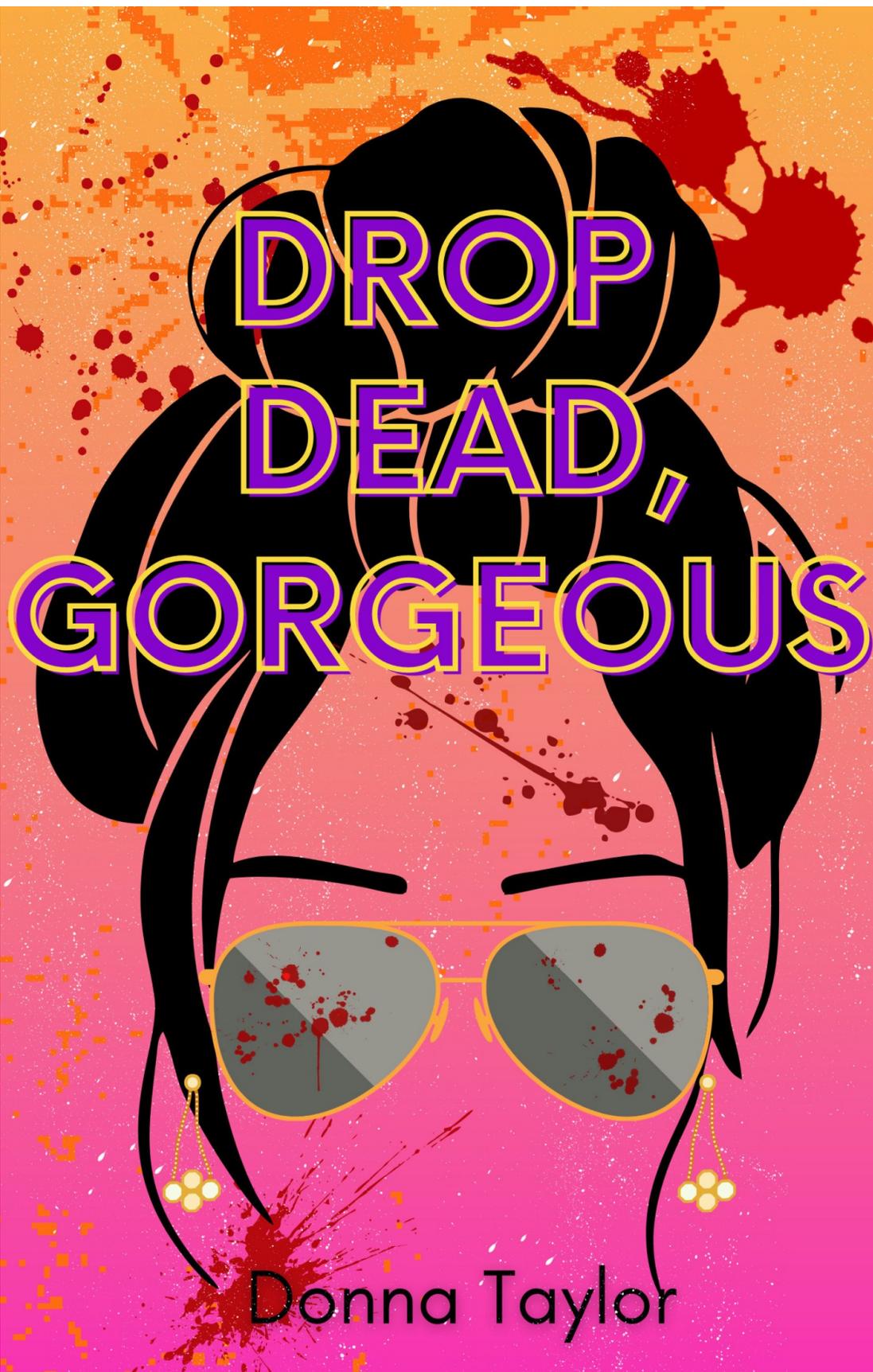


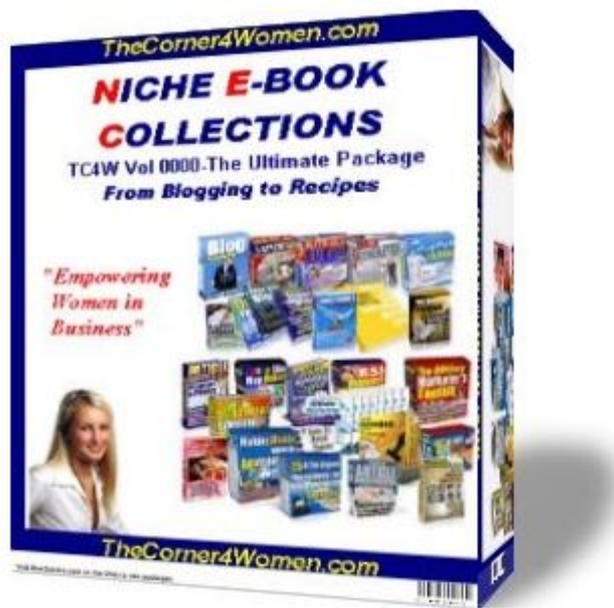
**DROP
DEAD,
GORGEOUS**

Donna Taylor



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Donna Taylor

Drop Dead, Gorgeous

A San Nico Slayers Short Story

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Second edition

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The sound of her “friends’” voices is like chewing on glass, but Georgie has mastered the art of pretend. Pretending she likes these assholes and wants to go out with them tonight. Pretending she wants to see the guy she calls her boyfriend when he repulses her. Pretending her mom only has Georgie’s best interests in mind.

She snorts and slaps a hand over her mouth and her makeup brush clatters into the sink. She freezes, expecting the vipers to go silent. When the music keeps pumping and their stupid giggles flow through the crack in the door, she sighs.

