



SEVEN

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BY
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Self-publishing

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Karma, because, well, she is a bitch,
and I like to be on her good side.

It's also dedicated to chocolate. I love chocolate.

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PROLOGUE

My skin flinches from the cold tile of the bathroom floor. My neck, aching from the pull of it falling forward in disgust. My stomach is twisted in knots, and my chest is constricted. Black tears fall to my bare legs and I lift my hands to wipe them away, but it's no use. The flow of them will never stop.

What the hell have I done?



From the outside looking in, it may seem like I'm any normal twenty-eight-year-old woman who has her shit together. I have a job that allows me to own my own condo. I pay my bills on time, work out almost every day, and drive a red Mercedes C-Class Coupe. But, looks can be deceiving, and I'm as deceitful as they come. Each and every move I've made in my adult life has been meticulously planned out to bring me to where I am today—bent over my boss's desk at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon.

“Goddamn it, Embyr,” he grunts behind me, sweating profusely. “You have to stop wearing these fucking skirts to work.”

He relentlessly pounds into me, his front meeting my ass, and I moan his name out, faking my way through each thrust. “Yes, Patrick. Yes. Pull my hair,” I command. I much prefer the pain of him grasping my tresses. It takes away from being present for another lousy fuck.

My body will never succumb to him. I won't allow him the privilege of making me come. I never do. I just moan and scream, allowing him to believe that his amateur screwing can make me fall apart.

Fucking asshole.

His head falls to my bare shoulder and I can feel the disgusting slime that is radiating out of his pores. When he grips my hair hard between his fingers, I rear back on him, egging him on, so he can hurry up and get the fuck out of me.

I push my ass against him harder. The sounds, coming out of his mouth, can be closely described as what, I assume, an

elephant sounds like when he finally shoots his load. I call out his name, huffing and puffing, making it seem as though this is the best lay I have ever had.

When he finally pulls his micro penis out of me and walks to his personal adjoining bathroom, slamming the door behind him, I slip my skirt back over my ass, and rush to his computer. My fingers type rapidly as I bring up his bank website and type in his password to move just a little bit more of his client's money into the secret Swiss bank account he thought he'd hidden. But, not from me; I'd come across this bad boy months ago.

The toilet flushes, and my fingers ache as I furiously finish up the transaction and jump away just in time. He walks back into the office, eyeing me as I sweetly sit on the couch along the large glass windows looking out towards the Chicago skyline. His early balding and already graying brown hair makes me sick just to look at him which is why I always make him fuck me from behind. "You can go back to work now," Patrick says, fidgeting with his belt, dismissing me.

I don't get upset like some lovesick girl who wants her married boss to leave his wife.

No.

I pick myself up and stride confidently out of the room, smirking to myself at how easily he is played.

Bypassing my desk, I take the long, bland hallway of Strickland Consulting to the ladies bathroom. After using the toilet, attempting to wipe the stickiness off my thighs, and washing my hands, I take a long look in the mirror.

Not a hair out of place. That man couldn't rough up a paper bag.

I shake my head and pull my lip gloss out of my bra. As I glide the light pink over my lips and rub it in, I can't help but laugh at how easy this all has been so far.

He hasn't recognized me. Not from the moment he interviewed me. It's amazing how dropping thirty pounds and dying your hair from a mousey-blonde to auburn can fool one

of your high school tormentors into allowing you to pull his strings like a tiny, little puppet. It was a constant battle to keep my mouth shut in high school about their hazing; the threat of them ruining my life, altogether, loomed over me. I'll have them all by the balls soon, and they don't even know it yet.

But my lousy fuck of a boss will by the end of the day.

Patrick Strickland was the ring leader in high school. He controlled the PITCREW, as they so lovingly called themselves. The letters stood for each of their names.

Patrick.

Ian.

Thad.

Casen.

Reece.

Evan.

Wesley.

Their sole purpose in high school was to work on the cars that their mommies and daddies paid for, every chance they got. All of them—rich. All of them—good looking. All of them—popular. All of them ... complete and total assholes.

Each of the seven could have any girl they wanted in school, and they did, but in their free time, they chose to torture me every day for what they had done ... what *I* had done. Using it over my head to keep my mouth shut.

They knew my mother was mentally unstable and could slit her wrists at any moment. They also knew I would never want my daddy's career ruined because of his daughter: the "slut." I spent the rest of my high school career catering to them and their "needs." Whatever they wanted, I got for them or gave to them. They drained me physically and emotionally.

But things changed. I've changed.

I was never a sweet girl. I never claimed to be, but someone, somewhere, labeled me as nice with a fucking cherry on top. If they only knew the thoughts that ran through

my mind, they would run screaming from their cozy spots on *Oblivious Island*. A decade ago, they hurt me. A decade later, they will pay.

I no longer have any family. My mom lived up to the rumors and took her life just a month before I graduated high school, and my father was killed in the line of duty just two months later. I have no friends from back then and, even if I did, I left them all to put myself through a metamorphosis that any butterfly would be jealous of.

I went on a diet, worked out like a mad woman, dyed my hair and got green colored contacts to hide the old, brown irises. All in the name of retribution. There is no one left that I love who can get hurt if my plot of revenge, on all seven of them, goes wrong. They ruined me. Ruined my body. Ruined my mind. Ruined my life. Now it's my turn to take from them all that they took from me ... and more.

Straightening my shoulders, I walk back toward my desk only to hear the phone alerting me to a new call. I rush over in my three-inch, red heels, sitting down to answer.

“Strickland Consulting. Embyr, speaking. How may I assist you?”

Embyr.

Yes, I changed my name, too. No more Annie from Arlington Heights. That doormat is long gone.

“Embyr, this is Roxie from check in. I thought I should warn you that the police are on their way up.” Her frantic voice comes through the receiver.

I smirk.

This is it.

“Thank you, Rox,” I say calmly, placing the phone in its cradle. I cross one leg over the other, fixing my skirt that has ridden up my thigh. I glance at the elevators, patiently waiting for the end of Patrick's career.

I take pleasure in thinking about him bent over in the shower, taking it in the ass from another inmate. For all the

times he screwed me over in high school, I don't feel a shred of remorse over what I've done to him.

The ding of the elevators, arriving at the twenty-third floor, causes me to sit up straight. Four police officers come barreling out, one by one, bypassing me completely, and barging into his office. I hear a small scuffle, and then Patrick yells, "What the fuck is this?"

"Patrick Strickland?" one of the men in uniform asks.

A moment later I hear another officer's voice, "You're under arrest for theft and misappropriation of funds."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he roars, angrier than I've ever heard him before.

I stifle a chuckle, but quickly stand to my feet, my eyebrows scrunching in fake concern and confusion when they pull a handcuffed Patrick out of his office. "What's going on?" I ask, my hand going over my heart like the good, little, worried secretary I must play.

Patrick's face is red with anger and laced with terror.

He looks scared.

So was I, fucker. I was scared every fucking day in high school, wondering what would happen with me next. Well, now it's his turn.

"Call my lawyer, Embyr. Call him now!" he yells as they drag him into the elevator. His tone would scare anyone, but not me. I'm made of fucking steel, thanks to him and his cronies.

I reach for the phone, hitting speed dial number three, and give his lawyer all the information that I have ...or supposedly have, and hang up. I glance at the clock on the bottom of my computer screen, noting it's just after four o'clock, and start to gather the few belongings of mine into my bag. I figure he won't mind if I leave a little early. I'm never coming back here again anyways.

I set up the answering service for the weekend, (not that I believe Patrick will be back on Monday) and walk with

confidence to the elevator, hitting the down button. The doors open and I step in, turning around to take one final look at the office I've spent the past six months at.

Fuck this place.

I reach the ground floor, ignoring Roxie's rapid fire questions, and quickly push my way through the revolving doors, letting the cool fall breeze wash over me. I fill my lungs with fresh air and allow it to soothe me. A sense of accomplishment washes over me. The tension I've carried in my body, for the past ten years, releasing just a little bit.

Fucking him over was like a drug. I needed more, and I knew where to get it.

One PITCREW member down. Six to go.

~~Patrick~~

Ian

Thad

Casen

Reece

Evan

Wesley

TWO

I'm feeling euphoric as I enter Jedi's Bar, after leaving Strickland Consulting for the last time. No more lousy sex with grotesque looking bosses. I'm sure the police will call me in for questioning but, right now, my focus is on the start of my new mission, and the one particular patron who frequents this establishment will hold. Since my time with Patrick is up, I can give my full attention to the next task. Jedi's is not only the greatest bar Chicago has to offer but it's also where my next PITCREW hit list member comes religiously, and the one who I will take most of my time with.

The place is packed by the time I arrive. Almost every seat is taken except for two lonely stools conveniently located next to each other around the u-shaped bar. I zero in on my destination, hoping no one snatches them up before I do, and adjust my way-too-fucking-short skirt. I navigate through drunken businessmen who attempt to halt my progress and flirt with me. I wave them off and finally make it just in time to claim the seats.

Laying my black clutch and cell phone on the bar, I look around the expansive space for him. Usually my body can feel his presence, but not now; he hasn't arrived yet. I tilt my head back to take in the surroundings. I come here often, but the atmosphere intrigues me every time. The bar lies within an old warehouse building, giving it that factory feel. The ceiling is raised three stories, and it has all different sized pipes lining the walls. Even with the large space, it's still noisy, between the people enjoying a drink after work and the music. "What can I get you, sweetheart?" Damien, the bartender, yells over the noise, earning my attention.

I smile, reaching into my clutch, and hand over my credit card. “Captain and Coke, please.”

Damien is smoking hot: medium length blond hair that is pulled back into a ponytail and blue eyes as clear as the ocean. From the stretching of his work shirt, you can clearly see he is definitely well-toned. If I wasn't here on a mission, I might take him up on his countless offers of fucking me senseless. *Lord knows I could use a good dick-induced orgasm.*

Biting my lip, I enjoy the view more than I should. I admire his muscular ass as he bends down to retrieve the Captain Morgan. The stool next to me is pulled out, and I don't have to look to know who it is. “Are you eye banging Damien, again?” Trinity asks, putting her almost identical clutch down on the bar. I laugh as Damien returns with my drink and a Corona for Trinity. “Damien.” She smiles in greeting, lifting her bottle towards him before taking a sip.

“Trin.” He smirks back and lightly slaps the bar top. “I'll keep the tab open for, you two, but that round is on me.”

“I'd love to be on him,” Trinity comments, lifting an eyebrow. I shake my head at her. She looks around for a moment, points at a vacant table, and tells me she would rather sit in a comfortable booth. I follow closely behind her, absorbing more of the surroundings, while shamelessly looking for *him*. When we are settled at the table, Trinity goes quiet. Unusual for her, and I watch as she nervously starts to pick at her fingernails. That's odd.

“What's up?” I prod, trying to get her to ask what she wants to ask. Trinity isn't a shy girl. She isn't one to hold back when she has something to say, but sometimes her discomfort, over what she needs to talk about, makes her look like a sixteen-year-old about to tell her parents she is pregnant.

I watch her blue eyes look up at me before she runs her fingers through her short, black hair. “I, ah, heard what happened with Patrick today. Are you ok?”

I inwardly laugh. That can't be why she is nervous. I cross one leg over the other, adjusting my skirt. “I'm perfectly fine. He was an asshole; he will get what he deserves.”

She shakes her head as if in disbelief. “I just can’t believe he was doing that and didn’t think he would get caught.”

“Well, karma is a bitch,” I respond. She lifts her beer bottle toward me in agreement, and I clink it with my glass.

To be honest, I don’t think he would have ever been caught doing the small amounts he was doing. The clients he was taking money from would never have noticed. They spend money some of them earned illegally to begin with, and never bother to balance any sort of check book. They were stupid to trust their money with an outsider and not check in on him. I just helped make it more evident. A few hundred here and there wouldn’t be noticeable but tens of thousands would, and it didn’t take long. From the time I found the account Patrick was trying to hide, to his arrest today, was only a few short months.

“So,” I stare at her, giving the look that she knows I’m being serious. “What is all the fidgeting really about?”

Her shoulders slump and she falls into the back of the booth. “It’s Jade.”

Ah, Jade. Her sister. The one who can’t fucking stop having babies. Six kids with three fathers. With just the mention of her name, I know I’m not going to like it. I’ve only met her a few times, and I tried to feel sorry for her, but you can’t have unprotected sex all the time and think you won’t get pregnant. None of the father’s are involved in their kids’ lives, but Trinity tells me that at least two of them give her some sort of financial support. Jade also can’t find work. By the time she would pay a sitter for all of the kids, she would owe more than she earned. It’s quite a mess.

“What about her?”

She sighs. I can tell she is just as thrilled with the news that she is about to tell me as I am. “She needs help, and has asked me to move in with her.”

My heart dips a little, and I try to control the emotions that are taking over. Trinity is my roommate but she is also the closest real friend I have ever had. In high school, after junior

year, no one wanted to be associated with the girl that had the PITCREW on their radar. I was deemed untouchable, unapproachable, and off limits. Even my best friend, since fourth grade, abandoned me. I don't blame her. Hell, even I didn't want to be around me most of the time. High school kids can be cruel, in more ways than one.

Trinity and I met at the gym, right after I moved to Chicago. We instantly connected over a protein smoothie, and started working out together all the time. When she got a job at an art studio, she left her parents house and moved in with me. I didn't need a roommate. I didn't need help with the rent, but I did feel like I needed a friend. She doesn't know much about my past. She knows not to ask, but I do know that, if she went to my high school, she would have stayed by my side. I'm one hundred percent confident that Trinity would never have let all that shit go on without doing something about it. So, I must know that I won't lose her friendship even if she is moving out. "Losing a job and a best friend in one day? Wow," I half-heartedly joke.

"Em." She frowns, reaching over to grab my hand. Our fingers interlace, and I'm instantly comforted.

A laugh escapes between my lips. "Trinity, I'm just kidding," I tell her, squeezing her fingers. "Family comes first."

"Thank you. It means a lot that you understand." She waves towards Damien across the room who nods. "Next round is on me."

I smile but, suddenly, I feel the hairs on my neck stand up. My body zings with electricity, and I know. My body knows. My mind knows.

He's here.

My eyes flash to the entrance, watching as the heavy, red door swings shut and several females seem to zone in on a man who commands attention. Casen Parker, fourth member of the PITCREW, and the hottest of them all, walks in, surrounded by his usual entourage of co-workers. I fidget in my seat, anticipation running deep within me. That man gives

off the vibe as though he can tear a woman's body in two like no other. His looks alone have the power to make any woman come on the spot. His black hair, short in the back and swooped over on the top, is long enough to roll your fingers through and grab onto. His eyes are a burning combination of green with a hint of blue. He takes great care of his body, going to the gym six days a week. His six pack abs and ass to die for prove it. His strong jaw holds perfect white teeth and dimples that you could take shots out of.

How do I know all of this? Because I've been watching him. I've seen him here for weeks, but it was well before that when I spotted him at my gym. It had been an odd nightly workout for me and apparently, for him, as well, since I haven't seen him there since. He just so happened to take his shirt off as he walked into the locker room, and I got a glimpse of his upper body. From what I can tell, he hasn't changed all that much. He seems nice to everyone around him, and if it wasn't for his association with the crew, I'd almost feel bad for what I'm going to do to him.

Almost.

Our gazes collide, as they have multiple times over the last couple of weeks, and his lopsided smirk appears, rooting me to my seat. I'm startled as a balled up napkin is thrown in my face. I pluck it from my lap and toss it back at her. "What the hell, Trinity?"

She laughs. "I think you need to wipe up that drool from your mouth."

I wave her off and look back over, but he's gone as fast as he came. I know he is still here. I have an obstructed view of his regular table, close to the dart boards, but I can see brief sightings of the guys he came in with.

"So, what about money?" Trinity asks just as the waitress drops our drinks off.

I furrow my brows, turning my attention back to her. "What about it?"

“Well, you just lost your job,” she whispers it like she is telling me I have an STD. “I don’t want to abandon you. I could stay for another month, if you want.”

I shake my head. “No, I’ll be fine. I have enough in my checking account to get me through. Plus, I have money in my savings.”

“Embyr,” she tilts her head to the side, “I feel bad. I don’t want you to have to pull from your savings.”

The music from the DJ gets louder, so I speak up. “I promise I will be fine. You’re the one who is going to get driven nuts!”

Her eyes roll. “You’re so right. I’m going to have to get some orgasmic release more often than I do now.”

I snicker. Trinity isn’t attached to anyone at the moment, but she does partake in a one night stand every so often. “You’re getting a hell of a lot more orgasms than I am. From someone besides yourself, that is.”

She eyes me in mock irritation with my comment before we both burst out laughing. I lift my glass up to take another drink until one fucking word burrows itself between my legs and raises my body temperature. “Ladies.”

Our amusement comes to an immediate halt as we both look up and find over six feet of pure, male, Godliness.

Casen.

This is the closest I have been to him in over ten years. I’m embarrassed at how my body reacts when he just walks into the bar, but I’m downright mortified how it feels when he is within a foot of me. Staring down at me. It’s how I felt anytime he would brush past me in the hall back in high school. My heart would beat out of its chest. My palms would begin to sweat, and the tingling between my legs would start. He was, and still is, a walking piece of art. But, he didn’t feel the same, and he allowed what happened to happen over and over again.

“Why hello there?” Trinity responds first. Her eyes dilated with lust, but he wouldn’t see that, because his focus is on me.

“May I help you?” I finally say; my first words to him in a decade.

His long fingers tap over the top of our table, and he grins. “I was wondering if I could buy you ladies a drink.” Casen and I stare at each other for what feels like an eternity, until his eyes slip up and notice my ample cleavage on display.

I lean over, breasts pushed up even more from resting on the table, and point to our almost full beverages. “We have some. Thank you, though.” Bringing my attention back to Trinity, I see her watching me in disbelief. I ignore her, trying to do the same to him, but he’s not moving.

“Listen,” he starts, but I keep my eyes shifted away. “I’m not dick. I just think you’re beautiful. I’ve seen you in here a couple of times, and I’d like to get to know you better.”

Trinity kicks me under the table, and I look back up at him. His eyes are scorching deep within me. I shake my head slightly trying to release myself from the pull. “I’m sorry. I’m just not interested right now, but thank you.”

His face morphs into something I’ve never seen before. It’s the face of a man who isn’t used to getting turned down. It’s shocked defeat, and it leads me to believe he thought I was a foregone conclusion. It angers me. When I don’t give him another glance he walks off.

“Embyr, you have to be fucking high,” Trinity admonishes.

I spin the straw inside of my drink. “He just isn’t my type, Trin.”

“He has a fucking tongue, Em. And a huge dick from the looks of his hands. You were the one who said you needed some more orgasms in your life.” She throws her hands up in the air. “Ride his goddamn face!”

I choke on my drink, shocked by her comment, and it spills onto my skirt. “Dammit. I’ll be right back.” Getting up from the booth, leaving a chuckling soon to be ex-roommate at the table, I head for the bathrooms, keeping myself from looking towards Casen and his buddies. I wonder if he told them he struck out. I almost second guess brushing him off. I’ve

worked hard for the past month to get him to notice and approach me and to just send him away seems ludicrous. But, he won't let this go. I guarantee that.

He'll be back.

I lock myself in the only single bathroom in the place and walk over to the mirror. I fix a smudged line of eye liner, roll my shoulders back so I'm standing up straight, and really take a look at myself.

Maybe if I would have been this confident in high school, this strong, this steel, then they would have left me the hell alone. For years, I've run things over in my head, trying to figure out how I could have done something differently. Maybe if I wouldn't have gone out with Ian then it wouldn't have happened. Who am I kidding, though? If Ian struck out with me, eventually it would have been Casen who asked, and I know I wouldn't have passed up at that opportunity.

A light rapping at the door jostles me back to the here and now. "Someone is in here!" I call out. More obnoxious knocking that can only belong to Trinity. "Sorry, Trin." I yell. "No matter how many self-inflicted orgasms I give myself, I am not riding that man's face." I laugh all the way to the door, swinging it open only to find the face of the man I would, for sure, like to giddy up on.

My nerves of steel falter when he bits his bottom lip and traps me just inside the door. "Which man are we talking about?" Casen asks.

I could push him away. I could ask him to move, but I'm going to use this to my advantage. Tilting my head to the side and resting my shoulder into the doorframe, I answer, "Why you, of course."

"Me?" he asks with a low rumble.

I lift my hand up and glide a finger down the middle of his chest, his eyes following. It's the first time I have ever touched him, and I'm trying so hard not to think too much into it. "You. But, again, I would rather just take care of myself."

Casen licks his lips just before meeting my gaze. “That doesn’t sound like so much fun, unless of course, I can watch.”

My body reacts. My nipples harden and I grow wet between my thighs with just the image of him watching me pleasure myself. I’ve obviously gone far too long without being satisfied the right way by a man.

“Hmm, your body language is telling me you would, in fact, like that to happen,” he lustfully whispers. “What’s your name?”

“I have to go.” Before this gets any more sexual than it already has, I move between him and the door, excusing myself, making sure I touch as little of him as possible. I walk away, knowing that even if his ego was bruised from my brush off, he definitely is still interested. When I get back to the table, Trinity is finishing up her second Corona.

“I’m ready to head out,” I tell her, not wanting to give Casen another opportunity to talk to me. I need to regroup before I see him again. I’ll be back next week, and I’m sure he will be too. And then maybe—just maybe—he will get my name.

2 THREE

Grabbing the lint roller, I try to snatch up every single piece of white cotton off of my black skirt. It's a bit longer than I'm used to wearing during the work week, but I'm interviewing for a new job today. A job that wearing a shorter skirt won't give me any sort of advantage.

My fingers lace the buttons through my gray business jacket, and I take one last look in the mirror by my door before grabbing my purse to throw over my shoulder. I quietly shut the door so I don't wake Trinity up since she doesn't have to go into the studio until eleven.

The weather is mild for the season and the streets aren't as busy as they normally are for a Tuesday morning. Usually the hustle and bustle has you clutching your purse and trying not to swear at each and every moron running late. By the time I reach Morrison and Associates, I have fifteen minutes to finish my coffee, use the bathroom, and wash my hands. As the elevator ascends to the tenth floor of the building, I adjust myself one last time before the mirrored doors open and I am greeted by a large, marble desk and a very attractive, brown-haired, blue-eyed, male, fielding a phone call.

"I'm sorry, but he is in a meeting. I'm going to have to have him call you back." He looks up at me, giving me the universal signal for "just one moment," and finishes up the call. "Okay, great. Have a nice day." He replaces the phone in its cradle before grabbing his bottle of water and taking a sip. "I am so sorry about that," he says, placing the bottle onto the desk. "May I help you?"

"Yes," I answer, reaching into my purse and pulling out my resume. "I'm here to see Mr. Morrison."

Taking the paper, he reads it over and smiles. “Ms. Quinn. We’ve been expecting you. I will let him know you are here. Just go ahead and have a seat.” He points to an area to the left. “I’m Jacob. Let me know if you need anything.”

I take my place on the deep, red couches and straighten my posture, my right leg crossing over my left. Nerves begin to build inside of me as I go over it in my head what I’m attempting to do here. What I am trying to catch. After declining some water and watching another eight minutes go, by I am finally called back by Jacob. “Ms. Quinn, follow me, please,” he requests.

I stand up and trail behind him down the long hallway, past another desk that is empty, to an office just a door before the last one. “Mr. Morrison.” Jacob knocks on the open door. “This is Ms. Embyr Quinn. She is here for the interview.”

I walk past Jacob, into the office, and stand before, what I hope is, my soon to be boss. “Thanks, Jake.” He smiles at his secretary for a second longer than necessary. “Ms. Quinn. Have a seat.”

Keeping my eyes on him, I stare as he smiles again at Jacob—a look crossing between the two of them—and watches as he closes the door behind us.

I smirk.

He walks towards me, and his presence alone is intimidating even though he looks to be just less than six feet tall. You can tell he takes good care of himself at the gym, and visits an esthetician for his eyebrows on a regular basis. His dark hair is styled perfectly. “Good morning, Ms. Quinn,” he acknowledges me, extending his perfectly manicured hand. I take it and firmly shake. *This man is more high maintenance than I am.*

“Good morning, Mr. Morrison.” I flash him a smile. “Please, call me Embyr.”

He nods. “Okay, then. Feel free to call me Thad.”

I smile. “Well, nice to meet you, Thad.”

Again.

Ten years later.

“Please, have a seat.” He extends his hand towards another comfortable red chair. His office is as pristine looking as he is. I take a seat, adjusting my posture so my tits press further out, but that doesn’t matter to him. He’s married. No kids, of course, and is in the process of one of the biggest cases that Chicago has ever seen. Well, the one taking up most of the recent headlines.

Thad Morrison is representing Lauren Crest. A newly divorced woman who wants sole custody of her kids from her ex-husband who decided he wanted to switch teams. Eric, her ex, and his male lover (also Erik, but spelled differently), are seeking shared custody. Thad has been very vocal about his stance that it would only confuse the couple’s sons if they were to go live half of their time with two fathers.

I personally think that with kids involved, both parents should have equal time with them. It’s not like he is abusive or an alcoholic. From what I have read, Eric has a great job, a nice home, and offering to pay child support and alimony. But, both sides of the debate have been heated since Thad took the case on, and the newspapers got a hold of it.

“I have to say; I’m a bit confused,” he tells me, looking down at my resume.

I shift, crossing one leg over the other. “How so?”

“Well, first of all, taking a receptionist job up front with Jacob would mean a major pay cut from your last job.”

I wait for it. The moment he mentions my ex-boss Patrick’s name. I mentally prepared myself for the questions he would ask, should it come up, but he says nothing.

I know those two haven’t spoken in some time. When Patrick would request the paper and Thad’s case was front page news, again, Patrick would make snarky comments about how Thad says one thing but contradicts himself and his stance in his personal life. How he was thankful to have lost contact with Thad a long time ago because he creeped Patrick

out. Through numerous snide remarks Patrick made, it was easy to put two and two together.

“Well, I love what I do. Some may hate answering phones and scheduling appointments, but I thrive on it. I’m an organizer.” I smile his way. “I know if I got this job that I would make ten thousand less a year, but after seeing the most recent case you have been working on, and knowing that I fully side with your position, I couldn’t help but submit my resume.” I swallow down the bile rising in my throat. Lies. I don’t agree with him. At some point, you have to let the bullshit go. Let people live their lives. Just because he loves another man; it doesn’t mean he doesn’t love his children. Thad would know that, if he ever caught interest in his wife and made a child with her.

Back in high school, Thad had asked me out, but it was the year before the bet, and I figured it was because his parents made him ask me. It was to homecoming, and I didn’t have a date. His mother worked with mine, so I’m sure that had something to do with it. To say it was awkward is an understatement. He didn’t touch me—not once. Didn’t dance with me, and only hung out with some guy from the soccer team the entire night.

I’ll give him credit, though, like Casen, he never asked me out for the bet, but he never prevented it from happening. From any of it happening. He never thought to tell them what they were doing was wrong.

The interview goes well, and I hope to get the job. It would be a lot easier on me to be able to see, firsthand, if what Patrick was hinting at is true.

I stand up, Thad shaking my hand, and freeze when his eyes don’t leave mine. They stare into me like they recognize something. This is another thing I have prepared myself for: being found out. It would suck, to say the least, but again, I’m not doing anything except bringing attention to what they are hiding.

Is that wrong? Maybe.

Do I fucking care? Not one bit.

He walks me to the door and points me to the far end of the hallway when I ask to use the bathroom. “There is an exit down that way,” he tells me. “It was nice to meet you, Ms. Quinn. We’ll be in touch.”

When I’ve finish, I decide to suck up to Jacob, and thank him for his help. Halfway back to the front desk, I stop short as soon as I hear heavy breathing and hushed voices behind a semi closed door. “Oh, you have to stop. I need to get back to work,” the masculine voice pleads. My eyes look through the slit in the doorway and go wide at the vision before me. My cheeks rise in a large smile when I find what might have taken me weeks to capture if I was hired here. I pull my phone out and hit video to record.

“I’m the boss,” Thad responds. “And, we’re taking a fifteen minute break before the next interview.”

