down.

I should slow down.

"You should slow down," Amelia says, echoing my exact thoughts. I swear the bitch can read my mind sometimes.

"I should," I agree half-heartedly.

But I don't.



CALABRIA BY ENUR PULSES through the surround sound and into my veins. My vision is blurred, and Amelia is somewhere behind me, trailing along, just as inebriated as I am. My body threatens to move to the beat before I've fully made it to the dance floor. The crowd claps along with the beat, and I spot a few girls busting moves that would land me in a hospital.

I get lost in the crowd and finally let loose.

My hands rise as my hips seek each beat. I sway and twirl to the upbeat

song, laughing as my world spins. I'm free. Unchained from life and all its expectations as my feet carry me across the dirty dance floor.

I feel the touch on my raised hands first, light and sensual. His fingers skim the ring on my finger, but it doesn't deter him. I wear it for that exact purpose, but it doesn't always work. Something tells me he knows it's fake. I don't know how, but I can feel it in the way his hands trail my body like he's daring me to say no.

I don't dare look at my next victim behind me. I begin to count as his hands trail down my arms, leaving goosebumps in their wake, down my sides and across my hips.

*Eight, nine, ten...*

His hands grip my hips possessively, as if he's finally caught the rare jewel in the middle of a dangerous trap. I'm pulled against a physique far bigger than mine. Heat soaks into my body as an intoxicating smell fills my senses. A spicy cologne with a hint of sweat. Absolutely divine.

*Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen...*

Our hips collide, and I'm pleased to find that there's *not* a hard dick digging into my back. I like a man with control.

I gyrate against him, his hips matching my movements perfectly. Surprisingly, a smile breaks across my face. Starting out small and then widening until I'm nearly laughing again. And somewhere between the end of Calabria and the middle of the next song, I stopped counting.

Still, I don't look him in the face.

His touch stays strong and confident, but never crossing a line or roaming to inappropriate territories. Soft lips travel across my neck and shoulders, but he never sinks his teeth into the apple. He never loses control.

Oh, how I want him to.

It leaves me a writhing mess. The pulsating heat between my legs

grows stronger with each song that passes us by.

I'm lost in him. So lost.

I want him. I want him wrapped around my body as he loses himself inside me. I want to be wrapped around his when I ensnare him and don't let go until the morning light creeps through my windows. Only then will I show his lost soul how to leave.

I ache for all of this without even seeing his face. His body chemistry tells me he's attractive. He's confident. Smooth and languid.

And he aches for me too.

I'm snapped from my sweet fantasy when a desperate tug nearly pulls me from the universe our bodies created. My eyes snap open and Amelia's green face is before me. Without having to ask, the hands leave my body and I'm left bereft and bone-chilling cold.

I don't want to leave. My friend needs me, though. I step away without looking back. It hurts, but I don't want a face attached to that fantasy. I'd rather he remain anonymous so I don't look for him every place I go and in every face that passes me by.



ANGELS ARE FLOATING AROUND me, beckoning me to come closer. To crawl into the light—a painful blinding light that's setting off a plethora of fireworks inside my head. I'm certainly not capable of fucking standing right now.

I'll blow chunks everywhere if I do.

I groan, rolling over in my bed. The dorm room mattress is normally not the most comfortable, but right now, it feels like I'm lying on a bed of rocks. My blankets feel like wet nylon and I think the little feathers in my

pillow are poking through.

I'm still in last night's dress, makeup is caked all over my face, and my mouth tastes like dead skunk.

I've never eaten dead skunk, but I'm positive this is what it tastes like.

An answering groan sounds from the other side of the room where Amelia's bed is.

"I fucking hate you," Amelia growls, her voice raspy from sleep. I look over to see her waves of golden blonde hair spilling across her face, some of the strands stuck in her mouth. Usually Amelia is always sun-kissed, but right now she looks like a pale zombie. It doesn't help that her makeup is smeared across her face. I'm sure her raccoon eyes look exactly like mine. We'd be able to walk onto a horror movie set and be instantly hired on the spot.

"I hate me, too."

Even speaking right now sends sharp pin pricks of pain through my head. I try to remember if I have any classes today, but all of my thoughts are clogged in the toxins of alcohol. I give up trying to think, deciding I couldn't care less if I have class today or not. Whatever day today is.

My head is pounding and nausea swirls in the trenches of my stomach as I attempt to sit up. Hopelessly, I look to my nightstand and find an empty bottle of water.

*Ugh.* Fuck drunk River. Couldn't even set herself up for success before passing out.

Those goddamn Long Islands. They're the fucking devil wrapped in a pretty bow.

"We need greasy food," Amelia says as she sips on her full bottle of water. The sight has me irrationally frustrated, nearly to the point of tears. Why is drunk Amelia so much more successful than me?

Noting my distress, Amelia caps the bottle and tosses it to me. By the

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grace of god, it plops next to me on my bed instead of on the floor, where I was positive it would land with that sad throw. I sip the water gratefully, resisting the urge to chug it.

The thought of food makes me want to follow those annoying angels into the light. Who needs to be alive anyway? Let the wild have the fucking planet back. Nature deserves this planet more than we do anyway.

“Whoever throws up first is buying,” I say.

“Deal, bitch.”