Georgie is Queen Bee. While she would gladly hand that crown over to literally anyone, her monster of a mother didn’t spend all this time maneuvering so her precious daughter can end up second.

The last thing Georgie wants to do is to be like her mother and peak in high school. Yet here she is, falling into the same damn traps, all because it’s so much easier to just do what Mother wants than fight it.

She picks the brush up and applies even more highlighter to her cheeks. If nothing else, these last four years of hell

have made her a master of makeup too. Perfectly lined and plumped lips pout, artfully flicked wings pop her eyes, and her cheekbones are sharp enough to cut.

And she hates every second of applying this goddamn stuff.

The clock's ticking. She's going to have to leave her bathroom eventually, but dread wells up inside her at yet another night of this bullshit.

Her summer college program is quickly approaching. Escape is all lined up. The days need to hurry up and pass.

Leaving the time zone was out of the question. That still left a handful of options far enough away that she could at least breathe. Slough off all this fucking makeup, stop acting, and be herself for one goddamn second.

"You almost ready?" Ali calls from Georgie's bedroom, a voice affected and squeaky, sounding more like a dog toy than something human.

Long brown hair so dark it's practically black curls around Georgie's face. An expensive, tailored flowing blouse fits her like a glove. The Erkal women don't wear off the rack. Gold earrings dangle and chime and a matching drop necklace shimmers in the bathroom light.

She shrugs on her expertly distressed denim jacket that matches perfectly with the not-too-short-but-short-enough shorts. The heels, some designer or other Georgie couldn't give two shits about, complete the outfit.

I'm going to the fucking boardwalk. Why am I wearing this?

She knows damn well why she's wearing it: because she's supposed to.

A knot forms in her throat and she clears it, choking against the memories that she reminds herself daily not to think of. Except it's Friday night and they're going to the boardwalk. The chances of seeing Jenna there are far too high. If only Jenna knew this was pretend.

Georgie eviscerated Jenna years ago, all thanks to Mother. And in public, no less. Jenna was humiliated and Georgie left her hanging. What Georgie did was unforgivable. Hell, she'll never forgive herself.

"You must move forward," Mother said not long after that fateful day when Georgie was a freshman. "Some people will only hold you back. The Erkals are not townies."

Georgie snorts again, thinking about that. Mother has an adjustable definition of 'townie' since she's made it her mission to ingratiate themselves in San Nico. Owning a diner, like Jenna's parents, is too low, Georgie guesses.

With another eye roll, Georgie fluffs her hair, inhales deeply, and wraps her fingers around the doorknob. Cold settles into her palm and she holds herself there for a moment, gathering herself. She wills away thoughts of Jenna, urging her nerves to calm down, and ensures that mask of hers is firmly in place.

With one more breath, she pulls the door open and steps out with a confidence she doesn't feel, yet can still exude.

“How many times do I have to say it? You can’t rush perfection,” Georgie calls down the hall with a flick of her hair.

Kaitlyn and Ali come tumbling out of Georgie’s room, twin bottle ice blondes with easter egg colors in their hair, squealing and gushing about her outfit, and how no guys will be able to keep their eyes off her. How she’ll have Mark drooling.

All these thoughts make her shrivel on the inside. She doesn’t want anyone looking at her or ogling her. Despite how many times she and Mark make out, she feels nothing for him. She’s felt nothing for any guy she’s dated, nor had any inclinations toward any girl, or anyone else. She knows she’s asexual, but with the way Mother forces everything on her, it makes her feel broken.

So, if Mother wants Georgie to date, she’ll date alright.

Ali reaches out and fingers one of Georgie’s dangly earrings with a glint of envy in her eyes. Georgie gives her a close-lipped smile as she compliments her alleged best friend on her own outfit, something equally ridiculous for the boardwalk.

A genuine smile creeps up Georgie’s lips as they chatter about clothes and Mark and his friends and who did what today in whatever class. Just the thought that these girls will fall on their faces once high school ends in a week fills her with joy.

“We ready?” Georgie says with a motion toward the stairs.

With more giggles and squeals, Ali and Kaitlyn lead Georgie down the stairs, out the front door, and to Georgie's SUV waiting in the driveway. The car's ding sounds more like a death knell as she waits for the interior lights to turn off before shifting into reverse and heading out.

* * *

She holds her head high, her shoulders back, each foot stepping with precision. It's what people expect. Georgie doesn't do casual. She doesn't have off days. As far as she, or rather Mother, is concerned, Georgie is always on. Always.

It's exhausting.

What she wouldn't give to just walk around in sweatpants and flip-flops. People would faint dead away if that happened.

The trill of an alarm bell breaks through the bustling noise of the San Nico Boardwalk and the screams of people riding the rollercoaster bring her a momentary wave of nostalgia. Memories of a simpler time when she, Jenna, and Georgie's brother Connor used to hang out down here. Inseparable.

Her heart sinks as she walks through the entrance, skipping past the ticket booths because they certainly don't come here to go on rides.

Mark and his friends lean against the railing near the arcade, their easy swagger a stark contrast against the group

of jocks hovering next to them. Mark is older, but only by a couple of years. It's enough to intimidate the high school boys who know they don't stand a chance with any of the girls while these outsiders are around.

His eyes find Georgie almost immediately, like her very presence is something he's already attuned to. A shiver rolls down her back, and she chalks it up to the breeze blowing in off the ocean.

Old movie star looks make up his features, carving him into something from the past that walked forward in time. Mark even wears his platinum blonde hair slicked back like some sort of greaser. Who does that? But no one dares call him on it.

The stare from his chilling blue eyes will freeze anyone where they stand and Georgie has to fight off the cold every time he turns that gaze on her. It almost makes her gag, the way he leans into her when he's close, how possessive he appears.