Through the screen on my phone I watch as Thad unbuttons Jacob’s shirt, pushing it down off of his body. His tongue darts out, leaving a trail from Jacob’s neck to his shoulder, and I have to cover my mouth before I squeal with joy.

I *fucking* knew it.

Jacob reaches inside Thad’s still buckled pants and drags his hands up and down his boss’s length. Thad moans and commands Jacob to his knees.

That’s all I need. I stop recording and back away slowly as to not make a noise. For a married man who is so against gay people and their right to their own children, he sure looked like he was about to enjoy the benefits of having Jacob’s mouth wrap around his cock.

I hit the elevator button three times in my excitement. I guess I don’t need this job anymore. Once inside the elevator, I pull up the email address of the Chicago Tribune and log into my secure email, sending the short fifteen second video to their site. I give it an hour before it goes viral.

Getting the proof that what Patrick said there was is a big win in my book. Now, seeing it for myself, I know why Thad

was always so awkward. Why he never dated anyone. Why he would have guy friends from other schools over all the time. I don't fault him. The heart wants what it wants. But, that heart should also be caring and kind to those around him, and he let them use me and my innocence. I wasn't a game. I wasn't a bet. All he had to do was stick up for me. He didn't, and now he will, most likely, lose the biggest case he's ever had, and his credibility because he is a walking contradiction. A liar.

Patrick

Ian

~~Thad~~

Casen

Reece

Evan

Wesley



FOUR

I'm sitting at Jedi's bar, again, on a Friday night, watching the news on the TV. The day after the Tribune broke the story about Thad Morrison, every news channel got their greedy hands on the video, and it already has over three million views of the g-rated version and close to two million on the "not for kids" version. Lauren, Thad's client, has already found a new lawyer, and Thad has gone into hiding. His poor wife, though. For her, I do feel bad.

I glance at my phone and the disappointing message that it contains. Trinity has to work late tonight, and can't meet me here. She plans to move into her sister's house this weekend, so I decided to come here on my own. I don't want to lose the momentum I feel I gained with Casen last week. I left him with just a smidge of anticipation. I just hope I didn't put him off too much.

I don't have to wait long for the answer as I turn in time to see Casen walk in, but this time he is alone, also. When he meets my stare, a smug grin appears and he starts to push his way past dozens of hopeful women. He looks like he has one goal in mind. His wide shoulders make it easy to part the crowd. With each step he takes, my body is filled with eagerness of what's to come. As he gets closer, his eyes rake over me, starting from my peep toe heels all the way up to my teal colored blouse that accentuates my breasts. My chest heaves up and down with each breath I take, and I'm purposely pushing my tits out so they appear bigger than they are. Last week, I was standoffish. That obviously didn't deter him. This week, I will give just a little bit more.

Damien nudges my hand aside, causing me to break eye contact with Casen. He sets another drink down without a word, and I don't hesitate to pick it up and take a long sip not only to cool my heated body but to calm my anxiety. As he nears, memories flood me. Casen was the one I crushed on throughout high school. I walked into gym class as a freshman and was immediately enamored with him. I would have to say my intentions behind going out with his friend Ian during junior year were to get Casen's attention. Who would have guessed accepting that date was a life changing decision? One that would alter my world forever.

I feel my skin prickle and my stomach coil, alerting me to his proximity and rub my fingers along the rim of my glass. "Is this seat taken?" Casen's deep, menacing voice asks. My breathing begins to even out as I look at the gentleman currently residing in the seat Casen is inquiring about.

He's got balls; I'll give him that.

Cocking my head to the side, I lift my glass up, seductively placing the straw on my tongue and taking a sip. His cool façade breaks as he swallows down the lump in his throat. Taking another taste, I secure my bottom lip before I speak, hoping to sound completely at ease. I motion to the occupied seat, "Looks like it is."

The man, who has his arm wrapped around a woman's shoulders, his face, red with irritation, looks at Casen as though he has lost his mind. "We just fucking sat down, bro. Piss off."

I glance between the two men, obviously in some sort of standoff, and try not to laugh. He never wanted my attention in high school but he sure has been seeking it lately, huh?

There must be a warning in Casen's stare because the man stands up and grabs the woman's hand, pulling her up, and they vacate their seats. Shifting away from the cocky bastard, I continue to sip my drink slowly and not mind him any attention. I'm going to make him work for it and try not to flinch if he so much as touches me. He slips in beside me, lifting a hand to let Damien know he wants to order before

turning back to me. “Am I going to get your name tonight, beautiful?”

I laugh.

Really?

“Not interested,” I state, trying not to let the seduction in his voice fool me.

“Not interested? I’ve never heard anyone with that name,” he tries to joke, but I don’t laugh.

This is the kind of shit he uses to pick up women?

“What can I getcha?” Damien asks.

I point at my glass, requesting another drink, and motion towards Casen, “On his tab.”

“Budweiser for me.” Casen tells him before returning his full attention back to me. “If I’m going to buy you a drink, then it’s only fair you tell me your name.” His leg brushes against mine, lifting my skirt and exposing more of my thigh. Goosebumps spread across my skin like wild fire and I will them down.

Stay focused, Em.

My fingers come up to play with my necklace, and I relent, “Embyr.” I pick my gaze up and stare directly into his eyes. I drag them down his body, noticing the long-sleeved, black Henley he’s wearing and faded jeans. His shoes are black, as well, and they look like they hold massive feet. I peek at his hands, seeing exactly what Trinity meant. They are huge.

A moment passes before he says, “Don’t you want to know my name?”

I already know your name. Casen Parker. Fire fighter. Lived with your friends, my other high school bullies, Ian and Reece, up until two months ago, when you all ventured off and got your own places. Homecoming King in high school and graduated with honors in fire science.

But, I don’t say all that.

“Okay, then.” I roll my eyes as if the idea is beneath me.
“So, what’s your name?”

He stares for a moment before widening his smile.
“Casen.”

His cockiness pulls me in and I can’t bring myself to turn away. His heated tone breaks through my barrier and a flood of emotions take over. Even though it’s been ten years, he still looks the same and I feel a spark of not only hatred but attraction. I didn’t expect that and it makes all of the high school memories come screaming back at me. They consume me. My chest tightens while I feel my face burning. I can’t control the tremble of my hands as I pick up my glass trying to keep this panic attack under control.

I haven’t had one of these since high school.

I take deep breaths, gasping for air, hoping I don’t pass out. It’s not working. The memories continue to suffocate me. I feel constricted.

I can’t fucking breathe.

A gentle touch glides over my back and I jump at the contact. “You okay?” Casen asks concern evident in his voice.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

I’m finally able to lift my head and slide off of the stool, grasping my purse to my chest. “Yes. I just…” I stumble. “I need a moment.”

I race to the bathroom, knowing full well I am fucking this up. I’ve managed to screw Patrick and Thad over no problem. So what is so different that, just speaking to Casen twice in the past week, has me turned inside out? The bathroom door slams against the tiled wall when I barge in and lock myself inside. My forehead meets the cold metal of the door as I chastise myself.

Get your shit together, Embyr.

You hate him.

He didn’t stop them.

He repulses you.

I repeat this over and over until I believe what I'm saying. It takes a few minutes, but I gather myself and hold my head up high as I stride back to the bar, shoulders straight, like I didn't just fall apart in front of my prey. When I turn the corner, I see Casen looking down at his phone typing furiously, and I pray I didn't lose him. I'll be pissed if I screwed it all up by letting his good looks and charm suck me in at a vulnerable moment.

"There you are." He places his phone back into his pocket.

I reclaim my spot and nod. "Yeah. Sorry. Long, shitty day got to me." I smile back, hoping he believes my lie.

"No worries," he comforts and slides a glass of water my way. "You looked like you needed this."

I take a sip and nod with gratitude.

"So," he begins angling his body so I'm facing him. "Last week didn't seem to go over very well for me. I feel as though I came on too strong." When I don't respond, he continues. "It sounds cliché, but I've noticed you the past few weeks and feel like, despite the brush off last Friday, that I should make more of an effort. Try not to scare you off. Maybe see if you wanted to go out sometime."

I breathe a sigh of relief. My momentary weakness didn't screw this up too badly, but I shut him down immediately, "I can't."

A slight tilt of the head and then, "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No." I shake my head.

His eyebrows quirk up in curiosity. "Are you a lesbian? Was the girl you were with last week your girlfriend?"

I remain unaffected though he almost sounded hopeful. Like if she was, that I would let him watch "No."

"Studying to be a nun?" he deadpans but I can see a hint of smile play over his lips.

“No. Not a nun.” I inwardly laugh at the thought of me living in a convent with other celibate women. Living my life for Jesus. I’m far from that. But, like them, I pray. I pray every day that they all get what’s coming to them. That I come out unscathed or with just a few scratches. But, my skin is as thick as steel.

“No boyfriend. Not a lesbian or a nun. So, why not go out with me? I thought we had something.” He leans in dangerously close to me, sending a second round of goosebumps all over my skin. “You know the whole ‘can’t keep my eyes off of you’ thing going on.”

“Because,” I say with annoyance. “I don’t like you.”

He gasps, bringing a clutched hand to his heart. “You don’t like me? How can you not like me? You don’t even know me.”

I shrug and watch his jaw drop to the floor. His eyes stare into mine, waiting for an answer, making me uncomfortable, so I pick up my Captain and Coke and empty the rest of its contents. Even though he isn’t saying a word, I know this isn’t finished. If I remember anything about Casen from high school, it’s that he doesn’t stop until he gets what he wants. If he wants me, then this is far from over.

Without warning, Casen jumps up off the stool and climbs on top of it, making the legs wobble. Shocked, I grab hold of the seat to keep it from tipping over. “Ladies and Gentleman!” he screams from his pedestal. My face burns with embarrassment as the entire bar quiets down. Even the music’s volume has been lowered. This is fucking unexpected. I pull on his pant leg, but he ignores my desperate pleas to get down. This is not how I wanted him to work for my attention. “I need your help!” he continues, pointing a stern finger down at me. “This beautiful, sexy lady refuses to go out with me! There is no boyfriend, no girlfriend, and no convent in her life.”

I can hear a few people chuckle and one woman yells out that he could do more than go out with her. Ignoring her, he continues. “Tell this lovely lady, Embyr, to give me a chance,” he pleads, fingers laced in prayer. Everyone erupts into encouragement for the crazy man on top of a bar stool.

Go out with him.

Give him a chance.

I'll have him.

All are being thrown my way. "Get down!" I command. He shakes his head no. Exasperated I finally say, "Fine"

Casen bends down, holding the bar for support. "I'm sorry. I couldn't hear you."

"Fine!" I tell him. This time, louder.

"Fine as in it's fine I won't get down or fine you'll go out with me?" He smiles.

Knowing I need to do something drastic, I grab onto his shirt and pull his lips against mine aggressively. Cat calls begin all around us, and when his tongue begs entrance between my lips, I pull away and whisper, "I'll go out with you."

"She said yes!" He screams to the crowd, making them all cheer.

"Did you really have to do that?" I ask once the crowd quiets down, and he is safely seated on his ass, fresh drink is in his hand.

He takes a pull from his beer. "I did. Now you can't bail since I have witnesses."

"Is that your idea of not scaring me off?"

"You said yes, didn't you?" He smiles.

I give him a fake laugh, shaking my head. "Why me, though? There are tons of women in here who would have said yes without the public display."

His fingers pull on the label of his beer. "I don't know. There is just something about you that I really like. I'm drawn to you. Even just seeing you across the bar has been the highlight of my week for the past month. I just feel like we need to get to know one another."

"And if you don't like me once you get to know me?"

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

I smile deviously. *Oh Casen. I’m going to destroy you.*



The water sparkles like crystal off of Lake Arlington as I wait for Aria to get here. It's an unseasonably warm day and I should be enjoying the sun, but being back in Arlington Heights just makes my skin crawl. I can't help the uneasy feeling that settles over me every time I'm here. Even if it is only thirty minutes outside of the city, I still feel safer within the city limits of Chicago. But, every Saturday I come out here for one reason and one reason only.

I can see my childhood home as it backs up to a trail that is two miles around the lake, and try to remember the good times it held ... up until I started high school. Its green shutters now are blue, and the current owners have added a deck and a swing set for the two little ones they have. I sold the house just after both of my parents passed away, and paid off, not only, all of their debts, but put it towards my college education, as well. It also secured a little down payment for my condo. It was tough for me to let it all go, but I knew that, in order to get away from this town and these people, that it needed to be done.

I went far away from this place after I graduated. I wanted to go somewhere that I could make a safe transition from Annie to Embyr. So, I went to a small college in North Carolina where no one knew my fucking name. It was the perfect place to change everything. Mentally and physically.

I took a lot of time and consideration into my new name. I wanted something strong and independent. Two things I was striving to be, but also something vicious because I knew it needed to signify what I was going to do. It needed to give me strength every time it was said.

One drunken night, I watched the burning wood die in the fireplace, and the name Embyr sprang from my thoughts. It possessed the qualities I wanted it to stand for. And, so began the process of becoming *Embyr Quinn*.

It was a lot easier than I thought it would be and, by the time I graduated from college, I was ready to start my plans of retribution.

“Here you go.” Aria’s soft voice breaks into the quiet morning air as she drops a heavy envelope next to me on the bench. I look up, finding her tight, little, eighteen-year-old, flawless body. Her blonde hair is flowing freely in the light breeze, and her blue eyes are crystal clear as though she has slept for hours. Her tiny running shorts match her red tank top, and her ample breasts push out as I watch her pull her hair up into a ponytail. She must be about to go for a run around the lake.

I lift the package and turn it side-to-side, feeling the weight of it. “Did you take your cut?” I ask.

She’s now bent over at the waist (her flexibility beyond anything I could ever do), touching her toes and looking upside down at me. No wonder Wesley couldn’t keep his hands to himself; she’s pretty damn hot. “I did,” she says, standing up and smiling. “I have to admit that I would almost feel like a prostitute, if he didn’t fuck like a stallion.”

Standing up, I nestle the envelope between my side and my arm as I glare at her. “Sometimes we have to do what we have to do, Aria. You don’t have to worry about putting your parents in the poor house for sending you to college now. Plus, besides the fact that he doesn’t even know you are benefitting from this, he should know better. He’s a principal who is fucking a student. You should sleep well at night, knowing you are reaping the rewards of his immorality and getting a good fuck.”

I start to walk towards my car, leaving her to her run. “You still haven’t told me what you’re getting out of this, Embyr,” she says to my back.

I turn around, tilting my head, and smile. “I’m getting the rewards of his immorality that I’m due.” When I get into my car I allow my head to fall back into the headrest.

Think what you want. It was as much Aria’s idea as it was mine.

I slouch down into the driver’s side of my car as I keep an eye on the side doors to the high school. Out of all the men on my hit list, Wesley comes across as the saint. I can’t find one shred of evidence to the contrary. From what I’ve found out, he worked his ass off to earn the job as Principal of the high school, despite all the money his family has.

No parking tickets.

No restraining orders.

None of his ex-girlfriends had a bad thing to say about him.

A fucking saint.

Yeah, right.

There has to be something.

I lean over to bump up the heat, when I see the side door to the school swing open, and Wesley steps out. He’s tall. Six feet two-ish and dark-skinned like the color of chocolate. He reminds me of Taye Diggs with his large lips and smoldering eyes. He looks around the parking lot, turning back to speak to someone behind him. After a moment, I watch as a blonde-haired beauty, who looks to be barely legal, steps out and makes a mad dash. He follows, running after her like she stole something. I watch curiously to see what she has done to make him sprint like he did, but when he reaches her at his car, his arms cage her in and he lowers his lips to the crevice between her neck and shoulder. Her fingers glide over his button up shirt and she grabs onto his tie, pulling him even closer into her.

My eyes widen at their brazenness. There is no way she is a faculty member. She doesn’t even look old enough to vote. Their mouths detach from each other, and his eyes scan the

parking lot, yet again, not noticing my car. A wide smile breaks out across his face, and he opens the back door of his car, playfully shoving her inside while he unbuttons his pants in plain sight. I watch her fidget with her own clothes from the back seat, not even bothering to look around. He crawls in on top of her, and I fumble quickly to pull out my phone and snap a few pictures. The door slams shut as he positions himself between her legs. I watch his ass rise and fall at a slow, agonizing pace as he plunges into the teenager. I hit the record button on my phone and watch. After a few minutes, his thrusts get faster. The car starts to shake and from my position, I can hear the girl's screams of ecstasy. When they are finished and put back together, he steps out of the car, looking to see if anyone is around, oblivious to the fact that I just watched. She follows momentarily behind him, adjusting her clothes and kissing him on the lips. His hand makes contact with her ass and they run back toward the side door.

I watched this happen four times in as many weeks before I caught up to Aria, the student, one day after school at a gas station. She said she was sent to his office after cheating on a test, and he came on to her. Said he would make it go away if she slept with him. So, she did.

When she told me she was eighteen and from a poor family, I knew exactly how to ruin Wesley and his reputation all while supplementing both of our bank accounts. She didn't even hesitate to go along with my plan.

The first set of pictures was addressed to him at the school. I wish I could have seen his face when he was confronted with image after image of his compromising position with a student. After that, I sent in my demands: *keep paying me through a P.O. Box, and I won't tell the school board.* It's amazing though, he didn't even attempt to stop fucking Aria. By the time I'm through with him, he will be jobless, and have provided enough money to put Aria through medical school.

Why Wesley, you might ask?

Simple. He was part of the PITCREW. Part of the plan. Part of the bet.

And now, he is another one to be crossed off my list.

Throwing the money in the passenger seat, I pick up my cell phone, seeing two missed calls from the police department and a text from Casen.

Interesting.

Casen: Dinner tonight?

I laugh at his eagerness. If only he would have claimed me before the bet. Maybe we could have worked out.

Me: Less than twenty-four hours should be a record. Aren't guys supposed to wait three days?

I put the phone down, looking at my old house one last time before starting the engine. My phone chimes.

Casen: I know what I want. Send me your address. I'll pick you up at eight.

Leaving the parking lot, I decide to leave him hanging for a little while. When I get home, I respond.

Me: Here's my address. Make it SEVEN.



At 6:59 P.M. the doorbell rings. I watch my eyes roll at Casen's promptness in the reflection of the mirror next to my door as I finish applying my fire engine red lipstick. Rolling it around, I ensure every inch of my lips are covered. I take my time, making him wait, and finish up before finally opening the door at exactly seven P.M.

My steady nerves falter.

I wasn't prepared.

My eyes trail up his body. His feet, donning the same boots he was wearing at Jedi's last night; one shoe lace looser than the other. His dark-washed jeans, looking as though he ironed them just for the occasion, are straining to hold his large bulge beneath the zipper. Lifting my gaze, I find his chiseled chest suffocating in the long sleeved, navy blue button up shirt. The sleeves are rolled up just below his elbows which are currently leaning into the door frame.

When my eyes meet his, he is giving my tight, black dress the same once over I just subjected his body to. I watch his tongue slide over his lips, and my heart immediately starts to race faster than it did in the bar. I have to take a few calming breaths before I can speak, but he beats me to it. "Embyr," he calls my name, danger laced in his tenor, as his arms fall to his side. "You look fucking delectable."

My skin prickles, making my nipples harden. The tightness of them brings me back to the here and now. *I can't let him have this effect on me.* I reach over and snatch my purse off of the end table, ready to leave, not giving him the opportunity to come inside.

He smirks, stepping aside, and looking into my apartment. “Moving?”

I turn around, finding Trinity’s boxes everywhere. “No. My roommate is.”

“The girl you were with last week?”

I nod and he allows me to pass but not hesitating to place his hand on the small of my back. Walking with newfound purpose towards the elevator, I ignore the burning his touch is giving me. He says nothing else as the metal doors open and we step in. I take my place in the back corner, leaning on the rail, and watch him press the first floor button before he spins around to face me. “If it’s ok with you,” he starts. “I want to take you somewhere kind of special to me.”

I smile. “That sounds great.”

He just nods, taking his own corner of the confined space, seemingly losing all of his previous confidence. Silence surrounds us and thoughts swirl around in my mind as I watch him. Here in the florescent lights, he looks the same as he did a decade ago. His high school muscles are amplified ten years and, if I didn’t completely hate him and his friends for what they did to me, I might still have that deep-rooted crush I used to have on him.

My freshman year—Casen was the one. The one that made me want to go to school every day. I had his name all over the insides of my notebooks. I would watch him walk down the hall with the PITCREW, day dreaming that he would come to my locker and kiss me, making all of my teenage fantasies come true. He never did. He was oblivious to my existence. He probably didn’t even know my name. That was until Ian and my “date.” Thus, the reason why we are here today.

Even if he didn’t participate in the “make Annie’s life hell” games, he is still just as guilty.

Guilt by association.

“Why are you so quiet now?” I ask him, breaking the barrier of silence.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he pierces me with the dark ocean storm brewing beneath his eyes. “I’m trying really hard to be a gentleman when all I really want to do is pin you up against the fucking wall.”

My breathing hitches at his words, and I swallow down the nervousness trying to build in my throat. I feel the blood rush to my cheeks.

“You’re a tough guy to pinpoint.” I observe.

“How so?” he asks, rubbing his chin with his thumb and pointer finger.

“Last week, you were aggressive. Yesterday, you seemed sweet. Tonight, you are a bit of both.”

He laughs. “I guess I’m a bit of everything. You know the ‘gentleman in the street but a freak in the sheets’ kind of guy.”

The air thickens around us with sexual tension. The doors pull apart, cutting the pressure. I watch the right side of his lips pull into a smirk as though he thinks he has affected me. He almost did.

Game on.

Taking a deep, confident breath, I breeze past him, grazing the growing erection begging to come out and play. “I guess you missed your chance.”

“For what?” he asks from behind me.

I stop mid-stride and turn halfway, meeting his stare. “To pin me against the fucking wall.” I can feel it as much as I hear the groan that emanates from between his lips, but the return of his cockiness has propelled me towards my mission once again.

We arrive thirty minutes later to North Avenue Beach. A popular spot during the summer but, right now, it’s pretty void of any beach goers. The wind is cooler by the lake, and I don’t say a word as Casen opens up his trunk and pulls out a few items. I offer to hold the blankets and sweatshirt so he can carry, what looks to be, a very heavy cooler. We walk the short distance and once we arrive at the sand, I bend down and

pluck my shoes off of my feet, dangling them by my fingertips. Casen leaves his on, and once we take a few steps toward where Casen is leading us, the wind picks up, and a cold shiver runs through my body. I adjust one of the blankets so it shields me from the harsh cold. I'm not dressed for this kind of weather; I was unsure where he was taking me.

Casen stops just thirty feet from the shoreline, setting the cooler down, and taking the dark, purple blanket from my hands, before laying it down on the ground. The wind starts to die down, but I know that, at any moment, the blanket could fly away. He grabs my hand, leading me on top of the soft material and helps me sit down. I allow my legs to stretch out in front of me, and he covers them with the other, plaid blanket.

"I brought the sweatshirt for you, as well," he tells me from above. "I would have had you change but I just love the look of that dress on you."

I laugh. "You're not going to see much of it," I respond, pulling the sweatshirt over my head. "I'll be covered up."

He sits down dangerously close next to me, pushing my hair behind my ear. "I know what is under there. I'll use my imagination."

I shiver at his words and he pulls back, just staring at me. "What?" I shift, feeling a bit self-conscious under his gaze.

He shakes his head. "Nothing."

I scoff. "It can't be *'nothing'* if you are staring at me like that."

He smiles, running his thumb from my left temple to the curve of my jaw. "You just look familiar is all or maybe that you remind me of someone."

I attempt to hold my composure but my body stills and my heart skips over a nervous beat. *Could he recognize me? Was I stupid to think he wouldn't?*

"That's not a bad thing," he says, cutting my internal freak-out short.

“Oh!” I say, my voice surprisingly high. “No. I didn’t think it was bad. I just hear that a lot.”

Casen leans forward, lifting the top of the cooler and starts pulling out *Tupperware* containers of food. That would be something, huh? Two women, who look like you, walking around. I think one of you is all that the male species can handle.” I watch his smile as he goes to work setting out the grape, cheese, crackers, and some sandwiches down between our legs. That smile could bring me to my knees with the flash of his perfect teeth and deep dimples. I don’t think he ever even realized how many girls fell for him because of it.

He pours me a glass of wine and hands it over. He flips the cooler top over, exposing drink holders to set our glasses down. I take a long sip, allowing the coolness to slide down the back of my throat before I speak. “So, Casen.”

He tilts his head, and watches me while making us each a plate. “So, Embyr.”

“What do you do?” I ask, trailing my fingers along the rim of my glass. Something I come to find as a habit.

“I work for the Chicago Fire Department. I’ve been there for about six years.” He smiles pensively, showing how much he loves what he does.

“So, what... you rescue kittens from a tree for a living,” I joke.

He chuckles, his eyes glistening against the candlelight. “Something like that.” Casen sets a plate on my lap. I put my wine glass down and sit up. He does the same and then asks, “So, what do you do?”

I finish the two grapes I shoved in my mouth before answering, “Up until a few days ago, I worked for Strickland Consulting. I interviewed for a job the other day, but it turns out, he no longer needed someone anymore.”

My curious eyes watch as he halts a cheese-topped cracker halfway to his mouth before slowly placing it back onto his plate. “Strickland Consulting?” he asks his voice deep. “As in Patrick Strickland?”

I try to appear indifferent, my free hand coming up over my heart. “That’s the one. You’ve heard of it?”

His stare pierces me, and if it were a knife—I’d be dead. This look is something that I wasn’t expecting. It’s cold. Angry. It could make any man cower in a corner. “Yeah, I’ve heard of it.” The tension in his voice is unwavering. “I went to school with that asshole.”

I give him a fake chuckle, attempting to lighten up the suddenly tense mood. “I guess you two didn’t get along then, huh?”

I knew that they didn’t like each other anymore. I know something happened after high school that caused them to part ways, but I never found out what it was that did their friendship in.

“No.” Casen shakes his head. “We were great friends in high school ... up until junior year.”

My brows furrow in confusion. Junior year? That was the year they all started to fuck with me. That was the year they started ruining my life. “What happened?” I try to ask casually, but the thought of finding out what took place between the two of them has me anxious.

He breathes out a sigh of disgust. “We didn’t see eye to eye. I mean we hung out together on the weekends, but he was a bully. Did some pretty disgusting shit to a girl we went to school with and our so-called friendship was never the same.”

I don’t say anything as I wait for him to continue. Maybe he will take some of the blame for not helping me.

He doesn’t.

“I’m sorry that happened,” I deadpan.

Casen leans back, picking his food up again. “Not your fault. Just crazy how small the world is.” He shoots me his signature smile. “Who would have thought that the woman I’ve spent many nights, going to sleep thinking about, worked for that tool?”

“Not me,” I joke. But for a brief moment, I’m intrigued, wondering what he does when he thinks about me at night.

“So, why until a few days ago?” he asks, picking up his glass and taking a long sip.

I shrug my shoulders again. “I guess he never stopped doing disgusting shit. They arrested him for stealing client’s money.”

His eyes go wide as he chokes on his soup. “Serious?”

“Serious.”

He shakes his head, pieces of his hair falling onto out of place. “I guess karma is a bitch.”

“I hope so,” I mutter under my breath.

He picks up his sandwich and asks before taking a bite, “Do you have to find a new job right away?”

“It’s not that I have to find a new job. I want to,” I tell him. I don’t need the job, necessarily. Wesley’s hush money keeps my bills paid pretty well. I just want something to keep my mind busy.

“If you’re interested,” he begins, but trails off. His eyes watch me, maybe to see if he is about to over step. “The police department, next door to the firehouse, is looking for an administrative assistant.”

I smile widely. “I’d love to get that information.”

Casen purses his lips. “With that smile, I’m not sure I want to give it to you,” his voice, taunting.

“Why’s that?” I tease back, leaning in.

“Those police officers aren’t bad looking guys. I wouldn’t want you to get rid of my sorry ass for a boy in blue.” he muses.

“We’ve only been on one date.” I shrug nonchalantly.

“Well, I know I want more.”

