

Excerpt

## Chapter One

He spotted her across the street, blonde hair shining like polished gold in the sunlight, her lithe body tormenting every Y-chromosome in a hundred yard radius. He pulled out his cell and took a snapshot to immortalize the moment. He'd thought she said she was returning later in the week. Obviously he'd been mistaken. He dialed her number and watched her pull out her phone. He waited for the matching smile to form on her lips, for her eyes to light up. Instead, she checked caller ID, grimaced, and let the call go to voicemail.

Horror rushed through him as she re-pocketed the phone and turned back to her companion. What the fuck? He killed the connection and collapsed to a nearby bench, hidden from sight by a mass of tangled bushes.

He'd thought she loved him. That she wanted to be with him...

God! He'd given her everything she needed, laid it out like a feast on a platter with a fucking apple stuffed in its mouth. She played you, dumbass.

Fury flayed his skin. Rage so hot and pure that the blood coursing his body burned his bones. She thought she could dismiss him? Like he was nothing? Like he hadn't risked everything for her? His hand strangled his phone as he imagined it squeezing her alabaster neck.

A noise brought him back to himself, and he drew in a long breath.

A laugh.

A giggle.

His head jerked up. Students milled around. They were relaxed and happy after winter break. The monster had been caught. They were safe. Life could go back to normal.

Sheep.

How could they think they were safe when the person they were having coffee with might be a predator dreaming about ripping into their soft, white underbelly? Why were they so willing to swallow bullshit as long as it was confidently labeled "truth"?

The system was broken. Bad guys walked free every single day. Good guys rotted. Innocents died.

Idiots.

A cute freshman smiled shyly at him from the bench opposite. He stretched his mouth into an answering curve that revealed nothing of the shock and disappointment that still rippled through him. Women liked him. So why the fuck did she think it was okay to ignore him?

A plan formed in his brain—a plan that buzzed along his nerves with the blistering speed of electricity.

Should he do it?

It might mess up things, and he didn't want to go to prison, but it would certainly get her attention. His brain raced over the possibilities. He knew how to do this. He knew how not to get caught. And it might keep things interesting. Life had been pretty fucking boring lately and, as he'd found out last year, there was nothing quite as satisfying as revenge.

The student hiked her bag on her shoulder and got up to leave. He eyed the flirty plaid skirt she wore over opaque black tights and tall black boots, then jogged to catch up with her. Made a joke. Made her blush.

It was almost too easy.

He laughed and realized he was enjoying himself again. The excitement resurrected something inside him that was both heady and familiar. Something that scared him enough to keep it tightly leashed and under control. Something he'd denied himself for ten long months. He reined in the thrill that fizzed through his bloodstream. He needed to be careful. The memory of the disgraced former quarterback reminded him he couldn't afford to get cocky. No way in hell did he intend to share the asshole's shame and degradation. But he knew the system. Knew the flaws. She was going to regret not taking that goddamned phone call for the rest of her life.

\* \* \*

Cassie Bressinger smoothed out the single sheet of paper and read Drew's small, cramped handwriting for the seventh time that day.

*Cass,*

*I was trying to figure out something interesting to tell you, but after only a month I'm already running out of material. I mean, there are only so many adjectives I can invent to describe the three shades of gray that make up the decor here—snot, Minnesota, and dead rabbit are my newest favorites. I probably wouldn't win any prizes in English class, but as I got kicked out I guess it doesn't matter.*

*Three shades of gray—hmm, there might be a book in there somewhere...*

*Fifty Shades this place is not. Not to say there isn't plenty of banging going on from the grunts and groans I hear at night. Someone somewhere is enjoying the fuck out of somebody else.*

*I think it's consensual...*

*An ironic concern for a convicted rapist but, hey, who wants to be predictable?*

*Honestly, Babe, I'm at the stage where protecting my own ass has become my #1 priority.*

*Luckily, I'm a big motherfucker and spent years on the gridiron, staring down people desperate to drill me into the ground. I could do with my offensive line in here though...*

*Crap.*

*I didn't mean to talk about this shit and I'm running out of writing paper so I don't want to start over. Plus, my fingers are getting cramps from holding a pen. Yeah, me, former star athlete whose hands were supposed to be his golden meal ticket. Getting cramps from writing a freaking letter! More irony*

*Enough about me. How are you? What's happening with your courses this semester? You said you were going to try and get into law school. Please don't do that because of me!!! The last thing I want is for you to be stuck in a stuffy courtroom listening to god-awful testimony and watching people's lives disintegrate. Run away and join the circus. Take a year off and travel the world.*

*Seriously.*

*And make sure you write and tell me all about your adventures, okay? I'm living vicariously.*

*And if you want to have sex with other girls—that's okay. Feel free to write and tell me all about that, too. Kidding! Well...kind of kidding and now kind of horny, which is a pain in the ass.*

*Obviously the DA was right to classify me as a dangerous sex fiend.*

*Fucker.*

*Okay, gotta go. Time for me to go line up for sloppy mashed potatoes and sausages that look like severed fingers... Ugh, okay, just grossed myself out.*

*Don't worry about me—I got this.*

*Love you. Miss you.*

*Drew. X*

Someone knocked on the door and Cassie jumped. Tanya Whitehouse sauntered in before Cassie had a chance to hide the letter.