Of course, Georgie pretends to like it. Pretends to want it. Whenever he leans in for a kiss, she swallows the bile in her throat as their lips touch. It makes Kaitlyn and Ali jealous and it takes everything in her to keep from shouting, 'he's all yours!'

The only joy Georgie gets out of this situation will be the look on her mother's face when she brings him home. Oh, how sweet that will be.

Mark pushes himself up from the railing and saunters over to her. She smiles as he nears, this warm, inviting thing that Mother taught her to be more endearing, more enticing.

Cold hands wrap around her waist, fingers lingering on the top of her ass as she wraps her arms around his shoulders and nuzzles into his leather jacket.

Who wears a leather jacket?

The question stays on the inside as she gives her girls knowing looks. Mark leads her back to the railing, back to the cluster of people she deigns to call friends.

Mark is also playing a part, something Georgie recognizes easily. He wraps his body around her possessively, yet he scans the crowd, barely even looking at her. Not like she cares, but it still piques her interest. Is he looking for someone?

Then Connor struts onto the gangway and Georgie's heart drops. If Connor's here, so is Jenna. Her heart thunders, the rapid beating making Georgie's head swim. It gives her an excuse to swaddle herself further into Mark, to lean against him for support. He leans back, welcoming her touch even if his look is only glancing.

Ali draws Georgie's attention, talking about something funny that happened to her earlier. It's stupid and vapid and not funny at all, but the meatheads laugh. Kaitlyn laughs. Now it's Georgie's turn.

A peal of laughter rips from her throat, momentarily silencing the carnival noises, before everything starts back up

again.

Mark's hand presses into Georgie's back as she sways, letting the laughter take her over for a moment. She allows herself this nanosecond lapse in judgment, this moment to breathe as the smile lingers on her lips, the flashing lights around her dancing to their own rhythm.

Once the laughter dies down, her eyes pass over the crowd again. Her breath stops when she locks eyes with Jenna. Jenna stares back and rolls her eyes, but keeps staring.

Georgie gives her former best friend a sly look, grasps the leather lapel of Mark's jacket, and pulls him down to her.

She whispers sweet poison into his ear, about how much of a freak Jenna is, how she claims to see monsters. Each letter chips away a piece of Georgie's soul, leaving a divot. A dent. A crack.

The sneering smile that crawls across Mark's face sends a shiver over Georgie's skin, but instead of pulling away from him, like every fiber of her being demands, she settles in closer.

Mark looks over to Jenna, sizing her up, probably, and Georgie wallows in her thoughts, lets the stone of guilt settle into her stomach with all the rest. She can't help but wonder if not wanting to piss off her mother is worth this torture.

Georgie's group loiters the rest of the night instead of doing something meaningful, alternating between lingering in the same place and roaming the gangway, mocking people as they pass. Weed swirls thick around them and a couple of

flasks flash in the carnival lights, but she brushes it all aside. Not tonight.

People like them do stupid shit like this on Friday nights. Georgie contributes to the barbs and the vitriol. Nasty words spill from her mouth while her brain rebels.

She longs for the day when she can just be.

The veneer slips, her mouth pulling down into a frown, so she schools herself. Replaces melancholy with moxie, with haughtiness, with savagery.

When they leave for the night, Mark kisses her in full view of everyone. Wolf whistles and cheers rise from their crowd, immaturity thick in the air. Georgie plays along, wraps her fingers around his neck, through his hair, and pulls him closer.

Something sharp pierces her tongue and she gasps, the salty tang of blood in her mouth. Mark smiles, only inches from her face, and places a chaste peck on her lips before sliding away and into his restored muscle car that Georgie cares nothing about, but pretends it means something.

Once she's through the door, home and alone at last, she peels her shoes off, her feet throbbing and thankful for the release. The giant house is quiet in an empty sort of way, paused and waiting for someone to fill it. The moon shines through the wide living room windows, the light above the stove in the ultra-modern kitchen the only other light.

She drags herself up the shadowed stairs, her body weighing a thousand pounds, her feet nearly impossible to lift

from stair to stair. It's cumulative, all this damage, and it's getting too heavy for Georgie to bear.

She falls into her bedroom, stumbling backward and slamming the door shut with her body. A nagging voice scolds her to take her makeup off, but she can't be fucked right now.

Her head hits the door with a muffled thud as tears track down her cheeks, carving pathways through the layers of lies on her face.

Less than a week left. That's it. Then she's gone. All these bad decisions left behind for something far, far away. Or far enough away, at least.

Georgie's skin itches like she's ready to shed it, molt this old life away and welcome a new one. Anything would be better than this.

* * *

Tonight Mark is picking her up. Tonight is also the night that Mother meets him. The roof may cave in when this happens. Georgie has to remember to not be so giddy when her mother's heart stops at the sight of Georgie's miscreant boyfriend. If he is, she has no idea. But he looks the part, and that's all that matters.

She's putting the finishing touches on her makeup when the rumble of a very specific engine rattles the walls of the

house. A slow smile spreads up Georgie's cheeks as she stares at herself in the mirror. The knowing look on her face glitters with malice and wanting. Not of Mark, just of sticking it to her mother.

Step by step Georgie saunters down the stairs, purse crossed over her body, hair perfect, wardrobe on point just like Mother taught her. A shit-eating grin crawls across her face as Mother scuttles into the kitchen, manicured toes on full display, eyes wide, before the rumbling engine cuts out.

"What the hell is that?" Mother asks.

"My ride," Georgie says, her voice almost singsong.

"I don't think so," Mother huffs, arms tightly knit across her chest, hair still pristine despite the later hour.

Technically, Georgie is still in high school. Also, technically, she's eighteen and will not be bossed around like a kid.

"I do, Mother," Georgie says.