“And, if I don’t?”

He laughs, his eyes crinkling. “You do.”

“You’re cocky,” I say, amused.

“Yes, ma’am. And, I don’t want anyone stealing away what I’m trying to impress.”

“Well,” I tell him, grabbing a few more grapes. “I guess I don’t have to look into it. I’m content to take some time off.”

“Ok, but if you change your mind, let me know. I was only half joking about them being able to steal you away.” He winks. He has nothing to worry about. I have zero interest in any man besides him right now and that is for a completely different reason than he thinks.

“So, why is this place so special to you?” I ask just as we finish our nighttime picnic.

He shrugs. “It’s just the place I come to when I want to leave the world behind me for a while.”

I lean back on my elbows. “Did you want to leave the world behind tonight?”

He follows me, resting his body back. “I just didn’t want to share you with anyone tonight. I just wanted it to be us.” He turns his face, and leans in, kissing me on the cheek. I can feel my both of them warm with a blush, and I smile at him before glancing away.

“Well, thank you. This all was really nice.” I look back over at him and am startled that he is still just staring at me. I feel the weight of his stare and it consumes me.

“You’re welcome.”

We talk for the next few hours about life while Casen keeps me warm. We’ve managed to move, so that he is sitting up and I am lying between his legs, his arms wrapped around my torso. Casen tells me things about him I already know and I tell him things I want him to know. Afterward, he asks if I want to have drinks at his place, but I decline. The ride back is much different than the ride there. Casen seems to be much more comfortable touching me and uses every opportunity to place a hand on my hand, or my leg. It’s causing my hormones to fight with my will. He walks to the elevator and I can feel the thick cloud of tension fill the tiny space. The hallway is

quiet for a Saturday night. Usually there is at least a television being played too loud, but it's just Casen and me, all alone.

"I had a great time," Casen whispers as he traps my body between his chest and the door of my apartment. His eyes trail down the exposed skin of my breasts.

I got the sweet Casen at dinner. Now the dirty one has arrived.

I look up, biting my lip, mostly to try stifling a laugh at his cliché date-ending line. "Me, too."

His eyes zone in on my mouth as a light finger trails up my arm. When it reaches my neck and up my throat, he wraps a warm hand around my jaw. Shifting, I wait for him to make his move and place his lips on mine. He grins before pulling back, dropping his hand, essentially leaving me feeling rejected and stupid.

I turn around in the tiny space he's allowed me and quickly open my door, so I can slam it in his face. Before I can fight it, Casen spins me around, sliding me over to aggressively push me up against the wall. When I don't think he can get any closer, he does, making my knees weak and my heart rate pick up.

"I want to kiss you Embyr," he growls, his intoxicating breath filling the air. "I've wanted these lips on mine all night. That little peck you gave me at the bar, last night, hasn't been holding me over too well."

Not wanting to miss an opportunity to make him crave me even more, I lift my fingers up, gripping the back of his neck. "What the fuck are you waiting for?" I ask, reaching up on my toes, colliding my lips with his. He doesn't falter as he takes the kiss deeper. His tongue thrashing against mine. His leg pushing my thighs apart, and his hands gripping my hips, pulling me into him. I tug on his hair, earning me a rewarding moan and feeling his hard erection drive into my leg.

I gasp at how massive it feels and inwardly smile knowing that is going to be the key to rock his fucking world into oblivion.

The way to a man's heart is not food. No—it's pussy, and I plan on using mine to shatter his heart so completely, as he did to me all those years ago, that he'll never look at another woman the same. I'm going to feel as bad for what I am doing to him as he did for what they did to me.

I feel nothing.

That's wrong.

I'm fucking lying.

Tearing our lips apart, I push at his shoulders forcing him back a few steps. He looks like a man out of control. We look intently at one another until he breaks again. Driving me back into the wall, he lifts me up by the back of my thighs. His tongue starts another assault on mine and I nip at it. He rewards me with a thrust of his jeans between my legs. I ignore the wetness seeping through my panties and focus on the mission at hand.

Our lips draw apart and his forehead falls to mine. "I really want to come in."

I turn my head side to side, letting him know that won't be happening. He concedes, lowering me to the ground. When my gaze finds his hungry eyes, they are looking down. I follow the trail, discovering my dress hiked up and my bright-red see through panties are on display, and make a show of concealing them once again, slowly gliding everything back into position.

Without another word, I saunter back to my door, leaving Casen in the hallway, and closing it behind me.

7 SEVEN

I watch the swirl of creamer circulate before blending into my coffee. The background noise of the café, drowned out by the thoughts of my date the other night. When I left him at the door, I couldn't help but feel triumphant over how twisted up I made him. I have no doubt that, if I would have let him in, he would have had me on my back in no time.

When he pushed me into the wall, I could feel how rock hard I made him. How my body affected his. I'm sure with just the brush of my tongue over his dick, he would have come on the spot.

Silly, foolish man.

I haven't heard from him since, though, it's only been two days. But, I'm not the least bit worried. Men love challenges, and Casen is no different. If I would have let him in and allowed him to fuck me, he probably would have lost interest. That's not the plan. I need to wrap him around my finger so tight that when he does get inside of me, he will never want to leave. Too bad for him that isn't his decision.

I look around, watching as one uptight business man meets with other uptight business men and glance at my watch. She should be here any minute. As if on cue, the door opens, allowing the bright sunlight to fill the dimly lit café. Tracy walks in, finding me in the corner. As she walks with purpose toward me, I find I'm jealous of her unique beauty.

“Embyr!” She smiles, crinkling her stunning green eyes as she pushes her red locks behind her ears. “So glad we could finally make this meeting happen. I was hoping you weren't avoiding me. I've had so many ideas, the past few days, flitting around in this crazy head of mine for your condo.”

I return the smile and wave my hand dismissively. “Of course not. I’ve just had a lot going on.”

Plopping down, she adjusts the strap of her purse over the back of her chair, and turns to face me. “I can imagine. Evan can hardly believe what Patrick got himself into. From what I hear, he stole a lot of money from his clients. I’m happy Evan never invested with him, even if they have been friends since high school.”

Ah, Evan. The “E” in PITCREW. The awkward boy in high school. The one who was lucky enough to make friends with the “in crowd.” The one who went to MIT and now has more money than he knows what to do with. Evan Gregory, the one who has absolutely no appreciation for his beautiful, faithful wife.

A few weeks ago, I told Patrick I was looking for an interior designer for my condominium. With my new found blackmail income from Wesley, I could now afford to hire someone highly sought after, like Tracy Gregory, to decorate my place. Patrick set us up.

Coincidence that she is married to a PITCREW member? I think not. I knew who Patrick would recommend. He and Evan stayed close after high school. He would drop by the office once or twice a week to talk to Patrick; each time, shamelessly flirting with me. Not that he gave me the time of day in high school except to taunt me relentlessly, threatening to release the tape. He never asked me any favors or made me do something I didn’t want to do, but I was in constant fear because he was just evil enough to show the world what I had done.

“Yeah,” I replied, taking a cautious sip of my coffee. “Good thing.”

Evan didn’t need Patrick to make him money. His yearly income far exceeded the other six PITCREW member’s combined. Not to mention that Tracy is the go-to interior designer in Chicago. She could live a very handsome life without Evan, and soon—that may be proven.

“So, let’s get started,” she says, smiling at me as she pulls out a notebook from her bag. “What sort of feel do you want for your place?”

I take another quick glance at my watch, hoping our surprise guest gets here soon, so I don’t have to go through all of the niceties.

He’s late. He’s never late. He’s always annoyingly fucking on time.

As my shoulders slump slightly, about ready to accept that maybe today he won’t show up, the door chimes. Tracy looks at me expectantly as my eyes find the large, sandy-blond haired man walking in, beautiful blonde bombshell on his arm. My heartrate picks up as I watch his long fingers caress the side of her hip before he leads her up to the counter.

“Embyr,” Tracy calls, trying to get my attention.

I absently shake my head and look at her curious eyes. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I was just thinking about all the ideas I have floating around in my head. My friend just moved out, so I feel like I can do just about anything I want. So many possibilities!”

She smiles, a beautiful, Julia Roberts smile. “I understand. It’s a lot to think about, but if I could just get a general idea of what you want then, the next time we meet, I can bring some boards with me for you to look at.”

I nod, looking once again at the couple, who are now making out like teenagers while waiting for their order. My stomach coils in disgust. I’ve never seen so much infidelity as I have since starting my little revenge project. There is so much deceit out there, it makes me never want to settle down. Not that right now is an option anyways. I have other things on my plate.

My parents, despite quite a few bumps in their marriage, never cheated. Not that I know of, at least. They were the type to always touch the other some way, somehow. I watched them go through their struggles, loving each other unconditionally. Never once forgetting to say I love you before leaving the

house. Before junior year, I longed to have a love like that one day. Now, I just want a good lay. No commitment. Just a good old fashioned fuck every once in a while.

A laugh pulls me from my thoughts. “Daydreaming again?” Tracy asks, pushing her fiery hair behind her ears.

“Yes.” I chuckle.

She reaches over, taking my hand gently in hers. “Well, how about I tell you some ideas I have that I think would be perfect and we can go from there?”

I nod. “Ok.”

Tracy dips down, digging back into her bag and pulls out a large black binder, opening it up to the first page. Both of our heads lean in but my sight lands on the couple making their way to their usual booth, close to our table, not paying any attention to the people around them. Obviously, because if he did, then he would walk the other way.

“This right here,” Tracy points to a black couch with deep purple accent pillows. “I think would be perfect in a bachelorette pad. Do you have pets? Because black is not a good color for a house with pets.”

I shake my head no, watching as Evan slides into the booth and is followed by the blonde. It makes me shake my head when a couple sits on the same side but they have a reason for it. A disturbing one. My heart beats faster, the rush funneling through my veins, as I try to figure out how to get Tracy to turn around.

She continues on, showing me each and every page. I make comments when needed, not really giving a shit about what she is showing me because I’m pretty sure, after today, I won’t see her, again.

I watch closely as the man’s hand slide up the woman’s thigh, higher and higher, and if I wasn’t paying attention, I wouldn’t have heard her harsh intake of breath as he hit her sweet spot. Every week I watch him get her off with dozens of coffee drinkers surrounding them. None the wiser. Each time they think they have gotten away with it.

Except, all the other times, Tracy isn't here.

Her shoulders stiffen as the woman's breath becomes heavier and the man's name slips from between her lips. "Evan," the blonde bimbo whispers, earning an eyebrow rise from Tracy. I watch as Tracy slowly turns. My hands grip the table, waiting for the moment she sees it. Evan continues to move his hands underneath blondie's dress, not noticing that his wife is watching him go knuckle deep in another woman. As he moves faster, the woman on the receiving end of his fingers slowly grinds into them attempting to get off. He licks his lips and takes the bottom one in between his teeth as he watches her with rapt attention. I look down at his lap noticing the bulge beginning to form. I know from weeks of watching the same thing occur, they head out to his car and have a quick fuck before he sends her on her way. Being in public is obviously not an issue for either one of them.

Her whimpers get more frequent and just as I think Tracy is going to watch her husband finger bang another woman right in front of her I jump from the sound of her hand slamming down on the table. "What the fuck are you doing, Evan?" her loud scream earning the interest of the entire coffee house.

Tracy's face burns a shade of red that competes with the color of her hair. She shoves away from the table. Evan's eyes grow wide, pulling his hand out from between the woman's legs as he watches his wife grab the little home wrecker by the hair, pulling her as far away from her husband as she can.

"Tracy!" he yells, standing up, still sporting wood. He notices and adjusts before Tracy walks over and knees him in the crotch. My shoulders come up to my ears. Fuck! That had to hurt.

"You cheating, lying son of a fucking bitch!" she fumes, shoving a finger in Evan's chest. He towers over her significantly, but you can see he is terrified of her. "What in the ever loving fuck are you doing?"

"Tracy. Baby. Brandi means nothing to me," he pleads, stepping closer before thinking better of it.

Brandi? Huh. His begging and her name? How cliché.

A slow smirk comes across my face and I watch Brandi's face morph into anger at Evan's words. "I mean *nothing* to you?" she asks, her voice echoing off the walls of the now dead silent room. "That's not what you were saying when you've had your dick inside me for the past year!"

A collective breath is taken from everyone. It's like watching a damn soap opera.

I need some fucking popcorn.

"A year?" Tracy screeches, looking with absolute disgust at Brandi. In a flash, her entire body whips around and her hand meets the left side of Evan's face. Evan barely moves at the contact and stares at her in disbelief. Brandi picks up her purse with a huff and stomps her way out of the shop.

"You," Tracy growls, getting into Evan's face, "Better get a good fucking lawyer because at least half of your shit is mine!"

And with that, she is gone, Evan hot on her heels. Out the door, leaving me to my coffee in peace. I almost feel bad for what just happened, but it's not like I made him cheat and showed it to her.

No.

That fucker started banging that woman over a year ago, and I was just showing his wife that she deserves so much better than that pansy ass. She is better off without him, even without half of his millions.

My foot knocks into something while I cross one leg over the other. I look down finding Tracy's bag and groan. Damn it. I was planning on never having to see her again.

I pick it up, but before I can place it over the back of my chair a hand falls over mine. I look up finding Tracy's tear-filled eyes. Trails of moisture fall down her cheeks and, for a brief moment, my heart breaks for her. "I forgot that," she says. I hand it to her and she pulls it over her shoulder, pulling her hair that tangles up in the motion. "I'm sorry you had to see that," she softly apologizes before turning and walking out of the door once again.

I watch her go, and it's the first time, since starting all this, that I feel bad for the wake from the deceit of these men. She could have gone on for years not knowing what he was doing. *She needed to know.*

The café returns to normal volume, now that the show is over, and I quickly finish up my coffee while scrolling through my phone. I decide to wait a few extra minutes, in case the happy couple is still outside, screaming it out on the sidewalk.

I smile realizing another PITCREW member's life just became a little more screwed up, and then a cold chill hardens my nipples just before my cell rings in my hands.

CASEN CALLING.

I briefly consider not answering, but decide to accept the call anyways.

“Hello.”

I hear him clear his throat. “Embyr, its Casen.”

His voice, deep and mysterious, sends a shiver through my body, but I laugh. “I know.”

“Oh, well. What are you up to?” he asks and I can hear the busy streets of Chicago in the background.

I look around, noticing a couple searching for an open table that isn't there. “I'm at Coffee Bean. Well, actually, I'm about to leave.” I stand up, motioning for the couple to take my table and clear my stuff.

“On Michigan?” he asks.

Tossing my trash in the garbage, I adjust my purse and walk out of the front door, taking a right towards my condo. “That's the one.”

“In a sexy, red shirt and ass-hugging jeans?” His breath becomes harsh.

I stop walking, the hairs on the back of my neck, standing up. “Yes,” I stretch out the word.

“With torture me boots on?” he continues. I spin around just in time to see him walking straight toward me with

purpose. He hits a button on his phone just before he gets to me. My hands fall to the side and his wrap around my face bringing our lips close. “I’m so glad I had to go to get my watch fixed around the corner this morning.”

This is dangerous. Part of me wants to push his hands off of me. The other part wants me to move in that last inch. “Why?” I breathlessly ask.

“Because now, I get to do something I’ve wanted to do again since Saturday.” His eyes look down to my lips before he gently places his on them. The kiss is slow and, even though I don’t want to I kiss him back, I allow his tongue to penetrate. It grows aggressive and, with a mind of their own, my fingers grab a hold of his shirt tightly as I grow wet between my legs. Shocked at my body’s reaction, I pull away and flatten myself against the side of the brick building. We stare for a moment before he speaks. “Are you busy right now?”

Speechless, I just shake my head no. Casen reaches out for my hand, and I take it. “Good,” he says. “I want to show you something.”

~~Patrick~~

Ian

~~Thad~~

Casen

Reece

~~Evan~~

Wesley

The logo features a large, stylized number 8 in a light gray color. Below the 8, the word "EIGHT" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters of "EIGHT" are filled with a white, distressed or splattered texture, giving it a gritty, urban appearance.

My feet struggle to keep up with his pace as he strides down the sidewalk. It's unusually calm, considering the hustle and bustle of Chicago is always going, even at eleven o'clock on a Monday morning. We turn a corner and he stops so abruptly, that I have to keep myself from running into the back of him. "Where are you taking me?" I ask once I have secured more air in my lungs. He has yet to answer me or let go of my hand, so I take a quick look at what he is wearing.

A gray t-shirt fits tightly over his torso with the letters CFD in black across the front, and he has on a pair of black work out pants. His running shoes are neon green. I stifle a laugh at how ridiculous the shoes look. When I meet his eyes, he is smiling at me. He points across the street. "The firehouse," he answers before pulling me in that direction.

I use as much resistance as I can. "I don't think I'm allowed in there," I tell him, attempting to gain possession of my hand.

Spinning around he takes my head in his hands. "Embyr, I wouldn't take you here if you weren't."

I relent, allowing him to grab my hand, once again, and pull me through the enormous red doors. The large building houses one fire truck and one ambulance. I'm taken back by how huge they are once you are right up next to them. I used to seeing firetrucks as a kid and they looked enormous to me, but even now, years later, I am still in awe of their size. "Wow."

My father was a police officer and I visited him at the station numerous times. Although it was connected to the fire

station he never allowed me in there, no matter how many times I asked him.

Casen drops my hand and walks over to the driver's side of the fire truck, opening the door. "Want to get in?"

I immediately shake my head no. "Won't that be against the rules?"

He steps close to me, invading my space, and leans in. "You don't look like a rule follower anyway."

"Well, okay then," I whisper, dropping my head back slightly, allowing his lips to brush the side of my neck. After he steps away, I grab onto the handle on the side of the door and start to pull myself up. Halfway there, I feel his warm hands cover my ass, pushing me up into the seat. The truck is facing out toward the street, and from up here, I realize it has to be tough navigating this beast through the city's narrow streets.

"What do you think?" Casen asks, effortlessly pulling himself up alongside of me.

"It's huge!" I tell him, running my fingers over the steering wheel, feeling overwhelmed by all the bells and whistles of it.

He leans over me, his intoxicating scent, hitting my senses, and he kisses me gently on the lips. "Want to pull the horn?"

I try to hide my smile from his sweet gesture and shake my head, realizing that I'm losing focus on the cause. Seductively, I pull my lip between my teeth before I say, "I want to do a lot of things."

His eyebrows raise and a deep green swirls beneath the irises of his eyes. His Adam's apple dips slowly as he swallows. "Like what?"

I turn my body toward him, allowing my legs to part so he can fit between them. He slides in, pushing his hips between mine and glides his hands up my jean clad thighs.

My body is in limbo. I don't know if I should be repulsed by his touch or propelled towards the good fucking orgasm I haven't had since college when I banged two frat brothers.

“You’re unbelievably sexy, Embyr,” he breathes into me. “I just can’t stop thinking about you.”

I don’t answer with words. I just pull him by the shirt into me and crash my lips to his like I’m claiming them as my own. His hands find the hem of my top and pushes it up, finding the soft skin of my stomach. His fingers drag along my sides, dangerously close to my breasts and then back down. I can’t contain the flood of want forming between my legs. “Casen,” I moan involuntarily.

“Jesus, Embyr,” he says against my lips. “I want to lay you down on this seat and have my way with you.”

His words cause a stir inside me. It’s like I almost want him to make good on his threat. His grip digs deeper into my sides but he startles as someone calls his name. Casen’s forehead falls to my shoulder. “Yeah, man?”

The interrupter’s voice gets closer, and I quickly adjust my shirt back in place. “I thought you were gone for the day?” he asks Casen.

“I was but I wanted to show Embyr the station,” he answers, dragging himself away from me and stepping down before extending his hand to me. I take it and carefully lower myself to solid ground and come face to face with Reece—fucking—Craig.

Ah, Reece. The one who started the bet. If it wasn’t for this asshole, I might have lead a normal life.

His eyes scan over my body, causing a shattering that makes me want to vomit. I feel exposed as he continues to take inventory before bringing his right hand out.

“Reece Craig. I work with Casen.” He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “What was your name, again?” His head tilts to the side and his face scrunches up in a stare I remember from ten years ago. It’s the look he gave just before he delivered the final blow on an argument. We had many of those since he was in most of my high school classes. Speech class was always the worst. If there was ever a chance my facts were wrong, or he disagreed with my persuasive speech, that look

would show up, and I would cower back. It's the look he gave me right after I told him my father was going to have his ass for what he started.

"You ain't going to tell him shit," he had said, and he was right. I didn't want to disappoint my dad.

I take his hand in mine and tighten my grip to show strength. "Embyr. Embyr Quinn. Nice to meet you."

When a sufficient amount of time has passed, I attempt to drop my hand, but he isn't so fast to let go. Tugging, I free my hand and take a step back, the hairs on the back of my neck, standing up. His dark green eyes pierce me where I stand. If he was as tall as Casen, Reece would be a very scary man. But, while his five foot eleven stature doesn't scare many men, his messy brown hair and dual dimple smile has most ladies dropping their panties within minutes. I've seen it happen. Casen, Reece, and Ian frequent Jedi's Bar and I've watched the women bow before him. It's sickening really.

"What are the two of you up to?" he asks Casen, but keeps his eyes are dead set on me.

I'm pulled from the depths of his stare when Casen grabs me around the waist. "I was about to show her where we sleep on our shifts."

A smirk crosses Reece's face that irritates me. He's the type of man that can instantly infuriate me with just his mere presence. It has always been that way. Reece Craig was never—and I mean *never*—nice to me. He turns to walk away, waving. "Don't forget to wash the sheets."

I mutter "asshole" under my breath not realizing I said it loud enough for Casen to hear. He chuckles and pulls me in tightly.

"Come on," he commands, sliding his hands down my arms and intertwining his fingers with mine. He takes me through a door and down a long hallway. The station is eerily silent except for our footsteps. Through the maze, he leads me to another door and into a large room that has at least ten, what I can only describe as cubicles, enclosed by high partitions. He

let's go of my hand and walks towards one in the back. Stopping just inside the entryway, he extends his hand, allowing me to go in first.

It's really small. It contains a twin size bed on the left wall with a dark blue blanket and a couple of pillows. On the right is a small desk with an iPad and a charger. That's it.

I walk in, dragging my fingers along the top of his desk. "No pictures?" I ask, turning to face him.

He shrugs. "No. I guess not."

Taking another spin, I finally settle on resting my ass on his desk and look over at him. He's leaning into the entryway, his forearms and biceps tight as he crosses his arms. His eyes are on my boots.

I cross one ankle over the other. "You like them?" I ask, bringing his attention back up to my eyes.

His arms drop and he slowly makes his way towards me. My insides tingle. I'm still a bit turned on from our time in the fire truck "They are on you, and I like you."

A harsh breath escapes me when he places one hand on each side of me on the desk. He's in my personal space and I'm not sure I'm supposed to like it. "You don't even know me," I whisper.

His head tilts to the side and falls slowly down until his words are a breeze on my neck. "What I know about you, I like."

Goosebumps prickle my skin. "What do you know?"

I feel a small nip at the curve of my neck and his hand comes up to gently glide where he bit. "I know how soft your skin feels under my touch." A whimper escapes my lips and he brings his fingertips up and touches them. "I also know that your mouth tastes like heaven, and I can't stop thinking about how sexy it is."

I can't help the longing I feel when he caresses me. I try to remain focused on the mission at hand but he is making it so hard. So fucking hard. And wet. Goddamn it; I'm wet.

“Where is everyone?” I ask with seduction on my mind.

“Lunchroom.”

Deciding to gain the upper hand, I push on his chest and walk him backwards until the back of his knees hit the bed. Grabbing the waistband of his workout pants I push them down, along with his boxer briefs, and his intake of breath shows me I’ve taken him by surprise.

I playfully shove him down onto the bed and keep myself from grasping his impressive appendage. In another place and time ... if he were another man, I would jump on him and take him for a ride. But, right now, I need to show who has the advantage here.

Lowering to my knees, I immediately wrap my mouth around him, bringing my hands to the base to make up for the length I know that my mouth, for sure, cannot reach. He groans, a deep, guttural groan, and takes my hair between his fingers tightly. I work my way up and down his shaft, alternating my speed and sliding my teeth along the top to show him who is in charge. His hips start to move on their own accord, and I have to keep him from hitting the back of my throat too roughly. My hands work at a feverish pace, and I let one of them drop to grip his tightening balls.

“Oh God, Embyr,” he moans, gripping my hair tighter and speeding up the pace of his hips. I roll his balls around between my finger tips and take him deeper, harder, faster into my mouth. He lets go of my hair and falls back to his elbows. I open my eyes and find him watching me. His face is flushed. One of his hands reaches back up on top of my head and lies gently there. Stopping all motion, he allows me to continue my assault on him. When I feel his dick grow larger in my mouth, he tries to push me off, but I won’t let him. His breathing grows ragged and his eyes roll to the back of his head before I feel the hot spurt jet into my mouth and down the back of my throat. I slow my pace, allowing him to finish his orgasm and then pull away from him. I swallow the rest of him before standing up and adjusting myself. My eyes are cast downward, so I don’t see him move until he is turning me around and up

against the desk. His front is to my back and his hand is working its way down the front of my jeans.

“Your turn,” he rumbles in my ear.

I’m embarrassed with how wet I am. He could slip that huge fucking cock inside me with ease, but I’m not looking to fake an orgasm with him right now. I turn in his arms, trying not to relish in the feel of his muscles wrapped around me. Making a big gesture of wiping my mouth free of his come, I lick my lips and snatch it between my teeth. “No, that was for you,” I say, looking around the small space. “Now every time you sit on that bed, you will remember me having my mouth wrapped around you.”

His head tilts to the side. “Are you sure? I’ve never had a female turn down me returning such a generous favor. I promise I’m fucking fantastic at it.”

My fingertips gently slide up his chest, coming to rest just below his jawline. “I have no doubt of that, but I’m sure.”

He leans in closer, his nose brushing along mine. “I don’t know what it is, Embyr, but I can’t help but want to be near you all the damn time.” His mouth captures my mouth. His tongue is gentle, timid, as it entwines with mine. I shudder as his hands come up to capture my face in his palms. I’m stiff as a board because I don’t want to have this reaction to him.

Years of wanting to get back at him for sitting on the sidelines as his friends treated me like garbage are colliding with years of not being satisfied by any man. Sure, there have been plenty. Some have even gotten me off but none have filled the void that is my need for intimacy.

I’m a strong woman. I’ve been hurt and I’ve protected myself ever since I gave myself away. But, you can be hard as ice and still want a man to melt you down into a puddle. I want to be in charge, but there is something to be said for a man who makes you want to submit to him.

I know Casen could ruin me again if I let him.

We never dated.

We never kissed.

He never even knew I had feelings for him, but he didn't have to reciprocate for it to completely shatter my heart. I was young and in love. Maybe if I would have told him, it would have changed things, but I doubt it.

I pull away at the sounds off footsteps along to the carpeted floor. "Casen?" They call out.

His head turns towards the door just as Reece appears. "Yeah, man?" Casen responds, not giving me an inch of space. I can feel him hardening under me again.

"Jedi's tonight?" Reece asks.

Casen looks down at me. "Only if Embyr comes."

I nod. "Sure." God, he has no idea how much I want to "come."



I started to regret the decision to join them tonight almost immediately after I agreed. I am here, but I'm not interested in making nice with Casen and his friends. All I want is to get in, break his heart, and get the hell out all while sabotaging the other's lives. Even though it's getting harder each day to do that. But then, I look across the high-top table we are all crowded around and see my reason.

Reece and Ian.

Just like Wesley, the two of them seem to be pristine. I can't find anything on them that would help me in my cause. So, if hanging out with a bunch of hot firefighters, after hours, will help me learn all their dirty secrets, then I'm all in.

"So, Embyr?" Ian asks. "What do you do?"

Ian Smith. The fucking bane of my existence.

This man—this piece of shit of a man—won the bet. He walked alongside of the PITCREW with his chest puffed out like a goddamn peacock that had the winning lottery ticket. He won and I know, for a fact, Reece resented him for it.