"That from Drew?" Tanya was wearing skinny jeans, her favorite strappy black top, and sparkly earrings. Her lips glowed in glittering magenta. Going out. Doing normal things like a normal person.

Cassie popped a shoulder and nodded.

"He okay?" asked Tanya.

"He's incarcerated with rapists and murderers for crimes he didn't commit," she bit out. "What do you think?"

Tanya placed her perfectly manicured hand along Cassie's forearm. "You know what I meant." Always patient. Always reasonable.

Cassie swallowed the anger. She wasn't patient, and she wasn't reasonable. But Tanya was only trying to help. All her friends had been nothing but supportive throughout this entire nightmare.

"He says he's okay." Cassie swallowed the knotted lump of grief that had taken up residence in her throat and tried to find her rationality. "I think he just says that to make me feel better."

"You going to visit him?" Tanya asked gently.

Cassie nodded. "I'm driving over with his dad at the end of the month. Drew doesn't want me to come, but I—"

"Maybe he's right."

Cassie sat up on the messy bed. She knew where this was going. "Please don't tell me I'm wasting my life. Drew is my life."

Tanya grabbed Cassie's hand and squeezed hard enough to hurt. "I just don't want you to be sad for the next thirty years."

Her vision blurred, but they both pretended Cassie wasn't crying. Even she was sick of the incessant tears. "I won't be." She was lying. "Anyway, he can still appeal."

There was an awkward silence when Tanya didn't say anything. Cassie's gaze shifted to the image on the front of a magazine. Easier to look at some movie star complaining about her messed up childhood than dealing with the sort of truth that dug holes in your soul.

"Hey," Tanya said brightly, "there's a party over at Riddell Hall. Wanna come with?"

Cassie shook her head.

"Come on. It'll be fun," her friend urged.

Going to a party would remind her of all the times she and Drew had hung out. She didn't want to acknowledge the aching void of his absence—especially not in public.

"I have an assignment due tomorrow. I really need to finish it." She crawled over to her bedside table in search of a tissue.

Tanya lightly flicked the magazine, mockingly. "Well, you better get on with it then."

Cassie slumped back to the bed, ashamed of how piteous she'd become. "I can't face seeing people," she admitted. "Not yet. Maybe coming back to school was a mistake."

"You did great. Take it slowly. You'll get there, and we'll all be waiting for you on the other side of this."

Cassie nodded. The problem was there was no 'other side.' Drew's loss was like a rip in her chest that got bigger every day. "The world thinks he's a monster."

Tanya wrapped her arms around Cassie in a quick hug. "We love him. We know he's a good guy and would never touch those lying bitches."

"I don't know how this could have happened."

"You can't lock yourself away forever, Cass."

But she wanted to.

She didn't know why she'd come back this term, but hanging around her parents' house with nothing to do was worse. Christmas had sucked balls. Now she needed to figure out a way to move on without giving up on the man she loved.

She gripped her friend. "I love you, Tan. I'm sorry I'm such a bitch."

"I love you, too, baby."

She forced herself to pull away and wiped her eyes. "I really do have an assignment to finish."

"Then get to it, slacker." Tanya gave her arm a noogie.

Cassie forced a smile. She'd blown off cheerleading practice earlier today, and if she did it again, the coach would throw her off the squad. She didn't care, except it would screw with her scholarship, and her parents weren't wealthy. She couldn't afford to get thrown out of the program, and she needed a good GPA to have a hope of getting into law school. But every time the football players ran onto the field in their black and gold jerseys, it was like someone was pouring acid in her eyes. Knowing everyone's life went on while Drew sat locked up in a cell. Her throat constricted. Some days it felt like the pain would consume her whole.

She stood and pushed her friend toward the door. "Go. Have fun. Kiss some hot guys for me."

"If I can find someone worthy enough, I intend to do a lot more than kiss him. So don't worry if I don't come home tonight. I'll text you." Tanya grinned. "Mandy's studying in her room. Alicia is still at the library but said she'd be back just after ten as per usual. She might come to the party later, so if you change your mind..."

"Maybe," Cassie lied. "You be careful out there. Guard your drink," she warned. Because if those women had been raped, there was still a dangerous criminal on the loose, and no one knew it.

"I will, honey. Jillian's going to be here any minute to give me a ride."

"Go. Have fun."

Tanya turned and smiled at her sadly, touching her arm. Cassie felt the punch of it near her heart. "You'll get through this, Cass. You don't have to forget Drew, but you need to keep living your life. He'd want you to do that."

Cassie's lip wobbled as she remembered what he'd said in his letter. She crossed her arms over her chest as she watched her friend jog down the stairs, grab her coat, and race out the front door. She had to believe a miracle was going to happen and that Drew would be freed, but it seemed futile. The judicial process was so slow it took months to even schedule a court hearing. In the meantime Drew was forced to live amongst killers and thieves. Getting raped in the showers wasn't something anyone should have to worry about. Who could live like that? That bitch Donovan had a lot to answer for. The blonde detective probably thought this was over.

It wasn't. It would never be over.

Anger grounded her. Without it she'd be so damn lost.

Across the hall, Mandy turned her music on full blast. Cassie slipped on her noise-canceling headphones and stared at her computer and thought about the paper she needed to finish.

Instead she pulled out a pen and notepad and started to write back to the man she loved, stopping only once to wipe away the tears that insisted on falling.

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