Georgie stands straight, making a concerted effort not to cock her hip. Mother always found that stance so tacky and would slap Georgie's hip every time she did it. Doing it now would add insult to injury and would make Georgie incredibly happy. But she doesn't want that kind of proximity to the piranha.

The gong of the doorbell rings across the open floor plan, but it does nothing to drown out the gnashing of Mother's teeth. Georgie gives her a sly smile as she saunters toward the

door, but she's brought up short by bony fingers biting into her arm.

Normally they stand at the same height, but in Georgie's heels she looks down at her mother, the pinch of skin on her arm growing tighter.

"I will not have you dating trash," Mother hisses through clenched teeth, eyes flaring.

Georgie glances down at the moisturized hand on her arm, the grip wrinkling the sleeve of her jacket. Fingers clench harder, nails finding the sensitive skin on the underside of her arm and digging in. Years of perfecting her poker face pay off as she swallows the pain.

"I'd rather not date at all," Georgie says back to her, her voice almost a growl, "but you insist I take in dick like it's my job. So here I am."

A flash of pain blooms on her cheek as her mother's hand connects to her face, Georgie's head jerking to the side. Open palm, the crack echoes around the entryway. The pain on her arm forgotten, Georgie slowly looks back at her mother, her cheek hot and stinging, the sneer making a snarl of her mouth.

"I didn't raise you to be a classless slut," her mother whispers, her voice vibrating with fury.

A smile ticks up the corner of Georgie's mouth. "Like mother, like daughter, huh?"

Georgie spins around and pulls the door open. Standing on the other side, harshly lit by the overhead light, is Mark. He

leans up against the railing, looking as snide and malicious as Georgie feels. At least they have that one thing in common.

Georgie reaches out and grabs his hand. Cold, clammy, and corpse-like, the feel of his flesh rolls a gag up her throat, but she forces herself not to yank her hand back.

Luckily, as she pulls him through the door, his eyes focus over her shoulder, at Georgie's fuming mother. He pulls his hand from hers and slides it around Georgie's waist.

For a moment Georgie's afraid that he'll see the redness in her cheek, but the hit sounded worse than what it was. Add in the makeup and her hair, and she shouldn't need to make any awkward explanations.

Mother stands rigid in front of them, arms crossed so hard over her chest she can touch her hands together behind her back. Face pinched, back ramrod straight, Mother is failing at her own game of pretend. She doesn't even deign to compose herself, just stands there, staring daggers at Georgie's new boyfriend, with a spare, murderous look for her daughter.

"This is Mark," Georgie says with a vindictive twitch of her lip, pointing at the bad news hanging onto her.

"I'll be late," she adds. "Don't wait up."

She looks up into Mark's face, his own smirk matching hers. She feels like he looks: self-satisfied and smug. It's a great feeling.

Georgie leans into him, pressing him toward the door. She lets it slam behind her as they walk through.

“You do that a lot? Piss her off like that?” Mark asks with a snide smile as he folds himself into his car.

“More than she likes,” Georgie says as she falls in next to him.

She’ll pay for that later. No doubt about it. Another reason she’s become such a master of makeup. Not all of her mother’s hits are weak.

The car rumbles as they drive down Georgie’s idyllic street, cliff-side with a wide open ocean view. The crashing waves are loud even over the thunder of the car’s engine.

Mark’s mother bought the old Emerson Lodge on the edge of town, and that’s where they’re headed. That place is a dump, and for a second Georgie thinks they’ll be partying in a run-down house. But as they travel up the gravel drive and a restored, pristine home with lights blazing greets her, she’s shocked silent as she gets out of the car.

Music thumps through the walls and shadows of people walk back and forth across the brightly lit windows. Mark’s arm slashes out in front of her and opens the door, guiding her into the entry. He presses himself up against her as he enters. A shiver rolls across her shoulders, but she hides it by pressing back into him, as if she actually wants his skeevey attention.

Kaitlyn and Ali squeal and stumble over to her, half drunk already, red cups sloshing with something potent enough that the smell of alcohol fills her nose from where they stand.

They chatter as they pull Georgie to the kitchen and press red cup into her hand.

Her regular crew scatters themselves around the rooms, mixing in with Mark's friends. They mingle like they get along, like they're actually friends, but she knows it's not true.

She looks down into her cup, at the toxic glow of the orange drink, and brings it to her lips. The sugary sweetness of it stings the skin through the layer of lip gloss. Instead of stopping, instead of staying sober like her gut tells her she should, she tips the cup and guzzles it all down.

The sugar puts her teeth on edge, the orange flavor not tasting like any fruit she's ever had. It's the alcohol that she welcomes, feeling it slosh through her as she chugs.

There must be a ton of booze in whatever this juice junk is, because as soon as it hits Georgie's stomach, the floor tilts. She lets out a giggle as she holds onto her empty cup, and Ali and Kaitlyn fall in beside her, holding her up.

Music pumps through unseen speakers, but Georgie can't make out the song. It's just notes and bass that make her skin thrum. Someone pours more toxic orange drink into her cup and she doesn't stop herself from downing it.

Somewhere deep inside her, the voice of reason struggles to tread water in the alcohol wave Georgie's pumping into her body. There's a primary reason she doesn't imbibe, at least not to the point of annihilation: it lowers inhibitions.

It's not just the touch of some guy that sends her mind reeling. It's that blanket of pretend that she's wrapped herself in for years being yanked away. If she exposes who she really is, everything will come crashing down.

She looks into her cup, cups, the blur of what she's holding duplicating before it settles together in the single cup she's holding. At the bottom is maybe an inch of drink. For once she listens to the voice at the back of her mind, sets the cup down, and walks away from it.