Reece tried. Oh, he tried over and over to get me to go out with him. But I had him pinpointed. Reece is sceevy. He has slime ball written all over him, and I knew his intentions behind asking me out weren't above suspicion.

Ian was the shy, innocent one. Reece was the outgoing, ladies man. Where Ian didn't have any girlfriends, Reece was fucking almost every girl in our class. By senior year, I'm pretty sure Reece had successfully bagged every girl in our yearbook, and when he turned eighteen, he went after college girls from the community college, thanks to his older brother.

But, Ian? Ian seemed harmless. I trusted him. And, even though I used him to get Casen's attention, it still didn't compare to what he was using me for. I feel sick every time I think of that night and how my life could have been so different had I just said no to the date.

"I'm in between jobs right now," I answer him, taking a sip of my margarita, inwardly patting myself on the back for fucking Patrick over. Then, my thoughts drift over to Thad and Evan. I wonder how much their wives will get in the divorces. I'm sure they will all make out like bandits.

The table is loud with conversations. I just don't understand why they would want to spend time together after being in the same building for two days, except Ian. I haven't figured out what he does, yet.

"You won't believe who she used to work for, though," Casen adds, pulling his stool closer to mine. "Fucking Strickland."

"No way!" Ian loudly calls out, making me tense. "Didn't he just get arrested?"

I lift my eyes up, finding Reece's zeroed in on mine. It makes me cower.

"Yeah, man. He was stealing from his clients," Casen replies. "I haven't spoken to him in years."

"Me, either," Ian says. "Small world. So, how did you two meet?" he changes the subject, motioning between the two of us. I can't speak. Reece's stare is still holding me hostage. My body tingles with nervous energy. If I allow it; Casen will just keep speaking for me.

"We actually met here," he says, tugging me alongside him.

Reece tears his stare away from me and looks directly at Casen. "Here?"

He nods his answer.

"Are you sure?" Reece continues. "You never met her before?"

Casen shrugs. “No. I saw her sitting at the bar about six weeks ago and ever since, I couldn’t keep myself from watching her.”

“You sound like a pussy,” Ian adds, making the rest of the firefighters, listening in, laugh.

“I’m definitely not a pussy!” he retorts and then leans in to speak to me alone. “I’m good at eating pussy, but definitely not a pussy.”

I feel myself blush with his words and allow, for a brief moment, to imagine his head between my legs and, just as quickly, banish it from my thoughts.

“Holy fuck.” Reece whispers. “Who is that?”

All eyes at the table, including mine, turn to see who has Reece gawking. I groan when I spot Trinity. I called her and asked if she wanted to join us. She said she could already use a break from the crazy house her sister runs. She looks smoking hot. I was able to go home and change but Trinity makes my off the shoulder shirt and form fitting jeans look homely compared to the tight black number she has going on. Her raven colored hair is slightly curled and one side is pinned back. Her blue eyes look bold and bright with the smoky look that adorns her eyelids. She is flawless without make up but the added touches make her look irresistible, and it seems Reece’s eyes catch her.

Her hips sway back and forth as she approaches our table and she brings me into a big hug. “I’ve missed you so much.”

I squeeze her tight. “I’ve missed you too, but I just saw you the other day.”

“That’s hot ladies. Keep touching one another,” one of the younger firefighters says.

Casen smacks him behind the back of the head and wraps his arms around me waist, pulling me in tight. “You must be Trinity,” he says, taking her hand in his. “It’s nice to ‘officially’ meet you.”

“The one and only.” She smiles. “And you must be Jared.” The table gets quiet and I feel Casen tense up next to me.

Trinity and I start to laugh. She thinks she is funny. “I’m just playing with you, Casen,” she tells him, taking a seat next to me. “Em must not have told you; I like to joke around.”

“She didn’t,” Reece chimes in. “Or how sexy you are. Hi, I’m Reece.” His smile widens, and she immediately swoons. I try hard not to throw up. I wanted Trin here for support, and now I’m pretty sure she is going to end up fucking Reece.

She leans over the table and places her hand in his. “Trinity.”

After a few minutes of nonsense chit chat, I feel Casen’s hands start to wander. His fingers have made their way to my hips and slide further north just underneath my shirt. They gently graze over my bare skin. It’s like he knows all of my turn ons. The ministrations are so distracting, I hardly hear a thing that anyone is talking about anymore. It feels so good, so relaxing that I almost forget where I am.

His breath caresses my ear. “Do you like that?”

I nod and his touch gets gentler. Like his fingers are ghosting over me and I feel a shiver run up my spine. The music starts to play, and Casen stands up, requesting we dance together. I don’t hesitate because dancing is one of my favorite things to do.

The lights dim as he pulls me onto the large dance floor and immediately has my arms wrapped around his neck. Our foreheads touch and our noses are an inch apart. I close my eyes, letting the beat filter through my body. He returns his hands to my hips but this time both of them grip me. My hips sway without thinking and I’m immediately impressed with how well he can move. He pulls me in tighter and places a light kiss on my lips before turning me around. My head falls back against his chest and I open my eyes, finding Trinity and Reece just a few feet away from us.

He has her in the same position but she has no interest in looking anywhere but back towards him. My body stiffens. I want to warn her. To tell her to stay the hell away from Reece Craig. He is very bad news but when Casen’s lips find my bare shoulder, I lose any coherent thought in my head, and remind

myself to talk to her before she does anything stupid, like leave with him.

“That was quite the little stunt you pulled at the fire station,” he rumbles in my ear before taking a nip at it.

Tilting my head to the side I find his eyes. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

His pupils dilate. “We could have been caught.”

My nipples harden at the thought. “That’s ok.”

He stares for a moment before bringing me back around. “Does that turn you on, Embyr? Thinking someone might catch you doing something dirty.”

The moment it leaves his lips I flash through all my sexual experiences since high school: the frat guys in the hot tub, the university’s football field, and the unlocked bathroom doors. I guess it does turn me on. I wonder if, for some sick and twisted reason, what happened in high school played any role in it.

Casen doesn’t wait for my answer before his hand crawls higher up my shirt, making sure it stays down and covers my breasts when he tugs down the cup of my bra. In an instant, my peaked nipple is between his fingertips, and a moan escapes between my lips. The pull of it thrills me. The pleasure of the pain is euphoric. Never have I felt this wonton or cared less if someone sees us.

I was screwing Patrick for a while and I never allowed him to bring me anywhere close to the brink of an orgasm but I know if Casen tried, even just a little bit, my body would come for him like a rocket.

“Six weeks, Embyr,” he tells me as he pulls the other cup of my bra down, giving the other breast some attention. “I noticed you six weeks ago, and I’ve craved you ever since.” He runs his hands down my stomach after covering my tits back up, hooking his thumbs into the waistband of my jeans, tugging me into him. I can feel his erection even through the denim. My body rolls, grinding against him, and I drag my lips across his. I’m on fire and keyed up, trying to keep myself

from taking him into the bathroom stall. Before I can make good on my thoughts, I hear someone calling Casen's name over the loud music.

Casen pulls away and we both look to find Ian standing next to us holding a phone up. "You're phone keeps going off, man. It's your sister."

Ian hands the phone to Casen. "I'll be right back. Why don't you dance with Ian, so I don't have to beat some guy's ass if they try to make a move on you?" He walks away, not giving me the opportunity to tell him I don't want Ian's hands on me.

"I'm good," I tell him. "I'll just go sit down."

Ian grabs just above my wrist and gently directs me into him. I look around for an out. Trinity is wrapped up in Reece. Casen is out of sight. I can't even catch Damien's eyes. He pulls me close and I relent but the feel of his skin touching mine causes me to shutter. I can feel my throat tightening up. I can't believe this man has been inside me.

"Annie," Ian breathes on my neck, dragging his hands down my sides. The garage is warm even though we are having a crisp fall day, and I shiver at his touch. Something feels off, but our date today was nothing but perfect.

After he picked me up, Ian took me to the roller skating rink and then for a quick bite to eat before bringing me to Reece's garage where the PITCREW worked on their cars. Tonight would be the first race after three weeks off.

"I want to touch you," he sweetly says breaking the barrier of the top of my jeans. "I want to make you feel good."

My eyes rolled in the back of my head as unfamiliar feeling took over my body. His hands on me make me want them to touch me in places that I've never thought I wanted to be touched. "Ok," I whisper and he doesn't hesitate to unbutton my pants and weave his large fingers inside my panties. I gasp as a spark zips through my body at his contact. It feels

incredible. I can't believe one of the guys from the PITCREW not only asked me out but wants to touch me.

His fingers slide up and down and I grip the work bench behind me. "Does that feel good?" he asks.

I can only nod as he takes it to a steadier pace. My knees feel weak and when his mouth crashes to me, his tongue seeking mine. I lose all control and my body freezes as the most incredible feeling takes over. I call out his name, muffled by the fusion of our mouths, and whimper as the last shockwave courses through my body.

He made me feel so good and with only the unbuttoning of my pants.

Ian pulls away, his brown eyes watching me as I come down from my high. "How was that?" he asks.

I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding. "Incredible."

A smile lights up his face and he steps away from me. "Do you want to make me feel incredible, too?"

My body stiffens with his question. "I-I don't know."

He looks down, and I can see the bulge in his pants. "Annie, I would hate to lose my race tonight because of a case of blue balls."

I scrunch my eyebrows unsure of what that means, but knowing that he wants me to give him the release he just gave me. "I've never done that before. I don't know how to do it."

Ian grabs my hand, leading me to a couch set up in the back. He leans down, pulling my unbuttoned pants around my knees. "Sit," he commands. I do, only because I'm scared, but also wondering where this is going. He takes my shoes off my feet and my pants the rest of the way off of me. "I'll show you how to do it," he says, pushing me down across the couch and covers my body with his.

That night Ian showed me more than how to take the edge off of a man. He showed me how a boy can get a girl naked

and manipulate her into giving her virginity up. At the time, I thought he was sweet and I remember his eyes watching me as he thrust in and out. It had hurt but I kept quiet. I didn't want him to tell his friends that I complained. When it was over, he took me home without another word and ignored me the next day at school. It wasn't until a week later when I found out why he was so pushy about asking me out, and when I did, he never looked my way again.

But right now, he can't seem to tear his evil eyes away from me, and I want to grab the nearest knife and cut him. I step away, looking at him in disgust. "Don't touch me."

His head shakes in confusion, and I don't give him a chance to respond. I find my way back to the table, shooting Trinity a text that I'm leaving, and walk out of the door.

Bang, bang, bang.

Bzzzz. Bzzzz.

Bang, bang.

Bzzzz.

For the past hour, since I arrived home, I've heard a chorus of banging on the door and my phone vibrating on the carpet. I'm sitting on the floor, against my couch, my eyes trained on the door. I've been ignoring Casen's request that I open up, and refuse to answer when he or Trinity calls.

"I know you're in there, Embyr. Answer your door," Casen says. "Tell me why you left."

My head falls into my hands as another text from Trinity comes in.

Why did I leave? That is the million dollar question. I just felt like something was off tonight. And, I sure as hell couldn't let Ian keep his hands on me. Every stroke made me feel dirty, and not in the good way. But, what I don't understand is why I could let Patrick fuck me for months and not shy away, but I'm letting Casen in, and I can't be strong as steel when Ian touches me?

I silently pad over to my fridge and pull out some Coke before taking my bottle of Captain off the top of my cabinets. The knocking has stopped, but I continue to keep my drink making to minimal noise. Once my glass is filled, I walk back to my couch, curl my feet underneath me, and take a long, slow sip. The first of many to put me to sleep.

10 TEN

Brutal. That's the only way to describe the workout I am giving myself this morning. Harsh and brutal. I can smell the alcohol I'm sweating out. I drank until I passed out last night. The last thing I remember is that it was close to midnight, and Casen still had not left my door.

I push my body to the limit. Hitting seven miles per hour on the treadmill. Any moment, my legs could give out on me but, in my mind—I need this. I haven't felt anything in a very long time and last night, I felt too much.

I had nightmares about Ian last night; his brown hair falling onto his forehead as he pushes himself inside me; his vile hands, searching my body, holding on for purchase. I've had that dream before. Multiple times, but never once has it affected me the next morning as it did today. I feel like my resolve is weakening and I can't figure out why.

"Whoa, Embyr. Slow down," Trinity says, jumping onto the treadmill next to mine, and brings one arm over the other to stretch.

I keep up my pace and don't look her way. She reached out numerous times last night, but I ignored each and every call. Every text. The image of her having her hands wrapped around Reece weren't helping my mood, either.

When she is satisfied with her stretching she starts the machine and settles into a steady pace. All the while, I am still pushing my body beyond its limits. We don't say a word for what feels like an hour but the countdown on my treadmill tells me it's only been two minutes since she joined me.

“What happened, Em?” she asks when I have less than five minutes to go.

I huff and point to the time. “I couldn’t even talk about it right now, if I wanted to.”

She nods and continues on her five and a half mile per hour pace. When my time is up, I slow to three and a half miles per hour and grab the white towel hanging over the side. I wipe the sweat away and grab a long drink of water from my half full bottle, nearly emptying it.

“I don’t want to like him,” I finally tell her.

She slows her pace. “Why? Casen seems like a great guy.”

“He is; don’t get me wrong. But, falling for him is not something I can do. I just want it to be casual.” Pushing the speed down a few more notches, I start to roll my shoulders to release the tension.

“But you left when he was on his phone. Did his friend say something?”

I breathe out a loud sigh, inwardly cringing when a vision of Ian touching my body flashes through my mind. “He didn’t have to say anything,” I tell her, taking another swig, and adjusting my sports bra. “His hands were on me. They felt wrong, and gross, and grimy. He skeeved me out.”

“So, why did you leave? And, why didn’t you answer my calls? You just left me there with hot firefighters all to myself. Do you know how terrible that is?” She laughs.

I shake my head and shrug. “I’m sorry about that. I left because Casen was making me feel too much. As far as your calls ... my phone was on vibrate.”

Trinity doesn’t respond, so I glance over and find a knowing look on her face. I huff. “What?”

“You didn’t want to feel anything, Embyr? You haven’t had a steady boyfriend since I’ve known you. Don’t you want to feel something besides your own fingers?” she says the last part at almost a whisper and chuckles.

Even though Trinity and I were roommates for a while, she has no idea what happened to me in my past or that I was fucking Patrick for months. When I say that I have no friends to lose if my plans go to shit, well that may have been a lie I was telling to myself. But, I have never let Trinity in enough to trust her with the real Embyr. If you asked her, she would say I'm sweet, I keep to myself, and I'm a prude.

I'm so far from it. If she found out about Patrick, she would be in complete shock. If she found out about what I'm up to, I'm not sure what she would do. Though, right now, I am not sure that I can continue if I'm going to be a fucking baby about it all. I need to steady my resolve. Casen is breaking down all of my barriers. One minute I feel like I am in complete control and the next, I am losing my mind.

She finishes up her run while I walk a little bit. Afterward, we do a few weight machines together and stretch. "He wants to go out with me," she mentions while bending down to touch her toes.

"Who?" I asked confused.

"Reece."

She must not have given it up last night. I've watched Reece a little bit at the bar on the nights before Casen and I "officially met" and he never gives any girl a second glance after he fucks her. I grab my ankle and pull it up to my ass. "What did you say?"

"Well," She stands straight up. "I told him I would think about it. He wanted me to go home with him last night, but I wouldn't."

I stay silent, so she continues. "I mean, I would've but between my sister needing me to bring milk home for the baby, and your sorry ass, I decided to play hard to get."

I release one leg to bring up the other. "I'm really am sorry." But, I'm not. I can't tell her what kind of man Reece is, though, because she doesn't think I know him.

"It's fine. Better this way. I can make him sweat it out a little bit more." She giggles. I laugh and we walk over to the

café and grab a smoothie before heading our separate ways.

My quads are on fire. Every step back to my apartment brings a soreness I haven't felt since I started running. The elevator gives me a small reprieve until the doors open. I groan as each step brings shooting pain and halt just outside when I hear someone across the hall.

“That sound you're making sounds sexy, Embyr,” Casen comments from just outside of my door.

I finish the last few steps and come face to chest with him. “Hey.”

His pointer finger tilts my chin up and his eyes show concern. “Hey.”

We stare for a brief moment before he leans in and places his soft lips on mine. My body goes lax and I almost drop my bag before realizing that this is the problem. I'm letting him get to me. I pull away and put my key in the door. “No work today?”

He follows me in. “No. Came off of a twenty-four hour shift yesterday, so I don't have to go back in until tomorrow morning.”

I drop my gym bag onto the table and turn to face him as he closes the door. He looks magnificent: dark jeans, royal blue shirt, same boots, and eyes that are scorching me from five feet away. “I need to take a shower. Make yourself comfortable and, when I get out, I'll make us some lunch.”

He nods but doesn't move, so I turn to walk down the hall towards my room, hopefully leaving my libido behind.

Twenty minutes later, I find myself back in the kitchen with an astonished look on my face. Casen has done way more than make himself at home. He's managed to find everything he needs for a Cobb salad, and even made lemonade.

“I figured this was okay.” He smiles, pulling a chair out for me.

I take a seat, placing a napkin over my jersey shorts. “It’s more than okay. Thank you.”

He sits next to me, takes a bite, and then places the fork down. “Why did you leave last night?”

That seems to be the question of the day. I can’t tell him that Ian’s hands on my body reminded me of a night, just ten years ago, where he and his friends started a chain reaction of ruining my life.

“I didn’t want that other guy touching me,” I tell him, taking a bite of salad. Jesus, it’s good.

“I’m sorry.” He sighs. “I didn’t even think about it, but I promise—Ian is a good guy.”

I nearly spit the lemonade out.

“I’ll show you how to do it.”

“Whether you think he is a good guy or not, I didn’t agree to dance with him. I agreed to dance with you.”

His head tilts to the side. He probably sees this as a fight and just might give up on me. Only couples fight and we are not a couple. Another bite. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

I wipe my mouth with my napkin and replace it to my lap. “I am, too. Maybe leaving and not answering you was childish. I’m sorry for that.”

“Ok, then.” He smirks, leaning over and kissing me. “Moving on.”

When we finish, both of us take our dishes to the sink, and I wash while he dries them.

“This feels so domestic,” he jokes.

I just smile, not wanting to even think about us being domesticated together. The thought would disgust me. But, even scarier, the thought could fill me with ideas I don’t want in my head.

Get in. Make him love you. Destroy his heart. Get out.

“Do you have plans the rest of the day?” I ask as we take ourselves onto my balcony. I sit on the wicker sofa.

He shakes his head no as he closes the glass door closed behind him. “I don’t. I was hoping we could spend some time together, if you don’t already have plans.”

“Not that I am aware of.” I eye him. “Do you have anything in mind?”

Casen stares at me before lowering himself to his knees between my thighs. They tingle with his touch. His hands slide up from my knees to just inside the bottom of my shorts. “I was thinking,” he says grabbing the edge of them and teasingly tugging on them. “That you could take these off and I could return the favor from yesterday.”

I look around, noticing the busy street just a short distance away and all of the other balconies looking down onto mine. “Casen, someone could see us,” I whisper, but I don’t stop as his fingers reach higher. My panties dampen and his thumb brushes the wet spot.

“That’s the best part,” he growls before his lips collide to mine. He moves my panties aside, and I don’t fight. I’ll let him do this, but I refuse to allow myself to reach an orgasm with him. He’ll get a fake one, just like the rest.

But my tits are sharp as blades, and my body slinks lower into the chair, looking for more friction. I can hear a bus in the distance and someone’s balcony door sliding, but the solid railing around mine keeps most others from seeing what is going on. He’s aggressive, sinking his fingers deep inside of me and earns a muffled moan from me. He speaks into my lips. “You are drenched, Embyr.”

With his words, the faint start of an orgasm starts to build and I try all I can to resist. Casen reaches up, pinching my breast through my shirt and bra, and I can’t help but see fucking stars. He’s going to make me come, and I’m going to hate myself for it. I try to fight it but it feels so good. My walls start to tighten, but I restrain myself. “Come on my fingers, Embyr,” he commands. “I want to feel you squeeze the shit out of them.”

A car door slams shut, and the thrill of what he is doing to me, out in the open, zings through my body. I'm still fighting, but not for long because just as I'm about to gain my composure he pulls his fingers out of me, shoves my shorts over, and latches his sweet fucking mouth to my pussy. "Holy shit!" I scream, fighting the inevitable. I'm so fucking close; it hurts.

"Come, Embyr. Let me feel your clit pulse under my tongue."

With those words—those fucking glorious words—I'm done for. My wall comes crashing down. My steel cage lifted. My first non-self-induced orgasm, in years, comes crashing down over me, and I can't help the screams that echo off the apartment complex walls. I grind into his face, riding out the last wave, as he laps up the remnants of my orgasm. I shudder when it all becomes too sensitive and he leans back, keeping my shorts to the side and staring at my pussy in wonder.

I'm too sated to move and the old high school girl, the one who crushed on him for so long, cannot believe that Casen Parker just got me off, outside, in the middle of the day.

I adjust my shorts, to his dismay, and sit up in my spot. He sits next to me and pulls me in for a deep kiss. I can taste my juices on his tongue, and can't help but want to suck them clean off of him. I'm fucking high on orgasm, and am not worried about the consequences I'm going to face with myself later.

"Does that make up for the blow job you gave me yesterday, and the mistake of leaving you with someone else last night?"

"Definitely." I smile. The first genuine smile I've had in a long time.

He reaches down, sliding his fingers up my thighs once again. "Why were you fighting me, Embyr?"

"I-I ... I wasn't," I stutter because his fingers have found my clit once again. It's swollen and sensitive, and if he

continues to gently caress it the way he is, then I'm going to come again.

"Let's try one more time," he tells me, bringing his forehead to mine, and dipping his pointer and middle finger inside of me; his thumb, still working my clit. "But this time, let the fuck go."

My head falls back as I do what he asks and allow him to thrust his fingers in and out of me slowly, his thumb running lazy circles. I whimper and he takes that as his cue to go faster. My hips move involuntarily and I can hear his breathing deepen. "That's it. Let go, Embyr. You are so fucking sexy with my fingers deep inside of you."

I moan, his thumb harshly pressing down. The bundle of nerves, still sensitive, creating chaos, building up to another orgasm. He thrusts, I ride, he kisses my neck, I moan. It's all too much and I take a deep breath in before letting go and coming all over his fingers. "Fuck," I whisper, my chest rising and falling rapidly.

He slowly pulls his fingers from me. I open my eyes to find him staring again while biting the side of his lip. "What?" I ask, pushing his shoulder jokingly.

He frees his lip before wetting it. "That is my new favorite."

I rub my finger along his chiseled jaw. "What is?"

"Watching you come, Embyr. It's my favorite thing to watch now. And, when I find a new favorite, I have been known to break it in and wear it out."

My skin prickles with the thought of Casen breaking me in. Images of his body over mine, pushing himself inside me. From behind, pumping into me. In the shower. In the car. In the fire truck. On top of the ferris wheel at Navy Pier.

He brings his hands up, cupping my neck and thrusting my lips to his. His tongue commands entrance and fuses with mine. I grab his shirt, bringing myself closer, before I straddle him. His reaches into the back of my shorts and squeezes my ass, grinding my pelvis into his. My body has a mind of its

own. I want to come again. I want to unbutton his jeans and slide my shorts over and ride this mother fucker like it's my last day on earth. And, for the first time since I started this journey of revenge, I feel like maybe—just maybe—I'm going to be the one to get hurt.

11 ELEVEN CASEY

My body is sore. The kind of sore you get from an amazing morning workout. Where your muscles ache so good, and you're still sweating it out thirty minutes later. The firehouse is quiet when I walk in but the truck is still there. I'm right on time; just before seven o'clock in the morning, for my shift and hoping I can get something to eat and a shower before any calls come in.

I swing my arms back and forth and pull them in for a stretch as I walk into the kitchen where a few of the other guys are eating. One of the local schools brought us over some coffee, donuts, and bagels. I snatch up a bagel and a bottle of water from the fridge and turn around, spotting Reece sitting at one of the tables. I pull out a chair on the opposite side of him, and the loud screech make his head pops up and his eyebrows to scrunch. "You almost scared me, man," he says before taking sip of his coffee, then folding the paper back up.

He has dark circles under his eyes and his shoulders are slumped. Yesterday he picked up an extra shift, and I heard there was a big high-rise fire overnight. Three stations battled it until just after four o'clock in the morning.

"You look like shit," I comment before taking a bite of bagel.

He lets his head fall to the table and his eyes shut. "I'm spent. I just want to take a shower and get this smoke smell off of me, so I can fall asleep for three days."

I laugh, knowing that won't happen. We can be one of the busiest stations. "Here's to hoping it's a calm day for you."

Lifting his head up, he looks at me suspiciously. “You get laid last night?”

I inwardly smile. “No. I didn’t get laid, asshole. I’m just happy.”

“Well, you look like a love sick puppy.” He scowls like it’s a disease. Maybe to him it is. He was never the one to have a girlfriend. Since Reece and I have known each other, I can count on one finger the amount of girlfriends he has had, and it was in second grade. He’s not a player but he gets a lot of no-strings ass.

I slowly sip the piping hot coffee. “I’m not love-sick.” I mean, Jesus. I’ve known the girl less than two weeks.

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

I look at him. Trying to figure out why he would say something like that. I don’t have a reputation for falling in love with a girl who I barely know. I’ve only loved one in my lifetime, and that was a lifetime ago. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You were always the one who was looking for more than ass. The only one of us who had,” He pauses waving his hand in mock disgust. “Those relationships things, it’s really fucking disturbing.”

“Really? You think so?” I ask, challenging him. “What about Embyr’s roommate, Trinity? I heard you asked her out.”

He jerks back, his eyebrows raised. “She wouldn’t come home with me. I mean, what girl in their right mind doesn’t want a no-strings-attached night with me? So, I asked her out.”

“The older we get, the more women want a commitment and not a one-night stand, Reece. Even quickly approaching your thirties, you still have a lot to learn about women.”

“Me? I have a lot to learn?” he asks, and I nod a yes. “Well, you look like you have your hands full with that girl from the other night. She seems a little pretentious.”

I stand up, instantly angered by his assumption about Embyr. I know she can be hard to read, but what happened the

other night, with Ian, shouldn't have happened. She isn't mine to pass off to someone else. I should have asked her if it was okay. Plus, Ian can sometimes give off the creepy vibe. He is never one to pass up making a girl uncomfortable.

“That girl's name is Embyr and watch what you say, Reece.” I point a finger at him. “You know nothing about her.”

He stands up too and peers at me from across the table. “You're right. I don't know anything about her and neither do you, but I get a feeling that something isn't right, Casen.” He taps his knuckles on the table. “The way she looked at me ... looked at Ian ... even at you, sometimes—it just feels wrong.”

I shake my head. “I don't say a word about who you fuck. Don't make assumptions about the ones I'm interested in.”

He takes a defeated breath, raising both hands, and drops the subject. “Alright, man.”

I take my seat again and get back to work on my breakfast. The endorphins from my workout, now long gone. I'm irritated and wanting to go back to the gym. Reece picks up his garbage and heads towards the exit but stops at the doorframe. “Do you have that information?”

I nod. “Yeah. I'll finish this up and bring it to you.”

He walks out of the room, and I notice that the other guys are looking at me. I guess we were a bit heated, but I like Embyr, and he is in no place to say anything. It's been a long time since I have been able to really get into a girl. Not since high school. Sure there were many girlfriends over the past decade. Some more long term than others, but none that held me captivated the way Embyr has with just knowing her a short time. She brings out every side of me: the sweet, the rough, and the aggressive. But, what Reece sees as pretention, I see as hurt. I can tell someone hurt her and she is cautious. Her little stunt the other night, fighting her orgasms, has me confused but, once I commanded her to, she let go. It was fucking beautiful, too. It was the first time I didn't want anything reciprocated. To watch her come beneath my touch was enough for me. I can almost feel how bad she is going to

wreck me, and I'm looking forward to every fucking moment of it.

Thirty minutes later, I walk over to Reece's sleeping area just as he is about pull the covers back. I throw a large manila envelope on his desk with a thud, still obviously irritated with him. "Here you go. That's everything Ian needs."