I DRAG MY FRIES THROUGH the mound of ketchup and shove them into my mouth. It takes me forever to chew considering my throat refuses to swallow. The usually salty goodness tastes like rat poison on my tongue. I force the fries down and shove a few more in.

I'm not about to waste free food.

Since I won, I chose the place. *Marty's Diner*, the best hole-in-the-wall restaurant you'll find in North Carolina. Grease is permanently etched into every surface in this place, including the cracked red booths and tables decorated with random magazine clippings. Normally the smell soothes me, but right now the chemistry between my stomach contents and the fumes of grease are causing an epic cat fight in the pit of my stomach. My addled brain wanders, conjuring up an actual fighting pit with a ball of fumes and a green acidic blob with arms slapping each other like two grade schoolgirls.

“So, River, who's going to be your plus one to the party?” Amelia asks around her food, bringing my attention away from my alcohol-induced thoughts. Pretty sure I'm still drunk.

She grimaces as she chews, turns a little green, and has to choke her food down. I look away before her nausea makes my own worse. I'm a sympathy-puker.

I shrug my shoulders noncommittally. I don't even want to go, to be honest. I'm supposed to meet my mom that day. Not that that's a good reason to miss the party. I'd rather make a Venn Diagram of the taste of dead skunk and my morning breath than meet with Barbie.

“Maybe ask Ryan?” she hedges. My eyes whip to her, turning from tarnished yellow to molten gold. I know because Amelia has graciously called me out on it endlessly. Ryan brings that reaction out of me without my permission, and it's got to be the most annoying thing to date.

“You know he's dating Alison,” I grumble. I hate that she can see I'm interested in him. Being interested in the male species sucks when they've done nothing but make me want to hate them. Alas, here I am, getting wet for a taken man. A man I always *think* I'm doing a stellar job at hiding my interest in, but really, I might as well get in a costume, and dance around like the poor souls you see on the side of the road, while waving a sign that points directly to my vagina. Open for business.

The man from last night creeps into my thoughts, but I push him from my mind before I become obsessed with the faceless stranger.

Amelia waves an unconcerned hand in the air, shooting me an exasperated look.

“They broke up last weekend,” she says airily.

The fries I'm gripping freeze halfway to my mouth, the ketchup dripping off and into my lap.

“They broke up?” I echo nonchalantly, turning my attention to the ketchup on my already stained sweatpants in hopes that it'll hide my piqued interest. I'm hiding from her and she knows it. In all honesty, I'm

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floored. Ryan and his girlfriend were high school sweethearts. They've been together forever. I'm pretty sure they were even engaged.

"Yep," she chirps, the smirk on her face falling flat due to her having to work hard not to vomit everywhere.

Again.

"What happened?" I ask, attempting to sound casual. Fuck, I failed. I don't appear as unflappable as I hoped. I don't want to flap, damn it.

She shrugs a shoulder. "Not sure," she answers. "All I know is a horde of horny bitches are already flocking around him everywhere he goes. And Cindy said there was a frat party last night and he was already making out with another girl while Alison was in the same room."

My eyes widen into saucers. Fuck trying to appear cool, I don't care anymore. "Seriously? Did she get upset?"

Amelia shakes her head slowly, a weird look passing over her face. "That's the strange thing, Cindy said she looked as if she couldn't care less."

Hope flutters in my chest. Maybe that means I won't have to deal with a crazy ex if I ever take my shot with him. Forget the fact that he hasn't looked twice at me, that can easily be changed. Guys like Ryan are easy to ensnare if you know how to set the trap.

With that thought in the back of my mind, I change the subject onto Amelia's art project—I was never the gossiping type. Anyway, I'm genuinely interested in her art. She paints like Michelangelo and damn well knows it.

Now only if I can find my own damn hobby.



"YOU'RE LATE," BARBIE SNARLS, a half-smoked cigarette dangling from the corner of her crusted mouth. I can only imagine what

the fuck kind of dirty substance she has wrapped around her lips—something tasty enough to let crust, I guess.

I shrug a shoulder, unconcerned with her bitching.

"What are you going to do about it?" I ask dryly. I can't remember the last time my mother evoked any real emotion in me besides irritation and wanting her to die already.

She calls me a few choice names—and I dutifully ignore her. Her lips tighten around the cigarette and she inhales until it's nearly depleted.

Good. Maybe she'll die faster.

"I should've aborted you," she mutters, her beady little eyes glaring holes into me.

"Oh, look. We can agree on something," I answer, emotionless as ever. "Do you have the goddamn money or what?"

She reaches into her dirty nightgown pocket and pulls out a few wadded up bills.

*Dollar* bills, to be precise.

"Please tell me you're fucking joking."

An evil grin slides across her face. Some of the crust cracks and flutters to her lap. I can hardly feel disgust.

"That's all you deserve."

I roll my eyes. If this waste of flesh had it her way, she wouldn't even give me half a penny. Not that the woman would put any effort into sawing the penny in half anyway—not when she has to save her energy for fucking men for drugs.

"What I deserve and what you're required to do are two different things, Barbie," I retort, trying to keep my cool and failing. I'm not even angry that she doesn't have my money. I expected it actually. But *fuck*, having to be in this woman's vicinity more than what's absolutely necessary