Stumbles away from it. Shit. She's had too much. The lightness in her body makes her float as the room swirls around her. Find Mark. She needs to find Mark. Don't talk to anyone. Just find Mark and make him keep her mouth shut with his.

A sour taste settles on her tongue, but it's all her rational brain can think. The other option is leaving, except it's not, because Mark drove her here and no one else looks at all ready to head out.

It doesn't take long to find him, away from people yet the center of attention. Ali shamelessly hangs on his every word and Georgie can't help but roll her eyes as she approaches, her alleged friend unaware of her presence. Instead of being demure with a gentle tap on her shoulder, Georgie lets the alcohol do the talking for her as she hip-checks Ali out of the way and allows her hand to slither up Mark's chest.

He smiles a snake-like smile at her and returns the touch with no apparent regard for the girl just shoved away from

him. Mark wants Georgie, that much is clear. The way his fingers brush along the bare skin of her stomach, how he eyes her neck and mouth hungrily. It's her he wants and Georgie revels in that feeling. Not of a boy wanting her, just of succeeding, of having her efforts reaffirmed. It's more than what Mother gives her.

Georgie shakes her head, and the thoughts of her mother fly from it. She leans into Mark, his body cold despite the heat of the room. It's almost refreshing against her flushed face. The floor tilts under her feet and she inhales through her nose, forcing the spins away.

Bile stings the back of her throat and she turns around, pressing her backside into Mark's front, afraid she's going to puke in his face if she stays facing him.

He doesn't question it. Instead, he pulls her closer, wraps an arm around her shoulder to hold her tight. Georgie leans into it, allowing her head to roll on his shoulder as he nuzzles into her neck.

The night needs to be over. She doesn't have it in her to be this drunk and still pretend.

Mark's nose runs along her neck, his lips barely brushing her skin. A small smile pulls up her mouth while a shudder runs down her back.

She cracks her eyes open, her vision blurry, the room swirling. For just a moment, she's convinced she sees Jenna among the crowd. A hazy, swirly version of her former friend watching the two of them in this semi-private moment.

That's not possible. Jenna wouldn't be here with them. No way. Not after everything. She wouldn't dare show her face, assuming anyone would invite her. Which they wouldn't, on Georgie's orders.

Georgie closes her eyes again, willing the alcohol to wash the hallucination away.

A shooting pain rockets down her neck, into her shoulder, sends white light bursting in her eyes and she gasps. Her body goes rigid as Mark leans his head against her, his mouth still on her neck, and everything goes black.

* * *

The darkness recedes, and an awareness settles over Georgie. Her limbs feel like lead, her head the weight of an anvil. Before her eyes even open, she knows it's too bright, the light on the other side of her eyelids blinding. A headache pulses across her face and a cramp in her neck makes her flinch.

For fuck's sake, how strong was that drink?

It's a colossal effort to move her arms, even to get them to the edge of the blanket to push it off. Eventually she does, then she settles her hands underneath her and pushes herself to a sitting position.

She presses a hand into her eyes and rubs the sleep away. She pries them open, gradually letting in the blinding light of

the surrounding room.

“Fuck,” Georgie mutters as she brings her heavy hand up to block the light.

Blink by blink, the bright gets a little more bearable, but only just. Minutes are creeping by and still her eyes remain sensitive.

Damn hangover.

Relief washes over her when the surrounding room finally comes into focus. Her pristine bedroom wraps around her. A fluffy comforter sits on her bed, shelving with knickknacks and photos are on the bright white walls, and her desk is on the other side of the room.

The blinds are still closed and while they're not blackout, they still block plenty of light. Even then, the light seeping through the cracks lances pain into her head.

She rubs her eyes, trying to push away sleep and the memories from last night. The thought of Mark's tongue slopping around her mouth makes her stomach churn.

Another thought, another lurch and the bile backs up her throat. Faster than she thinks possible in this sluggish moment, Georgie throws herself out of bed, out her bedroom door, and into her bathroom. She hurls herself over the toilet bowl and heaves. Nothing comes up.

She stays there for a moment, hanging over the toilet, her arm resting on the seat over her head, as she gasps against her rolling stomach. Her body still feels like it weighs a ton, but at least she can move when she needs to.

She spits into the water and flushes, bracing herself against the seat to stand up. Her feet shuffle against the cool tile floor as she makes her way to the sink and splashes cold water on her face.

Fingers blindly reach for the hand towel and she presses it to her face, rubbing a little harder than she should, still trying to wake up. When she yanks the towel away, her reflection should be horrifying. Instead, she cackles at the sight staring back at her in the mirror.

It's something from a horror movie. Or from under the boardwalk.

Shit, that stupid drink really did a number on me.

Sweaty, greasy hair sticks to her forehead and across her scalp. Her skin is a weird shade of deep olive gray that makes her look like a corpse. Sunken eyes stare back at her with dark bags dragging them down underneath. The corners of her lips turn down, like she's sad about what she sees, but she cackles again, hoping she runs into her mother looking like this.

Food. She needs something in her stomach. That has to be it. What time is it anyway?

Georgie lumbers back to her room and throws on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, covering up the tank and boy shorts she wore to bed that she doesn't remember changing into. On the nightstand sits her clock, red numbers blaring that it's two in the afternoon.

For the love of . . .

Honestly, she's surprised her mother didn't barge in and drag Georgie out of bed.

She shuffles back to the bathroom, throws her hair up into a messy bun, and grabs her toothbrush. Using far more toothpaste than is necessary, she scrapes her tongue, trying to remove a metallic aftertaste that keeps kicking her gag reflex, before getting to work at the fuzz on her teeth.

Bones crack as she fidgets and stretches while she works the toothbrush around her mouth. She tilts her head to the side, stretching her stiff neck, when she sees it. At the crook of her shoulder where her neck meets is an ugly purple bruise.