He walks over, picks it up, turning it over and back. "Are you sure about this? Seems like Ian is the last person you want doing this for you."

I pull my hands down my face and bring them to my sides. "Yes. I'm sure. He may not be the best guy to ask, but I have no other options."

Throwing it back down onto the desk he shrugs. "Okay, then. Get out, so I can fucking sleep."

"Alright, princess," I tease. "Get your beauty rest."

I turn to leave, but Reece calls me back. "You really like this girl?"

"I do."

He points to the envelope. "Are you going to tell Embyr about her?"

"Sure," I nod. "If there is anything to tell."

I walk out into the hallway, so I don't disturb the other guys while they are sleeping and pull out my phone. Leaning against the wall, I find Embyr's number and hit "send."

She answers on the third ring. "Hello," her voice filled with sleep.

"Hey, baby. Did I wake you?"

I can hear the rustling of sheets through the phone. "No. I'm awake. Just figured I would take a day off from job hunting and working out. Maybe clean up the house. What are you up to?"

I don't know what is going on or why I have this attraction to her so strongly, but even just her voice over the phone causes me to smile. "I just got to work for my shift. I won't be off until tomorrow. You have plans tomorrow night?"

She clears her throat. "I do. Trinity is coming over for a girl's night."

"Okay. Our crew switched with another crew for Friday, so what does Saturday night look like for you?" I ask, hoping this isn't a brush off. She seemed very off the other night and I hope I didn't scare her too much. There is something behind those eyes that she is protecting, and I hope she gives me the chance to break down her walls.

"Saturday is good." I hear the smile in her tone. "I have to run to the suburbs in the morning, but I'm available after that."

"Is five o'clock okay to pick you up?"

"Sure. Anything special I should wear?" she inquires almost seductively.

I swallow hard. Just her tone brings flashes of her coming on my tongue yesterday. "Just something casual."

"Alright. I'll see you Saturday, then."

We hang up a few minutes later and I push off the wall, walking past the sleeping quarters. I see Reece as I walk by, and the manila envelope flashes at me like a beacon. I've wanted to do this for a long time and I just happened to start pushing it through when I met Embyr. I don't think it's a big deal, but part of me is wondering if I should tell her what I am doing. I mean, I would want to know. But, this relationship, or whatever it is, is too new to go messing it up with something that I believe isn't a big deal.

So then, why am I hiding it?

12 TWELVE

“Are you going to get another job?” Trinity asks as I watch her riffle through my closet. Something she has always done ever since we met. I never had a sister, so it was weird to me the first time she barged in my room demanding silk. She thinks my clothes are cuter, but I wear a size smaller than her. She says that’s perfect because she likes things tight. I shake my head when she pulls out a sequin black tank top and steel gray pants, propping them up to her body, eyeing herself in my full-length mirror.

What was supposed to be our girls night turned into me, sipping wine alone, while she gets ready for her date with Reece? She called earlier today to ask if it was okay. Reece asked her out at the last minute, so she asked to change. I normally wouldn’t care, but I fucking hate Reece Craig. I took a deep breath and told her I was okay with it since she seemed excited and didn’t want to blow it.

Whatever.

“I’m not actively looking right now. I just want to enjoy some time off. Patrick rode me pretty hard when I worked there,” I tell her with a straight face, though, on the inside, I’m laughing my ass off.

He was hard. And rough with me. Much to my dismay, his wife bailed him out of jail and, last I heard, he was looking into taking a plea deal. If that happens, I don’t think I will have to testify. I was almost looking forward to telling everyone what a small dick he has on the stand. I would be under oath and all.

“I’m just worried. I left you. You aren’t looking? Do you have some trust fund I don’t know about or inheritance?” She

laughs, but then deflates. “I’m sorry.”

She shouldn’t feel bad. She knows what happened with my parents—well, the version I wanted her to know. Every so often, the mention of anything family related brings a sad look to her face. I can’t say I am over their deaths, but there is some sort of strength you gain when you lose two people, who are your absolute world, within months.

“Don’t apologize,” I brush it off, pulling out a red, off the shoulder, tank top and throw it at her. “Wear this.”

Her face lights up. She immediately switches out the black for the red.

“It looks perfect. And no, no inheritance or trust fund. I’ve just been very smart with my money.”

She strips her clothes down just as a knock comes at my door. “Can you grab that?” she breathlessly asks, pulling the pants over her ass. I nod, leaving the room and closing the door behind me. The closer I get to the door, the more my heart races. Another quick knock and I’m opening it to find Reece with his fist still in the air.

“Reece,” I greet, gesturing for him to walk in. “She will be out in a minute.”

He brushes past me, even though he has plenty of space, and it instantly makes my skin burn with hatred. He surveys my place, taking in each and every inch like he is trying to record it to memory. We don’t speak but his eyes find mine and hold them. I can feel my fingers start to tremble and I’m not sure if I’m scared or if I am keeping myself from making a fist and punching him square in the face. Our gaze is broken by the sound of the bedroom door opening and we find Trinity coming down the hallway. The shirt looks amazing on her and for the first time, I think ever, I find a genuine smile on Reece Craig’s face. It makes me want to slap it off of him. Thank God I never slept with him, and I hope Trin sees through his nice guy façade and doesn’t, either.

They leave and I balk at the sight of his hand on her lower back. If I could, I would kick him in the ass on the way out the

door. I wasn't particularly thrilled that Trinity had him pick her up here. Sure, I don't blame her for not wanting him to get her at her sister's house, though, I can guess it would be amazing birth control. She didn't ask me and, even though a few weeks ago this was her home, I am upset that Reece now knows where I live.

I warm up and eat some leftovers, wash my plate, and then head to the living room. I lay down for a brief moment, before my tired eyes drift closed, as I watch Patrick's story on the nightly news.

"No!" I scream as Patrick's hands push down on my shoulders. My knees hitting the dirt underneath our high school football field's bleachers. "I can't do this anymore."

His cold eyes look down at me. "You can stop this at any time, Annie, but I can't be sure what will happen to that tape once you do."

My chin drops as I listen to him unbuckle his belt and step closer to me.

"Ok," I sigh.

"Fuck!" I scream into the dark, sitting straight up, placing a hand on my chest as I try to calm my racing heart. I can't get myself to calm down even as I drink down an entire glass of water.

Even though it was just a dream, and Patrick never made me do anything sexual for him, the threat of that tape over my head had me doing whatever they wanted. A brush of my ass, my tits, and nights upon nights of doing their homework. Rumors were spread around and every single guy that showed any interest in me was run off by a PITCREW member. Then, one day, my life was ruined, and none of it mattered anymore.

I jump at the knock on the door and tip toe over. A look at the clock tells me it's just past nine at night. I take a look into the peephole and try to hide my smile. I swing the door open and find Casen, a grocery bag and DVD in hand.

I lean into the doorframe. "Can I help you?"

He smiles one of those toothpaste commercial smiles and lifts up the bag. “I brought popcorn, candy, and a movie.”

He attempts to step inside but I block him. “What movie?”

“Fast and Furious.” He waves it at me. “I know it’s about cars, and you may not be into that, but Paul Walker is in it and I heard girls think he’s nice to look at.”

I stay quiet for a moment before letting him off the hook. “Come on in.”

He complies and kisses me chastely as he passes by. “So,” he starts, putting the bag on the counter and making himself at home. “I heard Reece interrupted your girls’ night.”

I lean into the counter. “He did.”

Casen puts the popcorn into the microwave and I get a hint of arm porn. His muscles, flexing in a way that shoots pleasure through my body. “Well, I thought I would make up for it by coming to hang out with you.”

“Oh,” I sigh. “So, this is a pity popcorn and movie date.”

He shuts the microwave door and turns, pulling me by my hips into his. “Not a pity date, Embyr. This is an ‘I fucking owe Reece for ruining your girls’ night so I didn’t have to wait until Saturday’ date. It’s an ‘I couldn’t wait another moment to put my lips on you’ date.”

A whoosh of air rushes out of my lungs as Casen leans down, his lips brushing against mine. I feel his fingers trail up my body and find their home just underneath my ears.

“God, I love the way you kiss, Embyr,” he breathes into me. “I’m addicted.”

My teeth take his top lip between them and I pull, earning myself a growl. The part of me that thought I could find him as repulsive as Patrick or Reece is long gone. It’s replaced by my need to have him make me feel good again. To lose myself in and with somebody.

“Casen,” I whisper.

He reaches behind me, pulls me up by my thighs, and brings me into the living room. The ding of the microwave ignored. I'm surprised when he sets me on the couch and then sits way on the other side, detaching our bodies from one another. "What are you doing?"

"Remember that first night I talked to you, Embyr?" he asks, unbuttoning his jeans. "What I said would be fun to watch?"

I search that night and remember his words to me just outside the bathroom. I'm pretty sure I blush. "Wouldn't it be more fun to let you do it?"

He lowers his zipper and pulls his cock out, gliding his hands up and over it. "I believe you said you would rather take care of it yourself. Now, pull those tiny shorts off."

I hesitate, completely hypnotized by the motion of his stroke. Watching him is turning me on in a way I have never been turned on before.

"Off, Embyr. Now," he commands and when my eyes meet his, I can see he isn't playing.

For the past ten years, I have been the one in charge. Why I am letting someone, who I have despised since then, is beyond me. But, when you are this turned on, nothing else in the world matters. Just his kiss. Just his brief touch. His command is making me go against everything I started out to do. But, this is physical. I can allow myself to physically be in tune with him. As long as I don't give him my heart, then I can make it out unscathed.

I lift my ass, not taking my eyes off of him, and pull my shorts down, dragging my panties along with them. When they hit my ankles, I push them aside.

He groans. "Spread those pretty legs of yours so I can see."

I do as he says and before he can tell me to; I reach down and graze my clit. It's swollen and the brief touch sends tremors through my body. I watch his hand stroke faster and he slides down the couch slightly. I follow his lead and, when I'm in a comfortable position, I bring my fingers back between

my legs. I rub in circles, soft moans coming from between my lips.

“God, Embyr,” he hisses. “I can see how wet you are from here. Put a finger inside yourself.”

Leaving my thumb on my clit, I reach down and push my middle finger in as far as it will go, and feel my walls tighten. “Oh, Jesus,” I call out. My eyes close, and I forget all about Casen watching but imagine it’s his fingers making me shutter. I lift my hands up my stomach, reaching the bottom of my shirt and push it up. Once I reach my bra I lift it, exposing my breast and take a nipple between my fingers.

“Holy shit,” Casen calls out, his voice much closer.

I snap my eyes open, finding him lifted and hovering over me now. He’s working his cock into a frenzy as he watches where my finger disappears inside me. I add my pointer finger and start to ride them. The thrill of Casen standing over me, watching me, losing control over it all, sends a rush of wetness over my fingers, and I start to whimper.

“Are you close, baby, because I’m so fucking close.”

I nod. It’s all I can do. This is so erotic. My thumb presses down harder, my fingers reaching deeper, and my nipples feeling the pain of them being pinched.

“Lift up the other side of your shirt!” Casen barks out. “I want to see both tits.”

My hand leaves one breast to free the other and I give it the same treatment, roughly taking the nipple between my thumb and pointer finger. Louder and louder we get, calling each other’s names, looking into each other’s eyes, watching each other’s hands as they give us pleasure. It’s all too much and, without warning, I come, screaming out his name. My body bowing off of the couch, my fingers still firmly inside me. I look up to find Casen, stroking so fast, it looks almost painful.

“That was fucking hot, Embyr. Now, I’m going to come. Move your hands.”

I lift both hands up to my shirt, pulling it up as far as I can and watch as Casen loses all control. “Fuck!” he yells. “Fuck!”

His speed picks up, if possible, and he leans down, his dick almost touching me. I stare as he comes all over my stomach. I lay here as he descends from his high, wiping the excess come on my stomach, and tucking himself in.

When his dick is safely back in place, he bends down, pulling me in for a scorching kiss. His tongue infused with mine. My hands reach up, pulling on the hair at the nape of his neck. I jump when I feel his fingers caressing my core, and moan with how amazing it feels. His touch is soft and gentle. He never stops kissing me as I come again, but this time, on his fingers.

I lay still as he gets up to get a warm wash cloth. When he comes back, a strange look is on his face, but he doesn't say a word. He cleans the come off of me and I stand up, adjusting my clothes.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, once we grab the popcorn and settle into watching the movie.

He doesn't say anything for, what feels like, five minutes and then turns to me. "I wasn't snooping. I swear. I was grabbing a wash cloth from your linen closet and a box fell, spilling a wad of cash out of it."

I still. That's Wesley's money. I don't dare put it in my bank account. Should anything have gone wrong with Patrick's case, I wanted to make sure I wasn't depositing large sums of cash. I have it hidden in different spots in my house.

"Okay."

"Okay? Just okay?" He turns towards me. "It's not safe to have that much cash just sitting around your house. Where is it from? Why haven't you put it in the bank?"

I search for something ... *anything* to say because this caught me off guard. "It's Trinity's. She must have forgotten it here. She keeps a lot of cash on hand to give to her sister. This way she doesn't have to go to the bank and get it."

He stares at me, most likely trying to decide if I am lying or not. I hope my poker face is good. It used to be in high school. Then another memory floods me. Casen watching as I

was forced to pay for Reece's lunch one day. He wasn't concerned about my money then. Why the hell should he be concerned now?

He drops the subject and as we settle back into the movie. I get up to get a drink, returning only to take a seat on the other side of the couch. The side I had just gotten myself off on. The feelings I turned off before are now switched back on.

13 THIRTEEN

It's Saturday morning and I find myself sitting on the same bench I was the last time I met Aria. She is more than thirty minutes late, and I seriously don't have the patience for her today.

Casen has been very quiet the past few days. I know he had his shift yesterday, and I know he is usually done, by the latest, nine o'clock in the morning, but it's close to noon and I haven't heard from him today. I'm sure he didn't believe my lie about the money, and I would have told it better had I not been caught off guard. He could have left after that and not stayed until well into the night. He kissed me good night and promised to call me today. I was surprised that I didn't hear from him all day yesterday, but then I reel myself in; I'm not going to get attached to him.

Even though we haven't had sex, I know that the chemistry between us is phenomenal. As long as I'm mentally guarded, I won't have anything to worry about. It was sweet of him to come over after finding out my plans for the night had been ruined, but I convince myself that maybe he sees me as a challenge and he is slowly trying to wear me down.

I'm brought out of my thoughts by the loud laughter of children. The ones that currently live in the house I grew up in. It's a little girl and boy. The boy looks to be older. When I was little, I was jealous because I wanted to have a sibling just like all the other kids on my street. I wished from a very early age that my mom and dad would have had a brother before me. I had always dreamed that I was meant for an older brother so bad. Then, in high school, I knew that if I had one, things

wouldn't have gotten as out of control as they did. I would have someone to protect me when all my friends shunned me.

"Embyr?" Aria calls. I look up and she is timidly standing ten feet away. She looks different. Defeated. Deflated.

"Aria." I stand up and meet her halfway. She has unshed tears in her eyes. "Are you okay?"

She walks the rest of the way over and wraps her tiny arms around my waist and lets it all out. "Oh, Embyr."

I hold her, uncomfortably, rubbing her back because it seems like the right thing to do. After a few minutes, she pulls back, sniffing. "What's wrong?" I ask.

She reaches in her bag and pulls an envelope out before handing it to me. I scan its contents seeing it's more than my share of the money. I shake my head in confusion, lifting my eyes to meet hers. "Aria, why didn't you take your cut?"

"I ... I can't." She sobs, her shoulders hunched. "I can't do this anymore, Embyr."

I pull her to the bench and we take a seat. "Why not? What's going on?"

She sniffles, wiping her snot with her sleeve. "He loves me."

I groan. Damn it. "He does not love you, Aria. He loves the idea of you."

She shakes her head in disbelief. "I told him yesterday we had to stop. He was so hurt. He said he loves me. Told me that someone was blackmailing him. I didn't tell him it was us, but he said he would pay off the world if it meant he could have me."

Of course he did. She's a young and hot piece of ass who is also very smart. Any man would be crazy to let something like that go. She threatened to leave him and he pulled out the very card he thought would get her to stay. He has paid all this money to have it be kept quiet and now she threatens to leave him? The "I would do, and am doing anything to keep you" card. It's sick. He's a sick man and he thinks she is stupid.

I was stupid in high school too. Believing everything I was told. Of course, you think you are in love when you are that young and naïve. I thought I loved Casen when I barely even knew him. I confused lust and like for love.

Then, I realize anything I say to Aria, right now, will be manipulation just like he is manipulating her. I could tell her he is lying. I could tell her that it's just lust. I can sit here all day and eventually get her to agree to keep this going, but I don't want to mess up her life any more than maybe I already have.

Damn it—what has gotten into me?

“Okay, Aria. Okay. You don't have to do it anymore.” I pull her into me. I'm not worried about the money. I can collect it myself. I just thought I could help Aria out in the process. I know her family can't afford to send her to college even with the scholarships she has received from an in state school.

“Aria!” Someone screams from the parking lot. “Aria!”

She jumps up, turning so fast I get a full mouth full of her hair when she hits me with it, and gasps. “Oh no!”

I follow the sound of the thunderous voice. I squint my eyes to find Wesley storming his way toward us. He looks murderous. I feel as though I can see steam coming from his nostrils. My body tenses. I'm not sure what is going to happen but I secretly can't wait to find out.

I take a stand next to Aria, letting Wesley close the distance on us. People all around have stopped to watch the scene unfolding in front of them. Mothers hold their young children tight, scared, but not willing to walk away from the show.

“You!” he screams, pointing in Aria's face. “You were behind it?”

She shakes her head no, denying anything to do with it. Her eyes well up with tears, sobs escaping her lips. His hands ball up at his sides. “Liar!” his voice grows much louder. “I watched you pick the money up I had just dropped off. I

watched you count it and pocket it. You fucked me for money? Do you know what that makes you?"

A loud weep escapes her and she all but practically falls to her knees at his feet. "Wesley, please forgive me. I came here to tell her I was done. That I love you, and I'm done. I want to be with you."

His livid eyes look to me, confusion sweeping over his face. "Who the fuck are you?"

I inhale. "Don't fucking worry about it," I counter, standing tall. I have mace in my purse. He can go fuck himself.

"Don't worry about it? You've been the one blackmailing me for months and then have the audacity to tell me not to worry about it?" his voice is low. Growling. Menacing.

I step forward, getting right in his face, not caring if he hits me. He can go to jail for that for all I care. "You've been the one fucking a student for months. I think who I am is the least of your concerns."

"Wesley. I'm so sorry," Aria pleads, trying to grab a hold of him.

He snatches his arm away and looks to her. "Don't touch me! We're done." Then, he turns back toward me. "And, if you ever so much as look my way again, I will go to the police."

Aria runs after Wesley as he marches toward his car. I watch from where I stand as she begs him, holding tight to his arm. She is trying to block him from leaving but it's useless. He opens his door, ripping Aria off of him by her wrists before shoving her out of the way. She falls to the pavement and yells out in pain.

All I see is red fury as I run over. She's still sitting on the ground when I get there, head down in defeat. Wesley hasn't closed his door yet so I swing it all the way open and lower my face to meet his. He doesn't cower away from me and his chocolate brown eyes would frighten a weaker woman. "Listen, asshole," I start to threaten. "You ever grab her or any

other woman like that again, I will personally fuck you up. Do you understand?"

He leans in real close and his voice lowers to a dangerous growl. "If I never see you or that slut again, I'll be one happy fucking man. And, no other woman would be as deceitful as the two of you have been, so there would be no reason to put my hands on them. Now, get the hell away from my car before I run your asses over."

I stand back, raising my middle finger to him. He slams the door shut, reverses quickly, barely missing Aria and me, before peeling out of the parking lot.

I spin around. Aria is now standing, blood trickling from a scrap on her forearm, texting on her phone.

"Are you ok?"

She looks up, her eyes not hiding the murderous thoughts on her mind, like she wants to drop me where I stand. "Much better now," she responds, putting her phone in her back pocket. She says nothing else before pivoting around and walking away.

I stalk after her. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

She stops and whips around so fast, I almost run into her. "It means that neither of you get what you want anymore. I just sent those pictures to the school district website. No fucking for him, and no more money for you."

I try to hide my smile. It never was about the money. It was about the mental warfare on him. To make him worry, that every time he couldn't control himself, that there was someone watching him. I know Aria is hurt, but I can't help but be proud of her.

She saved me a step. A little earlier than I had planned, but I'm okay with that. I wasn't sure I was going to show the pictures, but I sure as hell wasn't going to let him get away with screwing a student, legal age or not. Wesley's parent's money got him out of a lot of trouble. There will be no way that he can keep his job now. At least he doesn't have a family at home; a wife or a child to devastate.

“It wasn’t about the money,” I inform her. “It was about doing what is right.”

She shakes her head. Her tears are long since dried up. “What did he do to you, Embyr? Why was he even on your radar?”

I look away. I don’t have to answer her. She’s making me uncomfortable and after today I am done with her anyways. “We’re done here,” I tell her.

Aria gets toe to toe with me. “You know what, Embyr? Karma is a bitch and she has your name on the top of her list.”

Her statement shocks me, and I watch her walk away, probably for the last time.

When I get back to my car, my whole body feels heavy. I’ve always believed in Karma. You do bad things, bad things gets done to you. If you do good things, you will be rewarded. A long time ago, those men devastated me without any sort of consequence. Now, I’m giving to them what has been a long time coming, but up until a few minutes ago, I was feeling pretty good about what I was doing. Now, guilt has started to tangle its web within me. Now, I wonder if karma coming for me for all the chaos I am bringing into their lives. Do two wrongs really make it right?

My phone chimes from the seat next to me. I pick it up seeing a text from Casen.

Casen: Double date with Reece and Trinity tonight. Sound good?

I guess that answers my question.

Patrick

Ian

Thad

Casen

Reece

Evan

~~Wesley~~

14 FOURTEEN

My hands are wrapped around my arms, but I'm not cold. I am fucking furious. For the past thirty minutes since Casen picked me up, all I can hear is Trinity and Reece kissing. It's not a soft, quiet kiss. No, the drive all the way to a restaurant, in southwest suburbs, is filled with sloppy, loud, wet smacking of the lips from the two adults, acting like teenagers in the back seat.

A quick breath releases from between my lips, and Casen looks over at me. "You okay?" he quietly asks, taking my hand in his. He's been on edge since he showed up to get me. I'm not sure what is going on.

I nod. How am I supposed to tell him that it's more of who is doing the kissing than the kissing itself? He accepts the answer and—thank God—two minutes later, we pull up to an Italian restaurant. I'm grateful for our arrival, so I don't have to hear anymore fucking spit being swapped.

Though there aren't a lot of cars outside, it looks pretty busy inside. It's brightly lit with red and white plaid table covers and candle centerpiece. Soft music plays in the background, and if everyone else wasn't wearing jeans and casual shirts. I would think I was under dressed in my floral navy blue skirt and white blouse.

The hostess shows us to our table in the back corner of the restaurant. Casen pulls my chair out, but Reece sits down before Trinity has even gotten to the table.

Asshole.

We all agree on a bottle of wine, and I look over the candle centerpiece to see Trinity grinning wide at me.

I know she is happy we are out together. The entire time I have known her, we've never double dated and, if I had any say in it; we wouldn't be doing it now. I was *told* what we were doing tonight. Not asked.

“So, Casen,” she starts talking first. Probably because it would be inappropriate to attach her face to Reece's right now. “Reece tells me you all have been friends for quite some time.”

He sets his wine glass down, wiping his lips with a napkin before responding. “Yup. Since I can remember. We grew up together and went to the same college to study fire science. After that, he followed me to the fire academy and, just a few months ago, Reece was finally transferred over to my station. Six years in, and now we're both up for Lieutenant.”

“Wow, that's lucky,” she comments.

Reece's chuckles. “That depends on who you ask.”

They all laugh and continue chatting, but I'm not participating. I just don't care to engage in a conversation right now. Besides, having Reece in my face all the time now (something I wasn't expecting when I took on the task of pursuing Casen), is adding strength to Aria's words that are flitting through my mind. I believe that what goes around comes around, but am I setting myself up for something worse?

I look at Casen and Reece. What the hell else could be worse than what their crew did to me? Though I am thankful they never forced me to do anything sexual with them after I willingly slept with Ian, knowing that they could've asked me is bad enough. I'm not even sure I would've said no, just to keep that tape under wraps. Patrick had once said he would never want me to touch him. I was a virgin before Ian and probably wouldn't do it right anyways. Maybe they thought blackmailing me to get their rocks off was going too far. I narrow my eyes at the thought.

Casen's hand squeezes my leg. “Em?”

I shake out of my thoughts. “I'm sorry. What?”

“Trinity told us where she grew up. Where are you from?” Reece speaks up. The tone of his question concerns me. Like he is asking a question, knowing I’m going to lie.

My eyebrows furrow. I can’t think of what answer I rehearsed should something like this come up. “Oh,” I wave my hands dismissively. “I grew up in the northern suburbs. Pretty boring place; not worth mentioning.” It’s a vague answer but it seems to satisfy them for the moment.

The server comes to take our order. Casen’s hand hasn’t left my thigh and is slowly making its way north. I peer over at him and he seems less distant, less distracted than he has been. I squeeze my knees together trying to trap his hand but he’s forceful and shoves them back open. I lean forward onto my elbows, hoping to block the view of his hand disappearing under my skirt. I don’t want to draw attention from the waiter who is standing to my left.

“For you, ma’am?” he asks and as I turn, Casen takes the distraction to his advantage and hits his target. His fingers massage me over the material covering my pussy.

“Uhm,” I stutter. “I’ll, ah, uhm.”

His pinky finds the side of my panties and I let go of the menu to grab a hold of his hand. “I’ll have the chicken parmesan.”

The server nods while writing my order down and I squeeze Casen’s hand, silently begging him to stop. The waiter asks Trinity what she would like and Casen breaks free from my grip and slips his littlest finger inside the silk fabric. My nipples peak, and when I look over at Casen he’s still looking at his menu, unaffected.

His pinky glides over my clit and it makes my knees weak and my legs spread slightly. Trinity and Reece seem oblivious to what is going on just across the table from them. Casen breathes deeply, letting out a sigh as a distraction that allows him to push another finger into my panties and it finds its way inside of me. “I’d like what Embyr is about to get,” he informs the waiter when it’s his turn. “It sounds orgasmic.”

My eyes flash to his devious stare and cocky smile. The server leaves, and Trinity, Reece, and Casen start up a conversation. But, I'm not paying attention. All I can focus on is the feel of his calluses giving me glorious pleasure. Just enough to make me feel fucking incredible, but not enough to send me over the edge.

He continues his torture on me, for what feels like an eternity, and then excuses himself to wash his hands, pulling his digits out of my panties. I'm left completely turned on and bereft. I can't eat dinner feeling this way. I excuse myself, as well, and head straight for the ladies room. Once the door is closed, I lean up against it and push my skirt up. Shoving my fingers down into my panties, I find my clit hungry and swollen. Relief washes over me. I'm so close and when I am done, I can go out there and keep his wandering hands at bay.

Someone pounds on the door, distracting me. "Someone's in here!" I yell frustrated. The banging continues three more times before I finally give up, washing my hands and throwing the door open, I find Casen standing there. Déjà vu to the night at Jedi's.

"You weren't touching yourself were you, baby?" he growls, lifting my chin up and capturing my lip between his teeth.

"No," I whisper into his mouth.

"You lie," he states, slipping his hands down my body, cupping my ass, and pulling me into him. "I got you hot and bothered, and I'm going to be the one to take care of you. But not until when we get back to your place. Understand?"

He pushes back, breaking all contact, leaving me wound up, and then reaches for my hand. I place it in his and allow him to pull me back to the table where Reece and Trinity are eyeing us suspiciously.

"Have fun in there?" Trinity winks.

Reece laughs. "They were only gone a minute, Trinity."

We sit down, and I place the napkin on my lap. "You grew up with him. I thought you knew he was a minute man."

Trinity starts full blown belly laughing and Reece looks impressed with my comeback. I take a bite of the amazing cheese covered chicken, savoring the spices they have added, and trying not to think about the throbbing need between my legs. That was a low blow to Casen but he deserved it. He worked me up and wouldn't help me relieve the tension or let me finish the job myself.

Casen's hand returns to my thigh but this time he doesn't hesitate to go as high as it will allow before he leans over and whispers into my ear. "You are going to pay for that little comment when I get you alone, Embyr. I'm going to have you tonight."

I look over at him, matching his dark stare and whisper. "I fucking hope so."

I've shocked him.

Good.

Two hours later, after dropping off Trinity and Reece to his place, Casen is walking me up my steps. I can feel the raw, carnal need permeating between the two of us. I slip my key in the door and turn it before I am pushed in and my blouse is ripped up over my head.

"You teased me tonight, Embyr," he accuses me, shoving the door closed with his foot.

"I teased *you*?" I ask in disbelief, watching while he takes his own shirt off and throws it across the room. "I'm pretty sure I didn't have my hands on your cock all night, keeping you on the edge of blowing your load, in front of your friend, in the middle of a restaurant."

He unbuckles his pants. "Don't tell me you didn't like it. And, after your minute man comment, I am going to show you how long I can last while I have my cock buried deep inside of your mouth."

I bite my lips as I watch him toe each shoe and sock off before lowering his jeans and boxers to the floor. He steps out

of them and up to me. “Take your skirt off, Embyr, because unless you tell me no, I’m claiming your body tonight.”

I marvel at the sight of his large, hard cock before I slowly lower my skirt over my hips and let it drop to the ground. His eyes scan my body, devouring my see-through white bra and panty set.

“Take me to your room,” he orders, his voice hoarse. I turn around, swaying my hips a little more than usual, down the hallway. As we enter the room, he pulls me towards my bed, unclasping my bra and watching as it falls, releasing my heavy breasts. He bends down, dragging my panties down over my thighs. He licks my slit, working his way up my stomach and breasts. My head falls back as I pray to God he will rock my fucking world.

He grabs my jaw between his large hands, bringing my lips to him, kissing me with purpose. Casen turns us around before he sits on the bed, slides back, and lies down. I crawl up to him slowly, taking a hold of his cock, ready to wrap my mouth around it. But, he stops me.

“No, Embyr. I want you to come up her and sit on my face while you do that.”

I flush with desire at his words and do what he requests, sandwiching his face between my thighs, backwards, so I can lean over and take him into my mouth. This time when I circle his cock between my thumb and pointer finger, he groans into my pussy. I stroke him a few times while he gently licks my clit and then I bring the tip of him into my mouth. Sucking gently on those few inches, I close my eyes and relish in the feel of our tongues on one another.

The tension I thought we had tonight is long forgotten. Wesley is forgotten. The talk of karma and thinking I should stop this foolishness are forgotten. All I want is to ride this man’s fucking face and then jump straight onto his dick.

“You taste so sweet, Embyr,” he praises, voice muffled by my pussy in his face. “Now, put my whole dick in your mouth.”

I lower my head down, taking in all that I can of him and making up for the rest with my hands. My hips buck against him, and when his tongue dips into me, his fingers push down on my clit. Within seconds, I am sitting straight up, riding his face and the orgasm out like a fucking cowgirl.

“Oh, God. Oh my God,” I moan, getting friction against his mouth for the last few tremors.

He slips out from under me and turns me around onto my hands and knees. “Don’t you dare move,” he says before leaving the room.

After a stated minute he returns and I turn my head to see him sliding a condom over his pulsing cock. It appears as though his girth could burst the latex. The bed dips behind me and Casen pulls me by my hips back into him, the tip of him at my entrance. I push back, and he growls when it starts to dip into me. “You’re tight, but wet and ready, baby. I’m pushing all the way in.” And, he does. He pushes every glorious inch into me and pumps slowly in and out allowing me to get used to his size. “On your elbows,” he commands. I lower myself giving him better access. His thrusts pick up speed until my small frame can’t stay in one spot. He reaches up and grabs a shoulder with one hand and gathers my hair in the other.

“For purchase, of course,” he tells me before he pounds into me like a jackhammer. The pull of my hair feels erotic. This is a man who knows how to give pain with pleasure. I push all the times Patrick pulled my hair out of my mind and go still, permitting Casen to pummel into me and be at his mercy. “Reach down and touch your pussy, Embyr.”

Releasing one elbow I touch myself and rub circles onto my sensitive flesh, my orgasm just within reach. “You like this?” he asks between thrusts. “Tell me, baby. Tell me how much you like this. How much you’ve wanted this since you saw me.”

My orgasm starts to make an entrance with his words. He’s right. I’ve dreamed of fucking Casen Parker since I was fourteen years old. Even then I couldn’t contain my lust for

him. This feeling, this amazing fuck he is giving me, is well beyond anything I could have imagined.

“I fucking love it.” I pant. “I’ve wanted this for so long.”

His grip on my hair tightens and his other hand finds its way to my hip. The tingling starts in my lower back and radiates through my body as the orgasm crashes over me. I scream his name out and he powers through me. I can feel him swell inside of me. When the last wave passes, I feel his dick pulse. He yells out, fucking me harder and faster before he slowly stops.

He frees my tresses and pulls gently out of me before sliding off the bed and taking the condom to the bathroom. I fall to my stomach, exhaustion setting in. Casen comes back into the room; his body hovers over mine again as he moves my hair to the side and kisses my neck.

“Way better than I ever fucking imagined,” he whispers, trailing kisses down my back.

“Me, too.”

15 FIFTEEN

I turn over in my bed, every muscle screaming in agony. I groan when I see I forgot to shut the curtains before bed last night. I slide to the side of the bed and sit up, allowing the blankets to fall off of my body. The cold breeze reminds me that I'm naked.

I quickly turn, finding a peacefully sleeping Casen sprawled out on his stomach. My internal freak-out begins. I have never had a man stay the night with me. I don't know what the morning after protocol is. My heart is beating out of my chest with nervous energy, and if I don't stand up now, I am sure that he is going to wake up from the bed shaking from my nerves.

I tip-toe over to the window, closing the curtains, then walk toward the bathroom. Taking one last glance at Casen, I stop midstride when I see a tattoo on his oblique. There, written in a beautiful script is a quote, but I am too far away to make it out the words. I pad toward him, trying to get a closer look, but I hit my foot on the nightstand. He shifts, and I make a mad dash toward the bathroom.

The morning is quiet and my desire to sleep in is now long gone. I take in my appearance in the mirror and what I find brings a smile to my face. If anyone saw me right now, they would know that I got fucked good last night. The way he touched me and commanded me proves I could really lose myself in Casen, if I allow it. Any girl would fall for his smile or that body. Or the sweetness that comes out between all the alpha male shit. But, I like that. I like someone to toss me around like a rag doll during sex, if they can make me feel special and take care of me outside of the bedroom.

What the hell am I thinking?

I can't fall for him, but it's becoming clear that may be what is happening.

I don't want that. I want to break his heart.

Right?

I do. He let them make the bet. He didn't do anything at all when they bullied me. They were his friends. He could have said something—*anything!* No. He didn't participate, but he allowed it, and for that reason, I can't let him anywhere near my heart. One word would have been all it took. "Stop."

Composing myself, I take a warm shower, quietly get dressed, and head to the kitchen to make coffee. By the time I am on my second cup and fully ready to take on a Sunday, heart intact, Casen walks into the living room naked. Gloriously naked. My cup halts halfway to my mouth as I watch him pick up his boxers by the front door and slip them on over his biteable ass. "I'm sorry." He smiles, his eyes still filled with sleep. "Did you want me to leave those off?"

I take a sip. "No. Just shocked to see a guy in my house, in the morning. I've never had anyone sleep over."

He saunters over, and I set my cup down onto the counter as he pulls me into him and takes me in for a deep kiss. "I'm glad I'm the first. Good morning."

I smile. "Morning. Want some coffee?"

He groans. "God, yes. I hope you have creamer."

I point a thumb behind me. "In the fridge."

He lets me go and I watch as he leans over, exposing his tattoo once again, but unless I want to look like I'm sniffing his armpit, then I still can't make out what it says.

"Casen," I call, pulling out a mug and pouring coffee into it for him.

I replace the carafe and he adds creamer. "Hmm?"

"What does your tattoo say?" I point at the script.

His forehead wrinkles in thought, and he looks down, almost ashamed of the tattoo. Raising his arm he runs his finger over the words as he reads it. “Stand for what’s right. Even if you are standing alone.”

He completely catches me off guard. “Oh.”

He laughs. “Oh?”

“I’m assuming there is a story behind that.”

He looks down. “There is. A really long and shitty story.”

I set my cup down and twist my hair up into a bun, securing it. I shrug. “Well, I have no plans and lots of time.”

Casen reaches for my hand and pulls me into the living room. We set our cups onto the coffee table and he leans back, his rippling abs on full display for my drooling pleasure. “It’s not something I’m proud of or think you should judge me on, Embyr. It’s not who I am anymore. Well, it’s not who I was, either, I guess.”

I pick my cup back up, needing something to do, and lean back into the couch. I don’t say anything. I just wait for him to start talking.

“Back in high school, I was part of the popular kids. The ones that everyone wanted to hang out with and all the girls wanted to date. My friends and I formed this kind of alliance or group. We would do everything together. Football, baseball, race cars—you name it.”

My face remains unaffected even though I am freaking out on the inside. He is talking about the PITCREW. I’m about to get an in depth look into the group every guy wanted to infiltrate.

“Well, just like any normal teenage guys, we got into a lot of trouble. Did some shit that, to this day, most of us aren’t proud of. Back then, we didn’t know any better, even though we should have. But, there was one particular event that happened that has haunted me since the day it started.” He shakes his head like he is trying to rid himself of the memory. “It started out in my friend’s garage. We were all talking about girls we liked. I brought up the one I had been interested in.

She was shy and quiet, nothing like the girls the other guys were looking to get with. I wasn't looking for ass like they were. I genuinely liked her, and the guys could tell. They started picking on me. Said there was no way she was into me. Just the normal guys bashing guys. I had her on my radar for a long time but was too much of a pussy to make any sort of move." He sighs, throwing his head into his hands.

I move in closer, wrapping myself around his torso. I'm at war with wanting to comfort him because I know how nasty those guys could be and wanting to ask him why the hell he hung around them. Why he still hangs around some of them today.

His chin comes to rest on top of his fisted hands. "What happened next, Embyr, just got out of control. It was like they went from saying she would go out with one of them before she would even look my way to making a bet on it, very quickly. I thought it was a joke, but when it became apparent it wasn't, it turned into something I wanted no part of." His breathing becomes deeper and I'm starting to think I'm not going to like hearing this story. My grip loosens and I try to control my shaking hands. My palms begin to sweat. "I know what guys say isn't supposed to affect you, but I almost believed what they were saying. I wasn't ugly back then. I was just shy and I really liked this girl. So, Reece initiated a race. A bet of sorts. To see who she would go out with first. The winner would get bragging rights. They all would try and then, if she agreed, it would prove to me that not only would she go out with one of them, but she wouldn't go out with me. Stupid, right? But, I was so sure. I knew she liked me, too, and I wanted to prove them all wrong, so I let them try. I watched each of them ask her out, each getting denied, until one day she agreed to go out with Ian." He turns to look at me. "The guy you met last week. "

I nod but don't say a word. I'm still trying to absorb the fact that he liked me and he had thought I liked him.

"I was heartbroken. I thought she would want to be with me but instead she went out with one of my best friends." He leans back into the couch, taking a deep breath

I want to console him. To tell him I only did it to get his attention and that I didn't want anyone else but him. I dreamed of Casen every night and sought him out every day just to watch him. My infatuation with him knew no bounds. I want to say all of that, but I can't expose myself. He turns, pulling me away from him so that he can look into my eyes. I see dread, sadness, and panic in them. "This next part, Embyr. You have to know that it wasn't my fault."

I blink quickly. "Ok," I agree.

"That night she went out with Ian, he ended taking her to the garage where we used to work on our cars. It was a race night and we were all going to meet there." He lets out a whoosh of air. "She slept with him. That night, she slept with him and it was all caught on the security camera inside Reece's garage. The camera was motion sensed, so it recorded the whole thing. I know for a fact Ian didn't think about that when he took her back there, but when he told Reece they had sex, he immediately ran to see if the cameras caught it. When Patrick got there, and Reece told him, they both decided to use the tape over Annie's head"

I gasp as he says my name. My old name. The sound of it coming from his mouth and it, being the first time I've heard it in a while, makes quiver. I try to hold back the tears. It's hard to hear this story from his perspective and to know what really happened. I always just assumed that they set it up beforehand. I pictured them mounting the camera and getting Ian to bring me back there so they could exploit me. Use me for their mind games. Fuck up my life completely.

"I know." He shakes his head. "It's terrible what they did to her, and I was so angry over the betrayal. From Ian and I guess from her. I never imagined she would go out with him, let alone give herself to him. I thought I was the one she wanted, and the whole thing made me turn cold. I tried not to look her way as much. I ignored them: Patrick, Reece, and the other guys as they used the video to make her life miserable. By the time my young, juvenile mind realized it was wrong, it was too late. If I tried to do anything about it then, they would oust me. Make my life just as miserable as they were making hers.

I mentioned it to Patrick one time and he told me I was just as responsible as they were. He threatened to make her life worse and my life a living hell. Told me I was being a pussy, and to shut my fucking mouth. So, I stood aside and watched. Watched them make her do their homework, make indecent gestures at her as she walked by, and spread horrible rumors about her. They knew how badly she didn't want her perfect innocent reputation ruined or for her parents to find out what she did. She was ashamed. I could see it in her eyes that she would do anything to keep it all quiet and make it go away. I was young and stupid. I regret every single word I didn't say in her defense. That's why I hate Patrick so much. I'm happy that asshole might go to jail."

This time I can't hold the tears back. They trail down my cheeks and spill onto my shirt. He pulls me in close. "I shouldn't have told you that."

"No." I shake my head. "No, you should have. I just feel so bad for her."

"Me, too. And, that isn't even the worst part." His chest begins to shake with silent sobs. "All of us promised that tape would never see the light of day. Reece told us he was going to destroy it, but he never did. No one will admit to who it was, but that tape was released our senior year. It tore her fucking world apart."

I give him a moment to compose himself because I can tell he isn't done. "Then, after she was humiliated, she lost both her parents in a matter of months. How terrible is that? After that, she left the state. I don't blame her one bit. I don't know where she is now or what she's doing, but all I can do is hope she is happy and doesn't hate me for standing by. At the time, I was more frightened of what would happen if I did say something than if I didn't. It haunted me for a long time. Still does. So, about three years ago, I got this tattoo." He points to his side. "It reminds me to stand up for what's right. I've done that since the day I got it."

My fingers glide over it and I smile through my sad tears. "I like it."

“Thank you.”

I shake my head in confusion. “So, why are you still friends with Reece and Ian? I would think that since they played a big part in, what seems to be your biggest regret, that you wouldn’t want anything to do with them anymore? And, why aren’t you still friends with the others?”

He gives a small shrug. “I don’t know. After high school, and everything that happened, they both started to make major changes. It definitely hurt our friendship, but, one night, we had a come to Jesus moment. Told me they regretted what they had done, too. We are friends, but not like we used to be. The others? Well, they just seemed as though they didn’t think what they did was wrong. They ruined a girl’s life and didn’t bat an eye.”

“I see.”

“I just wish I would have done something about it before it got too far, but I was devastated, thinking my first love wronged me. It hurt so badly. It wasn’t until years later; I finally got the truth from Ian. That he pushed her into sleeping with him. Made her feel like it was her duty. He apologized and said it wasn’t something he was proud of, that he regrets it every day. Some days, I believe him and some days, I don’t.” His fists clench and release a few times like he is trying to calm himself down.

“First love?” I ask, my eyes widening.

“That girl, Annie. I was in love with her.”

I excused myself after breakfast and said I needed to take a shower. I held it together that long but couldn’t mask my feelings anymore and needed a breather. Casen looked at me funny but didn’t comment that I had already showered this morning.

I adjust the temperature so it is scorching hot as I step in. My body crumbles and I sit on the bottom of the tub letting my tears circle the drain along with the water. Hearing his side of the story doesn’t change the way I feel about the rest of the crew. They still tried to win the bet. They still had me do

things for them. But, knowing that Casen regrets it and wishes he could go back and change it, puts things in a different perspective. I see him differently now, after hearing his side of the story. I see everything differently now. I can feel my body releasing the tension from the past decade of heartache and distress. I don't want to be angry with him anymore. I don't want to be angry at anyone anymore. I've spent the past ten years walking around with so much built up anxiety; my body is just as fucking tired as my mind. Since I saw Casen the first time at Jedi's, my feelings for him have morphed from utter disgust, at the sight of him, into complete infatuation with the man he has become, and how he makes me feel. He has seeped into my veins without warning and now runs my blood through my body. In myself, I feel the shift. I've chastised myself for softening up and letting him in little by little. I can almost forgive myself for allowing it to happen. Panic rises and my heart beats faster, when I face the truth. I have feelings for Casen. I can't let this foolishness of revenge go on any longer. I need to let it all go. If I want any sort of future with Casen, then it has to stop. Patrick, Wesley, Thad, and Evan can be listed as collateral damage, but they weren't going to get away with what they were doing for much longer. It was coming for them. I just sped up the process. But, Casen, Reece, and Ian? Well, I think I have had enough devastation in my life to just leave it alone. I'll keep up my guard, when it comes to the last two. I still don't trust them. I can, however, allow myself to open up to Casen. I want to. He *makes* me want to. Now that I know the story. Know that Casen was threatened too, I feel the crash of emotions knock me straight to the ground.

I want Casen.

I step out of the shower after finally getting myself together. Casen's words play on repeat in my head. "I was in love with her." I never knew. I always thought I was nothing to him when he was everything to me. A stupid crush that I thought wouldn't amount to anything. I was wrong. So very wrong.

I walk in and find Casen sitting on the bed, watching the news. "Do you want to hit the gym with me?" he asks.

“Hmm,” I ponder for a moment, tapping my pointer finger to my chin. “The gym? That seems like something a couple would do together.”

He slides off the bed, meeting me halfway and pulls my towel loose. “It does sound like something a couple would do. Do you consider us a couple because I sure as hell am not seeing or going to see anyone else?”

I shiver at the loss of material around my body when my towel drops to the floor. “I don’t plan on seeing anyone else, either.”

“So, then it’s settled.” He breathes, lowering his lips to my collarbone.

My head falls back. “What’s settled?”

He picks me up and tosses me onto the bed crawling up my body until his lips are inches away from mine. “We’re a couple now.”

I bite my lip and nod. “Okay.”

His mouth trails kisses down my neck, bypassing my breasts and straight to my stomach. He leans back on his haunches and spreads my knees apart.

“I thought we were going to the gym,” I whisper as his hands slide from knees to my core.

“Oh, we will. After I enjoy my new favorite thing a couple of times.”

16 SIXTEEN

It's Monday and while most people hate Monday's, I particularly don't mind them anymore. Sure, when I worked for Patrick or went to school, I disliked them, but now, sitting here, drinking my coffee after a workout and a shower, I realize I don't mind them so much. It's like a new start and, after my big weekend with Casen, I feel as though this Monday is the beginning of a huge change.

I've spent the past ten years being angry. Plotting. Changing my life and doing things all for revenge, But, deciding yesterday to let it go, continue on without the plan, has been freeing. I feel like a new person today. Someone I actually like and, until this morning, I didn't realize how much I hated the way I was living.

What would have happened after I fucked them all over? Was I to just go on and try to live a normal life? Find a husband? Have some kids? Would I find what I did later on to not be as fulfilling as I thought it would be? I don't know. All I know is, I need a new purpose in life and I'm excited to find it.

I've gone job to job for money to pay bills and blackmailed Wesley to bulk my savings, but I never thought about what kind of career I would have after it all ended. Today, everything changes. I'm going to focus more on the future I want. I'll start with finding a job I love and begin living a life I am proud of. A life my parents would be proud of. One with Casen by my side, hopefully.

That last thought pretty much scares the fuck out of me.

I bring my computer onto my lap and start a job search. I have a degree in hotel and hospitality management. I had always dreamed of working corporate events for hotels but

those are few and far between. In the end, I only send out three resumes.

Just as I am about to shut my computer down, my phone chimes with an incoming text message.

Trinity: Come meet me for lunch. I'm craving sushi! Please?

Me: What time?

Trinity: Noon?

Me: Shoot me the address.

I take a look at the time, finding it's close to eleven o'clock. She works out in the suburbs, so I don't have a lot of time before I need to leave the condo. I definitely need a break from job hunting.

I walk into Spark of Arts, where Trinity works as the owner's assistant, at promptly twelve o'clock. This is the first time I have ever visited her at her job. She's sitting at a white table, decorated in colorful paint splatter, with a beautiful brunette, standing over her shoulder, pointing something out to Trinity on the computer. When the bell chimes, they both look at me. The brunette straightens up and walks over toward me.

"Hi! I'm Hadley Blake." She reaches a hand out. "May I help you?" Her smile is bright and happy. Her hands smudged with all sorts of different colors.

"I'm Embyr," I take her hand. "I'm here to meet—"

"—Me!" Trin interrupts, jumping from the desk and throwing her purse over her shoulder. "Embyr is taking me to lunch."

Hadley turns toward Trinity. "Oh, okay! You two ladies have fun."

Trinity kisses Hadley on the cheek. "You can join us, if you'd like."

Hadley doesn't say anything. She is too distracted by something outside the door. I follow her gaze to a police car parked just out front and the hottest fucking officer I have ever

seen. He walks in, his eyes zeroed in on Hadley as he lowers his sunglasses.

“Oh, no thanks,” she finally responds before meeting the officer halfway. He pulls her in for a kiss that has me blushing and turning away to give them privacy.

“Nice to meet you,” I tell Hadley, laughing as she ignores me when I pass by on my way out of the door. The warm sun hits our skin as we step outside and to my car. “He’s fucking hot.” I comment to Trinity.

“Who? Hadley’s husband, Ryder?” she asks. I nod. “He’s so fucking taken. He wouldn’t notice you if you stripped naked and gave him a lap dance. That man is consumed with Hadley.”

I smile, opening my door and getting in. “That’s sweet.”

“From what I hear,” she tells me, slamming her door once inside. “It was a very long road to get where they are. They went through a lot of shit between high school and now.”

I think about that on the way to the restaurant; how hard some people fight for what they want. For who they want. Maybe if I would have gone for Casen, or him for me, things would have been different. If I would have said no to Ian, instead of trying to make Casen jealous to notice me. The choices they made, to do what they did, were only helped by my behavior. I will never excuse what they did. They set off a chain reaction that ruined me in high school, but I also helped their plan along by being childish.

I pull into the practically empty parking lot. The sushi place is in a strip mall next to a nail salon and a barber shop. The windows have red paper on them, covering the inside from the outside world. The hostess seats us at a table low to the ground with pillows to sit on. I’ve never been to sushi place like this. Eating on top of pillows is nothing I have ever seen before.

We casually talk while we look at the menu and order. “What do you think about Reece?” she gets right into it.

I slide my chopsticks out of their sleeve and break them apart giving me a moment to think about how to answer her. I know she likes him but I still don't. "What do you mean?"

She shifts in her seat so she is now leaning on her knees. "What do you think of him? I had a great time on Saturday night with you all and then we went back to his place, but he never made a move. Do you think he's gay?"

I almost spit my water out. "Gay, Trin? Really? The guy practically salivates over you since minute one and you think he is gay?"

She shrugs. "Well, Casen was trying to finger fuck you under the table. Reece barely touched me."

"You saw that, huh?" I laugh.

"Yeah," she answers, pushing her hair behind her ear. "Of course, I saw it. It's hard to miss a woman almost coming across the table from me. It was hot, though. Got me a little worked up, not that Reece tried to help me in that department anyways."

"Jesus," I retort. "That's really uncomfortable."

"Well," She leans back, giving the server room to drop our soup off. "How do you think Reece and I felt, watching his arm move back and forth under your skirt?"

I shoosh her until we're alone again. "Apparently, worked up."

She laughs but then straightens out. "But, seriously. Do you think he isn't into me?"

"Look. I don't know how I feel about Reece and you together but, from what I can tell, and what I've seen, he seems to be really into you. There is no mistaking that. Has he called you since Saturday?"

She nods, blowing on her soup.

"Has he asked you out again?"

"Yes, he has." She takes a moment before continuing. "For a friend's birthday get together this weekend. Aren't you

going? It's for that Ian guy. The one who gave you the creeps."

My shoulder slump. Casen didn't ask me to go. Maybe he thinks because of what happened at the bar with Ian that I wouldn't want to go. Either that or he just doesn't want me to go. The insecure thought sweeps through and I shut it down immediately. Casen is a sweet guy. He probably didn't ask because he didn't want me to feel uncomfortable or put me in the position that I would have to say no. But then, what if he isn't going because I'm not? Fuck, this relationship stuff is dramatic.

"Trinity, if he is calling you and asking you out, especially to somewhere there will, most likely, be a lot of his friends, then I wouldn't give it a second thought. Maybe he is just trying to make sure you know he likes you for you before he tries to fuck your brains out."

It's Trinity's turn to shoosh me now. "Why do you have to be so loud?" she asks, while looking around. I just laugh at her.

Our salad shows up and we fall into easy conversation. I told her about my job search and she is over the moon happy for me. She tells me about living with a single mom and crazy kids. I don't envy her. I miss her at the condo and I let her know she is welcome to come back anytime.

Before we can finish our salads, our plates of sushi are dropped off, and I notice the restaurant is now buzzing with patrons.

"Damn," I moan, taking my first bite of shrimp tempura. "This is fucking amazing."

"I know, right? I've wanted to come back here since the first time Hadley brought me," she responds and shakes her empty water glass. Searching around for the server she turns her head but doesn't look back for almost a full ten seconds. She looks at me, then back where she is staring. It's starting to freak me out.

"What's up?" I ask.

Trinity situates herself to face me again. “Just something weird.” She glances over her shoulder. This time, I see what she sees and my heart stops.

A woman, sitting in a booth just across the room is staring straight at me. Not just any woman. One that is very familiar. Alexia Monroe, one of the most popular girls from my high school class, is less than thirty feet from me and looking as though she knows me.

“Who is that?” Trinity asks, breaking the spell.

I shake my head. “I don’t know. So weird that she is just gawking at me.”

Trinity lets it go. “Maybe she is jealous of how fucking sexy you look today,” she muses. That makes me laugh. I look down at my pink t-shirt, jeans, and flip flops. “Real fucking sexy. I bet Casen would finally bang you.”

I can feel my face blush.

“Oh my God,” Trinity screeches. “He banged you already, hasn’t he?”

When I don’t answer she reaches over and slaps my arm. “He did. And you’re blushing, which means it was fucking awesome! I knew, as soon as he stopped at our table, that he was a great lay. I mean, you can tell just from looking at those fucking hands. You have to give me all the details.”

My phone chimes in my purse, and I use it to delay this conversation. I’m not shy about talking to her about sex, but the things that Casen did to me this weekend are worth the rosy cheeks I’m sporting. I grab my phone from my purse and smile.

Casen: I’m about to take a nap, lying in my bed, wishing you were here so I could fuck that pussy with my tongue.

Me: Aren’t there people around?

Casen: That didn’t stop you from putting those pretty lips around my cock and sucking me dry.

I can feel my panties get wet and I’m about to tell him just that when Trinity rips the phone from my hands. She gasps.

“Holy shit, Em. He has a dirty mouth. You should wash it out with your pussy juice.”

My mouth goes wide before I burst in a fit of laughter. “That’s so crude! You did not just say that!”

“I sure as hell did,” she states matter-of-factly, obviously proud of herself. I have to say, I’m a little proud of her, too. That was a good one. “Now, let’s finish up here, so you can go help that man fall asleep.”

“How is your idea of putting him to sleep going to make him actually sleep?”

Trinity raises her hand, finally finding the server and giving her the universal sign for the check. “Fuck him unconscious.”