The toothbrush clatters into the sink, toothpaste and spit splattering up onto her shirt as she leans into the mirror, getting her neck as close to the glass as she can. Her fingers press into the bruise, puncture wounds, and she winces when it sends a jolt of pain down her arm.

It comes back to her then, the last moment she remembers at Mark's party: Mark nuzzling into her neck and then searing pain.

For fuck's sake, did he bite me?

Words choke her as she struggles to make sense of what she's seeing. There are marks on her neck in the shape of a human bite, like someone, Mark, tried to chomp down on her. And succeeded. Georgie moves closer and pokes at the puncture wounds. What fucking diseases is she going to get from this? *Fuck*. Whatever they are, she hopes they kill her, because Mother is going to skin her alive when she sees this.

Georgie grabs a bottle of alcohol from under the sink and a bunch of cotton balls. She picks the toothbrush back up and clamps her teeth down on it before pouring some alcohol on the swabs. After a couple of deep breaths, she presses the swabs to the wound and wraps her mouth around the toothbrush to keep the screech of pain muffled.

Blood beads up once the already-formed scabs rip away, turning the cotton balls red. Her stomach churns as she keeps wiping, trying to dig the germs of a human mouth out.

When she's convinced it's clean enough, she smears Neosporin on it and covers it with a large Band-Aid better used on skinned knees or a kidney removal incision.

One sticky end crawls up her neck while the other end disappears into the collar of her shirt. Not obvious at all.

With a roll of her eyes, she cleans out her mouth, turns away from the mirror and exits the bathroom, ready, willing, and able to give Mark a piece of her damn mind. How the hell could he bite her so hard? That's so far beyond a hickey. Shit, she's probably going to need a tetanus shot or something.

Georgie's stomach roars and she presses a hand to it, the walls wavering around her as she braces against the door. She closes her eyes against the swirling world and breathes deeply through her nose until the ground steadies under her.

Seriously. What's with this hangover?

She grits her teeth and turns down the stairs, heading for the kitchen. The door rolls open on the breadbox, Georgie yanks out a loaf, and stuffs two slices into the toaster. She

grabs the spreadable butter out of the fridge and knocks the cap off before pulling a knife out of the drawer.

Bright yellow globs snag her attention and she stares, the fat glaring back at her. She thinks about smearing it on her toast, big blobs of it not even melting before she sinks her teeth right into the fat. It melts onto her tongue and swims in her mouth, coating everything in slick oil.

Georgie sways again and grabs the edge of the counter, her mouth watering while her stomach turns and rejects the idea of butter. She grabs the lid and snaps it back onto the container before sliding it down the counter and away from her.

Dry toast it is.

Yet she still grips the knife in her fist like she's about to stab the toast before she eats it.

Finger by finger, she releases the knife and lets it fall to the counter. As soon as the tinkling metal dies down, the toast pops up and Georgie flinches. Heat sears her skin as she grabs the bread, but she doesn't care, too angry that she just got spooked by an appliance.

With a shaking hand, she brings the toast to her mouth, her stomach squirming as her teeth bite down into what should be sweet bread. She winces against the taste, bitter and ashy, but she chokes it down before taking another bite.

On the third bite she gags, her throat pulsing, stomach heaving as she lurches over the kitchen sink and purges

everything she just ate, which isn't much. Her hand, still shaking, reaches up and wipes at the corners of her mouth.

What the hell?

This isn't like any hangover she's ever had. What kind of poison did she drink last night?

She throws the rest of the toast in the garbage, vowing to give Mark hell for whatever he was giving them to drink and for the damn gnaw mark on her neck. She just needs to sit a minute first. Her legs are like jelly, her arms like lead weights, and she's so damn tired she can barely keep her head up.

Her shuffling feet echo loud across the living space. The image of Georgie's fuming mother standing in the kitchen comes to mind as she makes her way to a nearby couch and she smiles. All of this is worth it, just to see the look on Mother's face. Georgie's cheek doesn't even hurt. Probably drowned out by the bite mark on her neck.

She throws herself onto a couch, the afternoon sun beaming in through the floor-to-ceiling ocean front windows. Just as soon as she settles into the warm afternoon sunlight, the heat of her body creeps up, sweat beading on her upper lip.

Trickles of sweat run down her cheeks and her head swims as it gets hotter by the second. Is she having hot flashes? Is she even old enough to have hot flashes?

Her hand presses into her face, flaming skin on flaming skin. When she pulls it away, a trail of smoke follows it. No

candle burns on the table and it doesn't smell like any candle would. Burned meat, maybe.

It gets harder and harder to focus the hotter she gets, but she holds her hand out in front of her and stares at it, the sun lighting it up. It's her fingers that are smoking.

She wipes sweat out of her eyes. So much sweat. Her shirt sticks to her like she just sprinted a mile. As she watches her fingers, they turn red, blisters forming, growing with fluid, and bursting right in front of her eyes.

Georgie's breath hitches, the air cutting off as the flesh burns away, blackens, and flakes, the damage traveling down her fingers. A screech rips out of her throat, and she throws herself forward, out of the sunbeams and off the couch.

Instantly the heat fades, a cold sweat replacing the building inferno. She chokes on air as she holds her smoldering hand in front of her face, the damage surely irreparable. Yet as she watches, the burn undoes itself, like someone hit rewind. The black falls away in specks to the pristine floor, angry red flesh pushes its way to the surface and new skin shines.

What. The. Fuck.

Georgie stares at her hand, sweat trailing down her face, fighting back a shiver as the cool room envelopes her. Then she looks at the beam of sunlight.

No way.

That's impossible. She doesn't get sunburns. She'd have to be out from dawn till dusk for that to happen. Never mind she

wears SPF. But this? What the hell is this?

Slowly, her hand far steadier than when she was holding toast, she presses forward, back into the sunlight.