Reaching for my wallet, I shake my head. Her dirty mouth and thoughts are why we get along so well. I never wanted to get close to anyone for a really long time. I’m so thankful I have met Trinity. I’m starting to see things a lot clearer today and I know I have a great, long lasting friend in her.

Our check is placed down and I throw my debit card on top of it, insisting that I pay. She allows it. We wait for the bill to be brought back, and I feel eyes on me again. Across the room, Alexia is still zeroed in on me and, if I didn’t care about drawing attention to myself or think that I might get recognized, I would go over there and ask her what the fuck her problem is.

She wasn’t mean in high school, though she did have a thing for Patrick for a long time. I know this because we had most classes together my senior year and his name was the only thing that came out of her mouth. I wanted to punch her every time she talked about him but she didn’t know what he had done. How could she have? All she knew was what was portrayed by the incidents that year. I was a whore who let people video tape me having sex. She never said as much, but the dirty looks and rude comments made by her friends told me she wasn’t oblivious. I always wondered why Alexia never said anything about what happened. Why she had been so nice to me.

The check gets paid and I drop Trinity back off at work. As I pull away, my phone rings and Casen's voice comes over the Bluetooth in the car.

"Hey, baby," he greets. I smile at his endearment.

"Hi. I thought you were going to sleep."

Casen clears his throat. "I was just calling to see why you didn't respond to my text."

I laugh. "Because Trinity had taken it out of my hand before I had a chance. I was going to call you on my way home. I just left from having lunch with her."

"Hmm, Ok. I wasn't sure if I scared you."

I merge onto the highway. "No, you didn't scare me."

"Just making sure. So, I don't know if you have any plans for this Friday night but I was wondering if you would like to go to Ian's. He is having a get together for his birthday." He sounds nervous. It's kind of cute.

"Sure," I answer.

"Okay. I know you didn't start on the best terms with him and, after what I told you he did in high school, I wasn't sure you would still want to hang out with those two. I'm actually surprised you still want to see me."

I think on that for a moment. "The past is in the past." And for the first time, I really feel that way.

17 SEVENTEEN

My hands shake as I put the finishing touches on my make-up. It's Saturday night and Casen is on his way to pick me up for Ian's get together. I wish my nerves would calm just a little bit so my eye liner didn't look like a two-year-old put it on.

I can't quite put a finger on why I feel this way. I just feel very anxious. I haven't seen Casen all week though, we have spent hours talking on the phone. Our schedules just didn't match up. I've kept myself busy with working out, job hunting, and trying to rid myself of the nastiness that has consumed my life for a decade. It's almost like a detox of emotions. I'm trying to push the old, negative thoughts out and bring in brand new, shiny ones. It sounds like it would be easy to do but that is so far from the truth.

I went and visited my parents at their gravesites yesterday. It was surreal. I hadn't been to see them in so long. The days have been beautiful and I was able to just sit there and share all that has been happening in my life and how I plan to make them proud. They would be horrified at what I have been doing.

After that tape was released, the entire town heard about it and got to witness the first time I gave myself to someone. My parents tried to be understanding. I hated having to explain to them that I didn't consent to being recorded. My father, being a police officer, was furious and was set on bringing up charges, anything to make those guys pay. I guess there are people way more powerful than him; nothing was ever done. It was my choice to go back to school afterward. I wanted to be brave. I wanted to show all of those kids that no matter what the PITCREW did to me, I was strong. But, life just kept

throwing everything at me. My mom committed suicide. My dad died. In the matter of two years, I felt like I had lost everything. Now, I feel like maybe there is a light at the end of the long tunnel. I have a good friend in Trinity and maybe, just maybe, things with Casen will work out. I just know that there is a chance I might have to tell him and that thought scares the shit out of me. I don't know him well enough to gauge how he will react.

I bite my lip when I hear a soft knocking at my front door and take a deep breath. It's the first time I've seen him since we made ourselves official. A month ago, I wouldn't have even dreamed I would be happy about it.

The door swings open, warm air filing into my apartment from out in the hallways. Casen stands there with his back to me and when he turns, I lose my breath. He looks so fucking sexy. I take a moment to appreciate every inch of him from toe to top. The jeans he wears are dark denim that squeezes his large thighs. A belt with a large silver buckle secures them around his hips that I know hold that glorious v that women love. Barely containing his strong torso and unbelievably ripped arms is a red, short sleeve t-shirt. I've never seen him wear that color but it has to be his best. By the time I reach his face, a devious smile plays across his lips. My body quivers beneath his stare. I've waited my whole life to have someone make me feel this way with just a look.

He stalks me into my apartment, shutting the door, and wraps his giant hands around my jaw before crashing his lips to mine. With their own mind, my fingers reach up and clutch the soft material of his shirt, holding on for dear life. I'm letting go and it feels amazing. I want to feel like this all the time. I want to get lost in him and never find myself again. My lungs gasp for air but I don't care if I ever breathe again. My life has so drastically changed over the past seven days and, for as long as I can remember, I feel happy.

My dress bunches as he glides his knuckles up the side of my thigh, his fingers spreading when they reach my ass. He burrows them into my panties and clutches my cheeks tightly.

“I want to ravish you, Embyr,” he utters, his heated breath ghosting across my collarbone. I wrap my arms around his neck and hold tight, lifting my legs around his torso. Casen’s grip on my ass holds me up and he walks me over to my dining room table, setting me on the edge.

“Do it, Casen. Ravish me,” I beg, my legs shaking with desire.

“I want to.” He lets out a long, anguished sigh. “But, I can’t.”

I pull back, dejected, and he must see it in my eyes because he quickly recovers. “Oh, baby. I want to so bad. I just...” Dropping his hands he turns and pulls them down over his face in frustration. “Reece is waiting for us outside, and he threatened to bang down the door if I took too long. But, then you go and put this on...” He stops, admiring my crimson spaghetti strap dress. It floats down to mid-thigh and I know that I can’t bend over in it unless I want to give everyone a show. “I just want to stay here and fuck you all night.”

I laugh, and slide down off of the table. “Okay, then. Let’s go, but know I expect a full ravishing when we get back.”

Casen playfully slaps me on the ass as I walk past him and to the door. “You can bet your sweet ass you’ll get one.”

The party is in full swing by the time Reece, Trinity, Casen and I arrive. The music is on but it’s not so loud that you can’t hear anyone when they talk. The lights are dim. People line every wall space and more filter out onto the large deck overlooking Lake Michigan. The view is breathtaking, from what I can see, and I make a mental note to check it out before the party is over.

Walking in on the arm of Casen Parker is surreal. I spent many nights in high school wishing that one day I could be in this exact position. I wanted to be the envy of every girl I’d known since elementary school and just like in my teenage daydreams, all eyes are on us as we enter. Like at the bar and every other time I’ve been out with Casen, all the women’s

eyes seem to gravitate toward him. I don't blame them, but now I am happy to be on the receiving end of their jealousy.

He leads me into the kitchen while Trinity and Reece go off on their own, and pours me a Captain and Coke. I smile and thank him, taking it from his hands. It's strong, and the burn of the liquor against my throat starts to calm my ramped nerves. I like that he knows what I prefer to drink.

"Casen!" a deep voice calls. We both turn and are greeted by a man just few inches shorter than Casen, but no less intimidating. His muscles rival Casen's and I watch them flex as he extends his hand to the guy next to me. "What's up, man? I haven't seen you in a while."

Casen takes his hand, smiling wide. "I'm good, Aaron. How have you been?"

Aaron nods, his dark chocolate irises shine with happiness. "I'm great! The wife just found out she is pregnant."

Casen pulls him in for a man hug. "Congrats, man! That's great."

"Thank you." He nods, and then looks at me as though he just realized I'm not here for decoration. "And, who is this?"

Before I can answer, Casen's large hand wraps around my side, pulling me to him, and kisses me on the temple. "Aaron, meet Embyr Quinn—my girlfriend."

Aaron's brows rise in shock as he takes us in. I'm sure mine matches his. This is the first time Casen has introduced me as his girlfriend and I'm not sure it hit me until just this moment how truly scary that is.

A lot of things flash through my mind. I'm his girlfriend. That means I will be introduced into every aspect of his life: his job, his friends, his quirks, and his family. Dread fills me as I realize he will be doing the same. Before, when I thought I was going to break his heart and leave him, there was no chance in him getting to know the real Embyr. I could portray whatever I wanted. Tell him whatever I wanted him to hear, but now, I can't help but get completely wrecked at the thought of him learning about my life. What if things work out

between the two of us? I'm either going to have to tell him the truth or I am going to have to stick with one good lie for the remainder of our relationship—possibly—for the rest of my life.

“Nice to meet you, Embyr,” Aaron interrupts my inner freak-out and reaches for my hand, but he doesn't shake it. He brings it up to his mouth and places a kiss on it.

“You have your own woman, Aaron. Leave mine be,” Casen jokingly warns.

Aaron laughs. “I know not to mess with your girlfriend, Casen. Not only do I have a wife, but I like my balls firmly where they are.”

The two chat for a few more minutes. I stand patiently next to him, enjoying the circles he is gently drawing with his finger tips on my lower back. It's making me edgy and downright horny. Everything he is doing is turning me on. The way he speaks and the way he won't let me get more than six inches away from him. The way his muscles flex when he moves. When he wraps his arm around my shoulders and traps me to him, I bring mine around his waist, looking for some sort of purchase. I find it just underneath his shirt. I caress the side of his abs, feeling them tense up and the goose bumps prickling his skin. I'm lost in the feel of his touch on my collarbone and shoulder, and the ripple of his skin beneath my fingertips.

I'm so distracted that I don't see Aaron walk away until I feel Casen's hot breath on my ear. “I can tell your panties are fucking soaked right now, Embyr,” he speaks in a low and menacing voice. “I want to take you in the bathroom, bend you over the sink, and claim that wet pussy.”

An involuntary moan escapes my lips, and I turn, so I am eye to eye with him. “You wouldn't even need foreplay, Casen. I'm so wet, that big cock would slip right in.”

He rears back slightly, a devious smile ghosting his lips, before he grabs my hand and tugs me toward the hallway. My nipples harden with anticipation and, since I'm not wearing a

bra, I'm sure the entire party can see the outline. I don't give a shit. I just want Casen's tongue running along the taut peak.

He grabs the doorknob to, what I assume is, the bathroom. Finding it occupied, he eyes the hallway. "This way. Ian has a bathroom in his room. I want to be able to watch you come on my dick in the mirror." He says it so loud that I don't think he cares who hears, and I almost feel bad that I'm about to fuck my boyfriend in the birthday boy's (who we have yet to see) bathroom. The knob turns and we enter the room. Just as we are about to close the door, someone calls Casen's name.

It's Ian.

"No fucking in my room," he half jokes from the opposite end of the hallway.

Casen pulls me in front of him, probably to hide the erection poking me in the back. "The other bathroom is occupied. I was just showing her where yours is."

Ian snickers. "You're not fucking her in my bathroom, either. What are we in high school again?"

My heated body instantly cools like someone threw a bucket of ice cold water on me. Ian mentioning high school makes me feel nauseous. Another "perk" of being with Casen: having Ian and Reece in my life, too.

I jump when Casen whispers "We will continue this when I get you home."

All I can do is nod and watch when Reece rounds the corner. "Hey, assholes, what the hell do you want?" he asks Ian and Casen.

Ian walks down the hallway. "I need to talk to you and Casen for a minute about that information he requested."

From behind, I can feel Casen's body stiffen before he releases his hold on me. "Right now?" he asks as I crank my neck to look at him. He won't look at me.

"Yes, now. Jesus," Ian answers.

Casen kisses me on the shoulder. "I'll just be a minute, baby," he softly says before disappearing in Ian's room. Reece

is right on his heels but Ian stays where he is, looking at me.

I wait to see if he says anything and when he doesn't I ask, "What?"

He steps closer, invading my personal space and I know Casen can't see me where from where he is standing, because if he could, he wouldn't allow how close Ian is. The hair on the back of my neck stands up and all confusion over what "information" Casen needs from him is lost, and I go in protection mode. If he steps any closer, I will nail this asshole right in his fucking balls.

"You didn't say 'Happy Birthday' to me," he says so low that I struggle to hear him, but I don't mistake the creepiness in his voice, or the light grasp he now has on my arm.

I look at him. Really look at him and say the nicest thing that I can muster up. "Happy Birthday, Ian," I tell him and then get closer. "If I were you, and wanted to see another year, then I would take your goddamn hand off of me."

It's obvious, by the stunned look on his face, that he doesn't know me. I don't think he expected a threat to come out of my mouth. He drops his hand, never losing eye contact with me until he shuts the door in my face. Fucking prick. He is still as skeezy as ever.

I set out looking for Trinity and find her on the large patio. It's gotten chillier since we arrived and I wrap my arms around myself for warmth. "Hey." I greet, leaning against the railing next to her and look out at the city.

It's quiet from up here: the blaring of the horns sound like a whisper and Lake Michigan glows in the moonlight. I don't know what Ian does. I've tried to do my research on him, but could never find out for sure. Whatever it is, he makes decent enough money. He has to with a view like this. Too bad he is a fucking creep.

"Hey," she replies, looking my way. "Are you having fun?"

"I almost was until Ian stole my man." I laugh.

She giggles too. "I didn't think Casen swung that way but to each their own. That could make for an interesting

threesome.”

I almost vomit in my own mouth. “No thanks.”

“Excuse me,” someone says from behind us. It’s a female voice. We both turn in unison, coming face to face with the same girl who saw us at the sushi place in the suburbs.

“Yes?” Trin answers her, but Alexia is looking at me.

Behind her, Casen, Ian, and Reece appear onto the deck laughing and then stop to watch the interaction. For a brief moment, I wonder why the hell she is here, but I know she went to our high school. She could still be friends with all of them.

Alexia directs her question to me. “Didn’t you go to our high school?”

It was already quiet outside but when she asks it seems like you could hear a pin drop. She doesn’t seem accusatory. Just as though she recognizes me and is curious.

Hoping my body language doesn’t betray me, I answer her as calmly as I can. “No, I don’t think so.” I shrug, trying to laugh it off. “I do have that face, though. A lot of people say I look familiar.”

Our surroundings seem to go back to normal. Alexia seems like she wants to walk away but doesn’t know how to escape. She looks almost embarrassed, but I’m pretty sure she thinks I am full of shit.

Casen joins our little party of three and brings Alexia in for a hug. “Congrats! Your hubby told me you two are expecting.”

Relieved, she places both hands on her barely-there bump. “Yes. We’re very excited.”

“Embyr, this is Alexia. We went to school together and she is Aaron’s wife. I introduced the two.” He motions between the two of us. “Alexia, this is my girlfriend, Embyr.”

She nods, still questioning in her eyes. “Nice to meet you,” she says.

“And,” I motion to Trin. “This is my friend, Trinity.”

They exchange pleasantries and talk about how they work just a few blocks from one another. I am wrapped up in Casen's arms, but I don't feel protected. I feel open and vulnerable, like a deer in hunting season. Alexia keeps looking at me, as does Reece and Ian. I don't believe for a moment they aren't scrutinizing me. I don't know, for sure, if the guys heard what Alexia asked but I can guess that they did.

18 EIGHTEEN

CASEY

It's eerily quiet as I make my way towards the station, overnight bag in hand. My thoughts drift to my time spent with Embyr over the past couple weeks. I have never felt so connected to someone—mind and body—after such a short amount of time. There is something about her that makes me want to confess all my sins and then commit more in the bedroom.

With all of my previous relationships, I was never able to tell any of those women what happened back in high school. My comfort level with Embyr is nothing I have ever experienced before and, even though I don't know much about her, I feel like I'm already so in tune with her. Her quirks, facial expressions, and even her smile remind me a lot of Annie. I think that has a lot to do with me opening up to her about what happened back in high school.

Annie: my biggest regret. I try not to regret anything, but just grow and learn from it. But, if I could go back in time and change one thing, it would have been to go after what my heart wanted. My own insecurities kept me from doing that. Stupid high school mentality. Then, they started the bet. I didn't want to lose my friends and I sure as hell didn't want to be on the receiving end of their wrath. I should have stood up for her, not stand there and watch them bully someone I had liked for years. I can only attribute it to actually giving a fuck about what other people thought of me back then. After what they did to her, she was never the same again. She was this bright shining light and then, all of the sudden; she looked as though someone blew it out. She was empty, and I felt it was my entire fault. It was. I brought attention to her and then I stood by and watched.

I'm just glad I have someone I feel comfortable enough with to tell all this to now. Someone I can trust. After a great time at Ian's party and an even better night last night with Embyr, riding my cock, I'm thankful that she seems to trust me more, as well. Where before, she was guarded; she seems to be letting her walls down a little more each day.

"Well, it looks like you got some ass last night," Reece voice carries through the alleyway. I look up, finding him stopped ahead, waiting for me.

He waits until I've caught up before he continues walking along side of me. "That's not your business."

He scoffs. "Since when?"

Turning the corner, we are met with a crowded sidewalk and squeeze in where we can. "Since Embyr."

His head shakes. "Game changer, huh?"

I nod. "And what about Trinity?" I ask.

"Man," he sighs. "It's weird. We haven't slept together and, yet, I want to see more of her. I loved having her on my arm at Ian's."

I laugh as we walk into the station and pat him on the shoulder. "Apparently, we have both found our game changers."

"I guess so." His shoulders slump like I just gave him bad news. I laugh.

The station is buzzing. Yesterday's crew just came back from a call and is pulling the truck back into the station. Reece and I head into our respective rooms, put new sheets on our beds, and put our Engine Six t-shirt and shorts on, ready to do our morning workout after changeover. The Captain walks past, yelling for us to hurry our asses up to the truck.

After changeover, Reece and I grab our water bottles and hit the station gym. It isn't much: a couple of weight machines, a treadmill, elliptical, and dumbbells. We like to get our workouts in right away, before the rest of the crew heads down after breakfast.

“So, tell me about Trinity. Why is she so different?” I ask him in between sets.

“I don’t know, man.” He puffs out as he works his triceps. “I’ve never had anyone put me in my place. She’s spunky, and I can’t keep up with her. I love it.”

I raise my brows. “And, no sex, yet? She isn’t clouding your judgment with her pussy?”

He laughs, dropping the dumbbell to the ground. “Nah. It’s crazy.”

We work out for a few more minutes but I can sense something is on Reece’s mind. “What’s up? You’re quiet today.”

He sits on the bench, bringing his elbows to his thighs, and leans over his clasped hands. “Did you hear about Wesley?”

I search my mind for who he is talking about. “Wes ... from high school?”

He bobs his head without looking up. “Yeah.”

“I haven’t seen or heard from him in years.” My hands come to rest on my hips. “Something happen? He ok?”

He looks up, his eyes full of concern. “He got caught with a student. She’s eighteen and attends his high school.”

My eyes widen. “Damn.”

“Yeah, she went all crazy and sent pictures to his job, the police, anyone she could.” He stands up. “Some crazy shit.”

“Well, I guess he shouldn’t have been fucking a student, Reece.” I step up onto one of the two treadmills and start my run. Reece takes the one next to me.

“Don’t you think it’s weird, though?” he asks, matching my speed.

“What’s that?”

He takes a minute to answer back. “Patrick getting arrested. Thad’s scandal with another man. Wes and the girl, and I heard Evan got caught cheating by his wife.”

I wipe sweat from my forehead with my towel. “Who told you all this?”

“Ian.”

I laugh. “Ian is nosey. He has to know everyone’s business.”

“Ian has to be nosey,” he points out. “He is a private investigator.”

Punching the incline up to three, I look over. “Speaking of Ian. Can you believe the shit he said last night? Not wanting to drudge up the past.”

He doesn’t look my way. “Yeah, but I see his point. I told you he isn’t the one to ask.”

I shake my head, disappointed. “He’s the only one. I don’t know anyone else I could ask that I wouldn’t be paying out my ass for or hit some legal roadblock.”

“I don’t think it’s priority on his list, Casen.”

I hit stop on my treadmill and look him dead on. “He fucking owes me, Reece.”

Sadness crosses his face. “I know, man. I know.”

Tension rises between the two of us, but I don’t care. I’ve never asked Reece or Ian for much, and I know Ian doesn’t want to look into what I need him to, but—I don’t give a shit.

Ian has always been investigative. He was the one who found out I liked Annie before the rest of the crew. He used to have those police scanners when we were younger. Every town has the resident gossip. That was Ian. I wasn’t surprised when I found out he was looking to become a private investigator. He doesn’t work for the police, but they help him out once in a while. He has his own company now and it seems to be thriving. Unfortunately, most of what he deals with is cheating spouses and workers’ compensation cases. I was shocked at the amount of people he catches working side jobs when they are getting paid workers’ comp. Ian isn’t on many people’s good lists. After everything that happened in high school, he should be able to do this for me. I’ll never

understand his reasons for sleeping with her when he was supposed to be my best friend. He told me he wasn't thinking. I try to accept that answer, but I'm still not sure I fully forgive him.

Just as I finish up my shower, the bell sounds loudly, and the fire house goes into high gear. We only have two minutes to get dressed and be at the engine or the captain will have my ass. You don't want to be the last one in the truck after the two minute mark. Reece and I race down the stairs, meeting Peter, our captain, and Troy, our driver, at the truck. Peter makes a single loud clap. "Less than a minute, boys. Nice."

We all get geared up and jump in the truck. Placing our headsets on, so we aren't screaming to each other in the cab of the truck, we find out it's a working structure fire inside an apartment building. When he gives the address to the call, my breathing stills and I glance over at Reece whose face is almost as white as mine feels.

"Isn't that..." he trails off.

I nod. "Fuck! That's Embyr's building."

What feels like an eternity (but is really just five minutes), passes before we end up in front of Embyr's ten story building. Light smoke billows out from the fourth story hallway window and my heart sinks. We're the first on the scene, so the first engine officer establishes commands. We all start pulling hand lines from the truck, so we can head into the building and also sweep for occupants. As we are getting ready to go in the building with the hose lines, Troy and Reece yell to bystanders to get back and move out of the way of the smoke. I don't know how big the fire is on the inside but it doesn't look like it could engulf the entire building. I just don't know if Embyr is in there, and I don't have my phone to call her. My nerves are shot as I look for her in the sea of evacuated tenants of the building. The smoke starts to build up and I feel nauseous.

"Do you need to sit out man? There are two other trucks here," Reece asks, patting me on the back. I look around, finding that other stations have converged onto the scene while

I was in panic mode. I shake it out of my head. I wasn't trained to stand by. I was trained to save lives and that's what I am going to do. Especially if Embyr is still in there, where I left her this morning, after another amazing night.

We get the fire under control quickly. Everyone has made it out safely, but I still feel very on edge. The fire started right in front of Embyr's door. The Captain said it looked like someone put a box of newspapers in front of her door and lit them on fire. Luckily, the only person on that floor was in the apartment closest to the exit, and he pushed the fire alarm. I'm worried about how Embyr will react when she sees what's happened and that it was meant for her. Not having my phone on me is infuriating. I want to call her and tell her what happened. I don't even have her number memorized to call her from Reece's phone. Then a thought pops in my head. Trinity! I run over to Reece and tell him to call her. He tries but it goes to voicemail.

"Hey, Trinity. It's Reece. When you get a chance, can you call me back or find Embyr and tell her to get home?"

An hour later, as all the trucks are starting to leave the scene, I see Trinity drive up and Embyr jumps out of the passenger side before the car has come to a complete stop. She is dressed in a tight green tank top and running shorts. Her eyes go wide in shock at the scene before her and they fill with tears. I strip myself of my smoky fire coat and stride toward her. Embyr's hands are wrapped around her torso and her body is racked with sobs. When she sees me, she turns her full body towards me and falls into my arms. I pull her into me, feeling the vibrations of her sobs against me.

"I'm sorry, baby," I tell her, looking over her head and finding Trinity staring at the two of us. I'm sure her heart is breaking for her friend.

Embyr pulls back and looks at the building before looking back to me. "Where did it start? Is everyone okay? How bad is it?"

She's shivering so I bring her to the truck, pull out a blanket, and wrap it around her. "Well, it started on your floor.

It looks intentional. Someone lit a box of paper up in front of your door. Everyone made it out okay, but I don't know that you'll be allowed back into your apartment for a few days. We have to make sure it's safe. Do you have insurance?"

A tear falls down her face. "I do."

"Okay. I'm sorry, baby. Do you have somewhere to go?"

Her body stills. "I only have Trinity, and she lives with her sister," her voice gets higher. "I can't go stay with them. I'll go crazy!"

I rub my hands up and down her arms. "Come stay with me at my apartment."

"I can't do that."

"You can and you will." My lips meet her forehead. "I insist."

"Casen, I don't want to put you out. That's too much too soon."

"Listen," I command, pulling her chin up so her eyes meet mine. "You will not be putting me out. I want you there and if you are concerned about it looking like we are 'living together' then you can take my spare room. My sister leaves her clothes there. You can come back to the station, get my keys, go to my house, shower, and get dressed. You can even come visit me later tonight, as long as we don't have a call, or you can hang out at the house. I'll have Reece drive me home in the morning."

She takes a deep breath. "I don't know."

"I do."

"Casen, we've got to go," Reece calls from next to the truck. The rest of the guys are in the truck, ready to take off.

"I have to go. Please have Trinity bring you over to the station to get my keys."

She leans up, kisses me, and nods.

Leaving her is hard but I'm relieved now to know she is okay. When I pull myself into the truck and strap in, I feel

Reece's stare. He has a huge smirk on his face. I shove him in his shoulder. "What the fuck are you smiling about? My girlfriend's apartment was intentionally set on fire."

"Girlfriend now, huh?" he asks as we both put headphones over our ears when we start to move, the sound of the engine blocking out all other noise. "When did that happen?" he speaks into the microphone.

"Last week. I haven't hidden that fact. What the fuck does it matter?" My nerves are shot. I don't want to deal with his shit right now.

I hear him laugh. "Play thing last week, girlfriend this week, and living with her the next. Seems pretty quick to me."

"What the hell am I supposed to do, Reece? She has nowhere to go."

He shrugs. "What about her parents? Why can't she stay with them?"

"They died when she was younger." I quietly tell him.

I recall that very short conversation on the subject over the phone one night. I could hear the hurt in her voice and it broke my heart. I have a sister and both of my parents are still alive. I don't know how I would have survived had I lost them at a young age. It makes me think about what happened to Annie and her having to put herself through college. At least, I heard she went to college. The thought crosses my mind again. Am I so attracted to Embyr because she reminds me of Annie?

19 NINETEEN

I'm devastated. There is something violating about someone intentionally seeking you out. They were on my floor and no one has the slightest clue as to why anyone would do that. I wasn't allowed back in so my purse, phone, money, and a picture of my parents, I keep tucked away, are still in there. Everything. I had left it all when I went to the gym with Trin. I'm just thankful the fire was mostly contained to the hallway. I have lost enough in my life. I don't need to lose the only memories I have on top of everything else.

Aria's words flash through my mind. "Karma is a bitch."

Nerves run ramped through my body. Every day I told myself all I was doing was taking justice into my own hands. Maybe I was lying to myself when I said I was speeding up the process. They grew up to be just as nasty as they were when they were younger. And, if they weren't doing something illegal, they were doing something immoral.

But, am I getting what I deserve? Because in the grand scheme of things, what I was doing wasn't morally right, either. I can be sent straight to hell for ruining their lives and the lives of their families. Do two wrongs really make anything right?

I can't keep thinking about that, though, if I'm going to focus on living my life for the better now. Moving on. Moving on with Casen, but, then, the dilemma of telling him who I really am crosses my mind.

How could I possibly tell him that I am the same girl he opened up about last week? Would I lose him? Two weeks ago, I wouldn't have cared, but, now—I can't even stand the thought of not having him, and that shakes me to the core.

I have Trinity, however, it's been so nice to have someone want to be there and take care of me. I've gone through so much devastation in my life, and at no point did someone come to my rescue. I don't know if Casen feels obligated to help me out with my living situation at the moment but he didn't hesitate to open his home to me. The home I am currently entering for the first time ever.