Within seconds, smoke swirls from the tips of her fingers as if they were candles. Pain is instantaneous on the new skin, like pressing it into a fire. Georgie yanks her hand back, the tips of her fingers angry red that fades as soon as it's out of the sunlight.

A hangover that has her sensitive to the sun?

A bite mark on her neck?

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” she mutters as she watches her hand heal again.

Her heartbeat thunders in her ears, blood rushing through her veins, making her limbs jittery. No one’s going to believe her. Absolutely no one. What the hell happened last night? What did Mark do to her?

That fucking asshole.

Georgie grits her teeth and pulls herself to her shaky feet. No, this is not happening. It can’t be. This is something else, some weird illness. Has to be.

Because this definitely is not a hangover.

She stomps back upstairs and slams her bedroom door behind her, locking herself in a cocoon of semi-darkness. She throws herself back into the bed and pulls the comforter over her head.

Panic thrums through her, shaking her hands, chattering her teeth. This can’t be happening.

Then, wrapped up in the safety of her blanket, a giggle blooms in Georgie's throat. She slaps a hand over her mouth, trying to stopper it, but it overflows, laughter falling out of her mouth in waves.

Mark looks the part of a bad boy. That's all she cares about. But it turns out that's exactly what he is. No, not a bad boy. A fucking monster. A real life monster who turned her into one.

Tears stream down her face as she laughs, her stomach muscles cramping. All these years she thought of her mother as a monster, controlling Georgie's life so thoroughly she doesn't even know who she really is.

Now she's the monster, something that can't even go during the day. Can't eat toast. Isn't fit for this world.

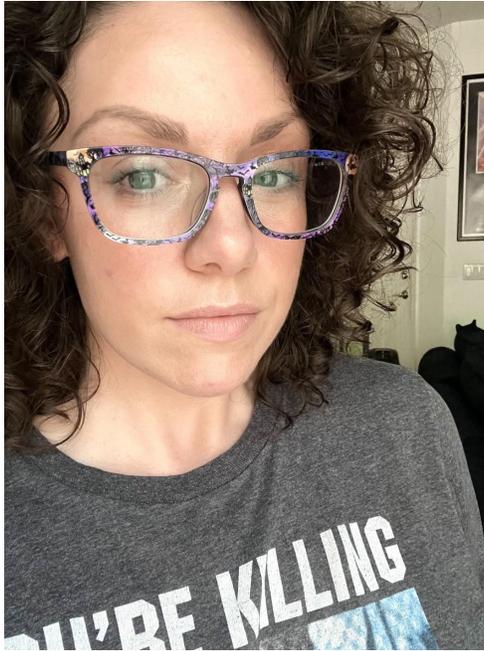
Georgie flops onto her back, her chest heaving with laughter.

All the clothes, the makeup, the posturing. It all means nothing now. The work her mother put in, poof. Gone. Mark may have torn at her neck like a fucking animal, but for the first time in her life, Georgie feels free.

Stuck inside until the sun goes down, at this point she'd rather be tied to Mark the monster than Mother the monster. Now Georgie's the one with the bigger bite.

She presses a hand to her chest and laughs.

* * *



About the Author

Donna Taylor is the 2021 Watty Award-winning author of *BLOOD ON THE BOARDWALK*, the first book in the San Nico Slayer series of young adult horror novels. The second book in the series, *MONSTERS IN THE MOUNTAINS*, shortlisted for the Wattys in 2022. Thanks to her moderate (okay, large) obsession with the mullet-filled 1987 masterpiece, *The Lost Boys*, she's made it her goal to freak you out and make you laugh about it, at least a little. She is a cross-genre writer, though, and likes to dabble in a variety of stories. Don't be surprised if the darkness creeps into those too. A nerd at heart, she lives in the American Southwest with her equally nerdy husband and four unimpressed cats. When she's not writing, she's crafting things out of paper, reading all manner

of books, and doing her best Spiderman impression. You can find her at her website and across various social media platforms being incredibly awkward. Sign up for her newsletter for monthly updates on all her writing projects, along with exclusive content from her San Nico Slayers series, along with her adult dystopian thriller series, Project Titan, and adult paranormal historical fiction story, What They Wrought.

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Also by Donna Taylor

Donna writes primarily young adult paranormal horror and horror-adjacent novels, but she likes to keep her options open. She also dabbles in adult dystopian and historical fiction, among other genres.



Blood on the Boardwalk (San Nico Slayers #1)

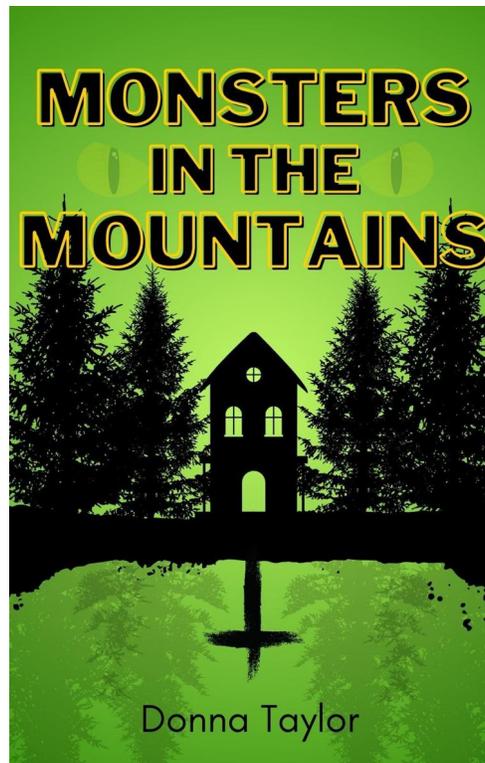
Jenna's convinced monsters aren't real, until one starts killing people in her small beach town and sets his fangs on

her. Surviving an undead serial killer seems almost as hard as surviving high school.

+

Surf, sand, neon lights, and vampire jokes have been Jenna's life ever since her former best friend, Georgie, spilled her darkest secret to the whole school. A secret that's haunted her since she was little - that she was attacked by something inhuman. When she stumbles upon blood-drained bodies on the boardwalk, and is attacked by a vampire-looking monster, old nightmares become reality. Now in the crosshairs of an undead serial killer, Jenna's pretty sure the killer is also Georgie's new boyfriend. Dodging a murderer is easier than talking to her enemy, but when Georgie starts changing in even more monstrous ways, Jenna has to suck it up and work with the person she hates most if she wants any hope of stopping a killer before they both end up dead.

Part of the Wattpad Paid Stories program (available on my Wattpad profile) and available through YONDER, the next-generation reading app from the WEBTOON and Wattpad family of apps!



Monsters in the Mountains (San Nico Slayers #2)

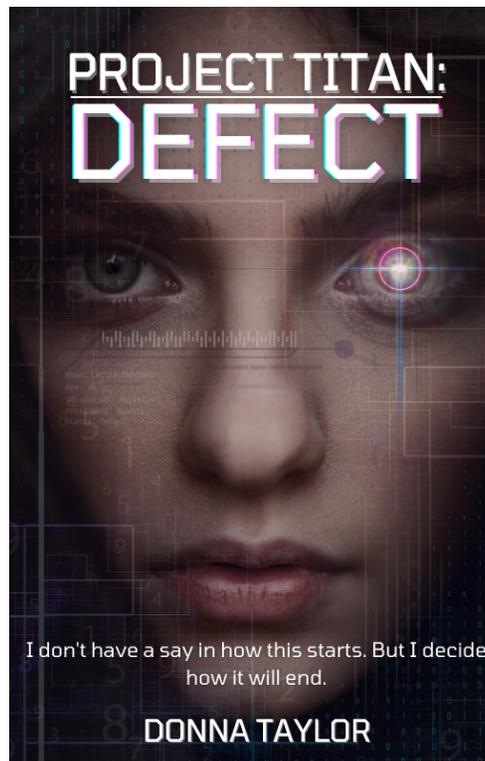
Jenna never planned on starting her summer vacation by staking a vampire serial killer. She certainly had no intention of joining a supernatural shadow agency, yet here she is, on her way to Slayer Summer Camp.

If the hours-long deep dives into the dark and creepy don't kill her, then the intense physical training probably will. Or perhaps it'll be the ghosts in the woods that really want her to know they're there.

When Jenna's moods change, she thinks it's just stress. But when she starts dreaming about those ghosts, she knows it's

more than coincidence. As Jenna's moods grow darker, and deadlier, she needs to figure out what's happening to her, and why, before the thing inside her destroys her completely.

Read it for free on Wattpad!



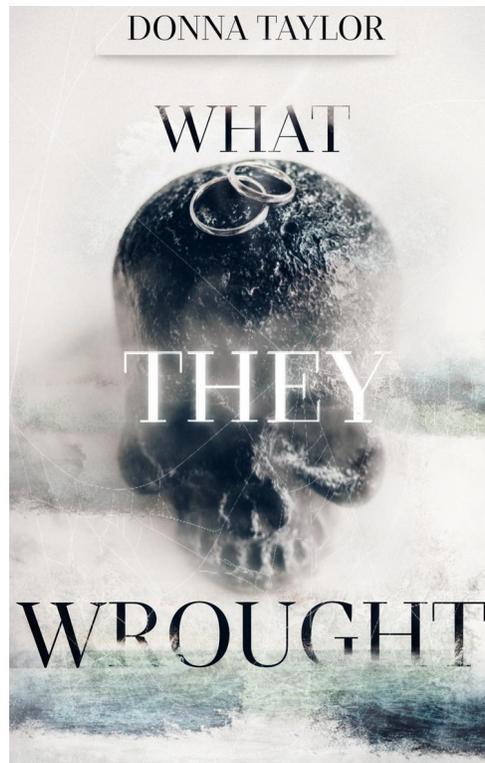
Project Titan: Defect (Project Titan #1)

Powers like super strength, rapid healing, and turning into a human lie detector should make the highly trained Lottie Merchant an even better soldier than she already is. But the Hounds, the city of Seven Hills' elite security force, see people like her as a threat. Uncontrollable and therefore useless, Defects are only good if they're dead. Never mind Lottie's

newfound Defect status is a side effect of experimental technology the Hounds exposed her to. And Lottie's ex, Gabriel, is their number one Defect hunter.

As the mayor's personal assassin, Lottie's already on the right side of the Hounds, so long as they don't find out about her. Only hiding her blooming powers is easier said than done, until she stumbles on an underground network willing to help. The Hounds are doing far nastier things than killing stray Defects, and before Lottie can expose them and break their stranglehold on the city, she has to survive Gabriel first.

An adult dystopian thriller available to read for free on Wattpad in early 2023!



What They Wrought

Her father's death left Maybe Leigh's family vulnerable, and before long the pious inhabitants of Salem Village came for the witchy women of the Leigh family. Purveyors of herbs and tinctures that can heal or harm, Maybe's mother and sister met their end at the drop of a noose, forcing Maybe to swear vengeance on the town before saving herself. Stowing away on a ship heading anywhere but the Massachusetts Bay Colony, with little more than the clothes on her back and her mother's grimoire, Maybe finds herself facing down a murderous pirate and his crew and stumbling upon magic darker than she could ever dream. Perhaps these are the

things she needs to help rain her rage down upon tiny Salem Village. Assuming she survives the voyage, that is.

An adult paranormal historical fiction novella available to read for free on Wattpad!



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