It's a quaint, little apartment just ten blocks from mine. It has an open floor plan and dons a black bar in the back corner which comes equipped with every kind of liquor you could imagine. His couch and love seat match the dark color of the bar. They are leather and look to have reclining seats on each side. A glass coffee table sits in the middle of the room with a remote control tower that holds at least four remotes; one of them belonging to the massive flat screen television. His glass patio doors overlook the streets from the sixth floor. He has a two person dining table and a kitchen smaller than mine with all stainless steel appliances.

I walk down the hallway; the first room is on the right. The door is open and inside has the bare minimum: a desk, bed, and a side table. I seek out the closet, opening it up to find it half full with girls clothes. A lot of bright colors. This must be all of his sister's stuff.

A minute later I find myself staring into Casen's bedroom. His bed is giant—a king with a dark blue comforter and four pillows across the top. I walk over, dragging my fingers across the soft material and notice how tall the bed is. The top of the mattress comes to my belly button and I push down on it, feeling the firmness push back.

The exhaustion from the day kicks in, so I decide to jump in the shower. When I'm done, I thoroughly smell like a man since his sister did not leave any girly shit in either bathroom. I slip into a pair of yoga pants and t-shirt from her closet and lay on the bed in the spare room. It's smaller and is far less comfortable than Casen's felt so, after a few moments of tossing and turning, I decide to go into his room. He won't be home until tomorrow morning and said he would call me later. Not that I believe he would mind if I sleep in his bed; I just

don't want to jump to conclusions. I get in under the comforter and it wraps me in warmth. In no time, I'm asleep.

A loud noise startles me awake and I look around into the darkness. A quick glance at the clock tells me it's just seven o'clock at night. I slept for seven hours? Another noise from the living area and I jump into overdrive. I grab a picture frame on Casen's nightstand to use the sharp corners as a weapon and slowly walk to the closed bedroom door. I turn the knob cautiously, trying hard to quietly open it.

I can hear movement in the kitchen now, cabinets opening and closing. I hold the frame tightly in my hand, the corner of it sticking out so I can cut whoever is here. When I first took a tour of the house, I didn't bother to look for where the phone is, so I can't call Casen or 911.

A thunderous crash sounds. I scream at the top of my lungs and run for the living room. I don't bother to look at the kitchen but, just as I am about to get to his front door, someone grabs me from behind. I yell louder and a hand is placed over my mouth. I shake back and forth, trying to hit the assailant with the picture frame.

“Stop screaming, baby. It's me.”

Tears prickle the side of my eyes in relief. I stop struggling and melt into Casen's arms, letting the frame crash to the floor.

He turns us around and goes down with me as I fall to the ground. “Embyr. Baby. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to scare you.” He kisses my forehead and I will the panic attack that is rising, down.

Once my heartrate returns to normal, I lean back and look at him. “Why are you home?”

Casen hugs me tightly to him. “I tried to call the house a few times, since I knew you didn't have your phone, but you didn't answer. Reece called Trinity but she said you weren't with her. The captain decided I needed to be with you, so he had someone come in and finish my shift. I got home and saw you were sleeping, so I decided to make some dinner before I

woke you up. I dropped the fucking pan. I feel terrible that I scared you.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him, trying to calm my racing heart. “I’m fine now.”

He pulls my chin up to face him. “Are you sure?”

I nod quickly. “I am. I’m fine. I promise.”

Smiling he says, “I loved the way you look in my bed, Embyr.”

My hand reaches up, pulling him into a kiss. “I loved the way it feels. So comfortable.”

We stand and he grabs my hand, taking me into the dining room and sitting me at the table while he tends to the pans that fell on the floor and caused all of the chaos.

The counter is lined with ingredients for enchiladas. “I can cook for you.” I stand up to help him, but he shoos me away.

“Get out of here.” He laughs, and then points to the coffee table. “Oh, I was able to run into your apartment and grab a couple of things for you. I hope you don’t mind; I used the key you gave me.”

I pick up a duffle bag. Unzipping it, I find my phone, purse, and some toiletries from the bathroom, as well as a picture of Trinity and me inside. I also find the cash that Casen had stumbled upon last week. He doesn’t say anything but watches me rifle through it. I start to become upset that he went through my apartment, but take it as him caring for me. I grab the bag and put it in the guest room, plucking my phone out of it and turn the screen on. Just one text from Trinity, asking how I’m doing. I send a quick message back about the day’s events, how I feel better, and then I return to the kitchen to see if Casen will let me help.

An hour later, after dinner, we are sitting on the couch together. “Are you okay?” he asks. “I know today must’ve really sucked for you.”

I take a sip of wine he poured me and curl my feet underneath myself. “It does suck. Any leads on who did it?”

“No. I’m sure the police will be in contact with you once they find anything.”

“Ok,” I nod, taking another sip but, this time, spilling some down the front of my shirt. “Oh, shit.”

Casen looks over as I slip the shirt over my head and rush to the kitchen to rinse it out.

“Don’t worry about it.” I hear from behind me. “It’s an old shirt of hers.”

I grab the finger nail scrubber he keeps on the sink and lay into the setting stain. “I can’t just not worry about it.”

His front meets my back as he reaches around to shut the water off. “It’s fine. I promise.”

My head falls and I drop the shirt into the sink just letting the whole day sink in. I feel like I have no ground underneath my feet. Everything is spinning out of control. I turn in his arms and lean back against the cold counter.

His eyes search my face. “What are you thinking, Embyr?”

My fingers burn to touch him. I want to forget about this whole day. This whole weekend and lose myself in him. “I’m thinking,” I start, reaching around to unclasp my bra, dropping it to the floor and expose my breasts. “That I want you to take me.”

His eyes flutter closed. “You’ve had a long day. Are you sure?”

Without warning, I grasp his jean-clad cock in my hands, his eyes flashing open, and move my pointer finger over his growing erection. “I’m sure, Casen. Help me forget about today.”

He doesn’t waste a second. Grabbing for my pants and ripping them down to find that I’m not wearing any panties. “Holy fuck,” he groans, picking me up and placing me on the counter next to the sink. I reach down, pulling his shirt up and off before leaning in, biting his shoulder as I go to work on his zipper. Once his cock is free he shoves two fingers inside me. “Fucking wet.”

“Take your pants off Casen,” I command, and he complies, dragging his fingers out of me to do so.

His eyes find mine as his massive girth invades my body. I throw my head back at the intrusion and he clamps down on my nipple with his teeth.

I moan his name and lean back onto my hands, opening myself up for him. He starts fucking me at a relentless pace. His fingers dig into my thighs and pull me to the edge of the counter. “Look at me, Embyr.”

I do as he commands, His stare is that of pure lust and it’s about to put me over the edge. He looks at where he is fucking me for a brief moment before he freezes. “Fuck. No condom.”

My hips involuntarily continue to move, my pussy wanting the friction. “Don’t fucking stop. I’m going to come.”

He moves hesitantly. “I’m not wearing a condom, baby.”

I pant, grabbing a hold of his hips and attempting to get him to move. “I’m on the pill, but pull out. Come on me.”

His dick hardens with my words and it’s like I turned the machine back on. One hand goes to my hair at the nape of my neck, the other digging into my thighs. “You better come fast, Embyr because it won’t be long until I decorate that pretty body with my dirty come.”

“Faster,” I beg, making his grip in my hair tighter. I lock my elbows to give me purchase as he complies with my request and fucks me hard. I spread my legs as wide as I can go, giving him full access. His hand comes off my leg and he reaches down, pinching my clit. My eyes slam shut as the orgasm crashes over me.

He lets go of my hair and grabs the side of my face. “Open your eyes and watch me come on you.”

I open them, looking down, and watch his dick disappear inside me and reappear before he pulls it all the way out and he shoots his load all over my stomach. His hand, stroking his cock, milking it. His lips find mine and he gives me a kiss that could incinerate the clothes on my body if I still had any on. It’s carnal. He nips and he sucks my tongue, my lips.

“Do you feel better?” he asks.

I bite my lip, trying to contain my smile. “I do.”

“Good.” He kisses me chastely.

He grabs a paper towel, running it through warm water and cleans me off. We walk into his room and he hands me large t-shirt from his drawer before he disappears into the bathroom to take a shower.

He didn't grab me panties from my house so I go through his drawers, finding a pair of boxers and rolling them over until they are snug on my hips. I unfold the t-shirt and freeze as I see it's one he has kept since high school. The one the booster club sold for fundraisers. It has our school emblem on the front and the name “Parker” on the back. When I've secured it on my body, I look in the mirror and smile. It never was as popular as wearing your boyfriend's jersey but wearing the booster shirts came in at a close second, especially with their last name on the back.

When I fantasized about being with Casen, back in high school, I always imagined wearing this shirt. Now, here I am, over ten years later, doing just that. I smile at how it looks on me and turn side to side, admiring how it swallows my new svelte body.

I'm just about to crawl into Casen's bed and wait for him, when I hear his phone ringing in the living room. I walk out to retrieve it and see Ian's name come across the screen. I shiver and bring it into the bedroom. After a minute the phone chimes in my hand. Assuming it's a voicemail, I set it on Casen's night stand, and then freeze when a text message pops up. The words across the screen pull all of the air out of my lungs. I pick the phone back up, reading the message two, three more times. What I find scares the shit out of me. More than when I thought someone broke into Casen's house. More than when Patrick had me up against a wall in the science room closet. More than when the police showed up at my house to tell me my dad passed away.

Ian: Annie leads go dead. Ended in North Carolina. I'll keep digging.

I don't hear when Casen gets out of the shower or calls my name. I only feel him when he reaches for the phone in my hand and takes it. He reads the message and stares at me with desperation in his eyes.

“I asked him to do this before I even met you, Embyr.” He sets the phone down and grabs my hand. “I just want to know what happened. I wake up every day, wondering what happened to her. Ian is a private investigator, and I asked him for help.”

Just like it has done for the past two days, Aria's words replay in my head one more time. “Karma is a bitch.”

Now, I know I have to tell him, before Ian does.

20 TWENTY

I wrap my jacket tightly around me, trying to keep the freezing wind out, as I walk the last two blocks towards Casen's fire station. Leaves blow furiously at my feet, and everyone seems to be using anything they can to block the frigid air from slapping them in the face. It's an unseasonably cool day in the city, and I don't think anyone has brought out their winter clothing yet. I was lucky enough to get into my apartment today and snag my heavier jacket.

The past few days between Casen and I have been nothing short of amazing but this pit in my stomach is burrowing a deep hole through my body. I know I have to tell Casen who I really am and before Ian does. My mind was consumed with questions the night of Ian's text.

Why is he looking for Annie?

Why didn't he mention it when he told me the story?

What was he going to do with the information once he got it?

All of those questions and about a million more took up every single thought in my mind since that day. I've barely been able to eat or sleep and I always feel like, at any moment, everything is going to come crashing down, because it just might.

Casen has been wonderful. Sharing his home with me while they clear my apartment was something he didn't have to do but continuously reminded me that he wanted to do. I've wanted for nothing since taking residence there. I have never felt so taken care of. Even though I have been fighting it, and fighting it hard, I think I am falling for him. Falling so damn

far that I don't know what will happen if I lose him. I know I'd be devastated. That seems to be the only fitting emotion. My life has been a roller coaster of ups and downs. Some, my fault. Well, most my fault. My plan has backed me into a corner. There is nothing I can do but come clean. That scares me. The worst that could happen is that I will lose him. That feels like it would tear my world apart even more than the release of the video back in high school did.

I started off on this journey of fucking over the men of the PITCREW and now one of them has me on the brink of falling for him so hard that I may shatter and the pieces will never be put back together.

My hands fold across my stomach with the thought.

I don't want to lose Casen.

I can't lose him.

A chill runs down my spine and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I have a sick feeling in my stomach; the kind where you feel as though someone is watching you. My breathing deepens as I glance around me, but nothing seems threatening. Looking back, I find no one is following me, either. I turn around to finish the final block, before getting to Casen's work and surprising him, when I crash into someone in front of me. My head gets the brunt of the hit against a hard chest and I close my eyes, willing the pain to go away. The stranger's hands come up, grasping my upper arms. "Where you off to so fast, Emybr?" a familiar, vile voice asks, causing my body to stiffen in fear.

I open my eyes. My heart immediately begins to beat out of its chest, and I take a step back to break the hold of his grimy hands on me. "Don't touch me!" I yell, staring Patrick down.

He takes a menacing step forward, invading my personal space. We're on the city streets of Chicago, surrounded by hundreds, but I feel completely isolated. "Don't touch you? That's an odd thing to say considering the last time I saw you, I was fucking your sweet pussy from behind."

My stomach coils with disgust as his eyes travel down my body. “What the hell do you want, Patrick?” I ask with false conviction, pulling myself together so I don’t show any fear.

His skin turns an angry shade of red. “What do I want?” He shakes his head and asks louder. “What do I want?”

The strong façade I’ve put on is cracking and if I don’t hold still in the face of this dangerous man, he will chew me up and spit me out. “That’s what I asked, isn’t it?”

He steps closer, his eyes are tired and fierce, and stress is written all over his face. “I want to know if you did it, Embyr?”

“Did what?” I ask, mustering some strength in my tone.

Another step closer. I feel like he is caging me in. I could run, but I’m afraid he would chase. I look to the left, the fire station so close, yet so far away. I’m almost backed against the wall by the time Patrick speaks again. “Were you moving my clients’ money?”

I stare him down. My fists clenching, ready for a fight, should this turn bad. “You did all of that yourself!” I spit my answer. “You fucked your clients’ over and now you’re just looking to find someone to blame. That account was made long before I even started working there.”

His eyes turn to slits. “How do you know that?”

I step forward, getting stronger by the second. I didn’t start that account. I didn’t screw over my clients. I just made it so other people finally noticed he was doing it. “I worked for you for a long time, Patrick. You may think I’m stupid, that all I was good for was a fuck and some coffee but I’m so much smarter than you think. Now, back the fuck off.”

Patrick’s face turns a shade of red I have never seen before and it puts me more on the defense. My knee is ready to rise up and connect with his balls, should he choose to make a physical move.

“You’re right about being smart, Embyr. But you’re wrong about one thing.” His eyes move down to my chest. “You weren’t a good lay at all.”

I lean in, getting as close to him as I can without turning my stomach. “Fuck. You.”

I can feel his breath all over my face as he retorts. “Been there. Fucked that. No thanks.”

I shove him as hard as I can with both hands and before Patrick can react I hear Casen yelling. We both turn our heads and watch as a murderous looking Casen storms toward us with Reece trailing behind him.

“Get your fucking hands off of her,” Casen roars from twenty feet away. I can see Reece cracking his knuckles. They are ready for a fight.

As they get closer and see Patrick, recognition flashes across their faces. I hear my old boss chuckling while taking a few steps back. “Casen Parker and Reece Craig? No fucking shit!”

Recognition is replaced by anger again. “Strickland,” Casen says. “Back away from my girlfriend.”

Patrick looks at me, and then at Casen. “Girlfriend, hmm?”

Casen towers over Patrick, they are chest to chest and I watch Reece take in the situation. “Yeah, my girlfriend, asshole. So, back the fuck off of her.”

Patrick raises his palms up and to the side, seemingly in defeat. “It’s all good, man. I was just speaking to my ex-employee.”

Reece chimes in, appearing next to Casen. “Conversation is over. Leave.”

Patrick continues to walk backwards but his eyes find mine and he says, “Do you pull her hair, Casen? Because she always loved when I pulled her hair while railing her from behind, over my desk.”

It happens so fast. Casen storms over to Patrick, fists clenched, and punches him so hard, Patrick immediately falls to the ground. He doesn’t get up. He just holds his hand to the bruise that is rapidly forming on his left cheek and stares at Casen.

“Come on, man,” Reece commands. Casen grabs my hand, and pulls me behind him until we get to the station. Reece gives Casen an unreadable look as we enter the door, leaving the two of us alone.

“Stop moving so much,” I softly tell Casen, gently wiping the blood off his knuckles. The knuckles he hit the brick wall, just inside the station, with.

He releases a deep breath and lowers his head. I finish cleaning his hand up inside the large bathroom and kiss the top of it. “Thank you,” he says.

I nod, sliding off the sink, and deposit the Band-Aid wrappers into the trash can. Casen pulls me by my hips into him and then lifts my chin. Looking distraught he asks. “Embyr, did you sleep with him?”

My heart starts to crack. This is the last thing I thought he would ever find out and it’s probably the least heartbreaking thing I need to tell him. I tip my chin down, answering his question truthfully and he drops his hands.

“We’re you two dating?” he asks. “Wait! He’s married. How long did it go on?”

Tears prick the sides of my eyes, threatening to spill down my cheeks. “I don’t know how long. It just happened. I have no other reasons for doing it besides I wasn’t thinking.”

Casen’s head falls back and he looks at the ceiling. Searching it as though it may hold all the answers. “Did you know he was stealing?”

I wasn’t expected that question but I’m too exhausted from all the lies to lie anymore. “I did.”

He finally looks down, his eyes meeting mine. He doesn’t say anything, so I decide to give him another truth. “I was the one who brought it to the attention of the police.”

His scowl lightens with those words. I feel as though for a brief moment, Casen thought I was allowing it to happen under my nose. Even though I was, it was to make sure he was caught and all that money would eventually end up back in the arms of its owner.

“I feel sick, knowing he has touched you, baby,” he whispers. “That you let him do that, knowing he is married.”

I allow tears to fall down my cheeks. “I can’t explain why I did it, Casen. All I can say is that is in the past, and a lot has changed. I’ve changed over the last month. You have to forgive me,” I beg.

He nods a couple of times, seemingly coming to terms with the slap in the face he just received. “Okay.” He walks over and kisses me on the nose. “I don’t like that he has fucked you, but I’m glad you did the right thing, Embyr, and tomorrow, when I get home, I’m going to fuck you so fucking good, any past lovers—that asshole included—will be long forgotten.”

I wrap my arms around him. “You forgive me?”

He places his cheek on top of my head. “There is nothing to forgive. All that was before you met me. The past is in the past, right?”

Casen and I sit on the couch in the common room of the fire department, watching mindless television. I don’t want to leave just yet. The whole interaction with Patrick has shaken me. Soon, I’ll have to head back before he has to go wash the truck. I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I know, my eyes are slowly peeling open and my ears perk up to the whispers of Casen and Reece.

“You can’t just let that go, Casen,” Reece speaks soft but harshly.

Casen shifts underneath my head lying in his lap. “Back off about it, man. It’s not your concern.”

I hear Reece huff. “It is my concern. You’re my best friend.”

“No,” Casen tells him, dragging a hand across my neck. “I’m not a child. There is no reason for you to worry.”

A chair shifts across the floor and Reece’s voice gets closer but quieter. “What about what Ian said? What about how all

that shit happened to Patrick, Thad, and Evan. Now Wesley. We all need to be watching our back.”

“So, you think someone is out to get our group from high school?” Casen scoffs at the question.

“I don’t know, man,” Reece answers. “Seems that way.”

“That kind of thinking is insane,” Casen says. “It’s a coincidence. They all were doing shit they needed to get caught for, and if someone is coming to get all of us, I’m not doing anything that I should be ashamed of. You all were the assholes in high school, not me.”

“Then why did you get that tattoo?” Reece asks.

It’s quiet for a moment before Casen responds. “So it would remind me not to stand and watch something happen when I can do something about it, Reece. You know that.”

Reece’s voice comes from above us now, he must have stood up. “I’m just saying it’s weird is all, Casen. First those guys and now Ian can’t find Annie anywhere? You don’t think that is strange?”

I’m trying to control my breathing so I don’t bring attention to the fact that I’m awake and about to have a panic attack. I can feel my pulse quickening.

“I do,” Casen continues, while I take long breaths. “But, I’m not doing shitty things with my life now, and neither are you. There isn’t anything that I’m not happy to admit to anyone. Embyr included. He can look for Annie all he wants, but what I want is right here. I’m not scared of something that seems like a coincidence.”

I can’t manage the attack any longer. The guys continue to fight, but I don’t care. I start to whimper and jump straight up, releasing myself from Casen’s arms, and run to the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face. My fingers wrap around the edge of the sink and a soft knock at the door startles me.

“Come in.”

Casen walks in with a look of concern. “You okay, baby?”

I lower my chin to my chest. “Yes. I was having a nightmare,” I lie. How else am I going to explain that I’m freaked out over the walls caving in on my lies?

He pulls me away from the sink and into his chest, surrounding me with his comfort. My shoulders shake as I start to cry, but he doesn’t comment on the tears falling onto his shirt. After long minutes and I’ve calmed down a bit, Casen is called over his radio to the back of the station, so they can start washing the truck. He walks me out to the exit and thanks me for the surprise visit. I feel guilty, but I don’t focus on that for too long as his hands secure my jaw and his lips find mine. I’m lost in the feel of our mouths sealed together. Nothing else in the world matters as long as I have Casen by my side, and with that thought, everything crashes down on me again. I start to cry and he pulls back.

“Don’t cry, baby.” He kisses my cheek. “Everything is fine.”

My hands reach up, securing my fingers to his wrists. “I know. I know. I just feel that, at any moment, the ball could drop and all this will go away. I don’t want to lose you.”

Casen kisses my nose, tightening his grip on my jaw. “Embyr,” he starts and I look away because I can’t bear to stare directly in his eyes.

“Embyr, look at me,” he commands, and I do. I want to wipe the tears from my face but his thumbs beat me to it. “You’re not going to lose me. There is nothing you can say or do to make me not want to have you every day, do you understand?”

I look down again. He can’t possibly know that. I could tell him now. Tell him I’m Annie. Tell him I was the one who brought all the indiscretions to light for his high school buddies. Tell him I was going to make him fall for me and crush his heart. Tell him I felt the same way about him ten years ago. I could tell him. “You won’t lose me, Embyr. I’ve fallen so hard for you. I’ve never felt this way and I know for a fact that I am in love with you,” he admits, keeping me from releasing all of my lies and speaking the truth.

21
TWENTY
ONE
CASEM

By the time I get outside, the guys have the truck out and all the things needed for its bath. I'm still on a fucking high since telling Embyr I love her, but in the back of my mind I'm kind of fucked up in the head over her having sex with her married boss. Her married boss that I went to high school with. Her married boss whom I despise. Her married boss who is a criminal in more ways than the world knows.

Reece is emptying out the back of the truck to reorganize everything when I find him. He eyes me sideways but doesn't say anything. Our intense conversation is probably still floating around in that head of his. Ever since I've known him, Reece has been suspicious of everyone and everything. I can't disagree that it's odd all this shit went down with our high school friends around the same. I find it more of a coincidence than a conspiracy. Then, to bring up Annie's name along with it? That is out of line. That girl was the sweetest in high school. When Annie finally showed up on my radar, it was like I couldn't see anyone else. She was kind and had a great circle of friends. That tape ruined everything for her. No one will admit to who the culprit was but I have a pretty good idea.

"I heard what you said to her," Reece says, grabbing one of the sponges and starts cleaning the side of the truck.

I pick up one of the scrub brushes and start working on tires. "What did I say to her?"

"That you love her."

I stop, stand up, and straighten my back. Our eyes meet, but his look is unreadable. I don't know if he is happy for me or not. I'm guessing not. "And?" I ask, feeling my jaw tick.

“And,” he starts, “Don’t you think it’s too soon for that?”

I drop the brush into the bucket, setting my hands on my hips. “Maybe for someone like you,” I state.

He narrows his eyes at me. “What is that supposed to mean, Casen?”

I throw my hands up. “It means that you don’t know what that feels like.” When he doesn’t respond, I continue. “Love. It may seem like it’s too soon for you, but I’ve been in love before. I know what it feels like and, for some crazy reason, even after the short time I have been with Embyr, I know my feelings for her are strong.”

“Strong, yes,” he agrees. “But, love?”

I step up to him, feeling the throbbing in my hand from punching Patrick go from dull to painful with my rising blood pressure. I would never hit Reece. Not unless he gave me a reason to. “I am done talking to you about this ... about her. I didn’t even start this conversation. Leave my love life out of your mouth unless you are going to congratulate me on finding an amazing girl.”

He stares me down and then squeezes the trigger, spraying the truck again. We work side by side for the next hour and, by the time we’re done, our beautiful red engine shines. I smile. I take pride in my work, even if it’s to get all the shit off of our vehicle. We all head in to start getting ready for dinner. Even though the temperature has dropped over the past couple of days, that doesn’t deter us from grilling some chicken outside. We always try to eat healthy and the captain requires us to work out every day. Weights and cardio are a must. While the chicken grills, I stay inside and steam some vegetables and make a salad. Living in a fire house up to four days a week has made me a better cook. We all contribute to the food. It’s a system that seems to work for us.

I hear someone walk in but I don’t look up as I chop the cucumbers.

“I get it,” Reece’s voice echoes in the kitchen. I glance over and watch him grab paper plates and plastic ware. We may

have to cook our own food, but none of us want to do the dishes.

“Get what?”

He leans on the counter next to me, watching as I drop the vegetables into the salad bowl. “You are sticking up for Embyr.” He takes a deep breath and crosses his arms over his chest. “I have been thinking about it and, even though I’m not in love with Trinity, I wouldn’t want you putting your nose into how I do feel about her.”

I raise a brow at him. “And, how is that?”

“I’ve been living the college frat boy life for so long, I didn’t think I would ever want to change that up and be in a committed relationship. I like her. She gets me.”

“Even without the sex she’s holding off on?” I ask, knowing he has never been shy to talk about his sex life.

“That’s the thing. It’s me. I’m holding off.”

That catches me off guard. “Why?”

“It’s just,” he starts, scrubbing his hands down his face. “I don’t want to fuck it up. Every time I sleep with a girl, I lose interest. I like Trinity too much to let that happen.”

“So, what?” I ask, starting in on the tomato. “You’re going to be celibate your whole relationship?”

“There is no relationship,” he sternly tells me.

I raise both brows this time. “If you like this girl, Reece, you need to snag her. She’s hot, smart, and witty. Nothing like any of the one-night stands I’ve seen you take home.”

“Thanks,” he mumbles.

“It’s true, fucker. Stop worrying about losing interest. If you’ve been seeing her for the past couple of weeks and are going back for more, then I can guarantee, once you sleep with her, you’re going to be more interested than you already are.”

“Yeah.”

I jab him with my elbow. “Take the advice from a relationship guy. Make her yours and fuck her senseless.”

He smiles, the first time since I got here this morning. “Sure.” He pushes off the counter, snatching up a few cucumbers from the bowl. “We’ll see.”

I hear him walking away. “If you fuck her senseless, then she won’t know what a douche you are.”

He laughs, and I feel a piece of cucumber hit the back of my head.

It’s close to nine o’clock when we are done with dinner and clean up. Most of the guys are in the community room watching television when Ian walks in. He sees me first and immediately looks away.

Weird.

He finds Reece and motions for him to follow into the other room. My eyes are rooted to the doorway they just through. Fifteen minutes later, Reece walks back in without Ian. I throw a pillow his way after a full minute of not looking my way. “What was that about?” The pillow misses him, and he ignores my question.

“Reece, man!” I yell across the room. He looks at me, and I can tell whatever it is that Ian told him wasn’t good. “Do you want to tell me what that was about?”

He shrugs. “Nothing, man. He just invited me to play golf tomorrow.”

I let it go. I can tell he is lying but, if I know Reece at all, I know that eventually he is going to tell me.

I’m sound asleep when the alarm sounds. The noise is so loud, it blocks out everything else. When I first started out, I fumbled around a lot to get ready and downstairs to the engine. Now, I’m a seasoned pro and can be ready before the alarm is done. I’m one of the first ones to the truck with Reece right behind me. We slip on our gear and hold tight as Troy,

our driver, takes off. Sirens blaring, we barrel down the narrow Chicago streets to a car accident.

Being so late at night, there isn't much traffic, so we make it to our call in record time. The EMTs in the ambulance jump out at the same time we do, finding an SUV lit on fire as its front end is embedded in the side of a minivan. We rush to hook up the hose and go to work. As I try to do with every call, I block out the images and try to do my job.

22 TWENTY TWO

I didn't get any sleep last night. I tossed and turned in Casen's bed while he worked his shift, fluctuating between being nervous that I am going to have to tell him soon and elated that he is in love with me. I didn't say it back. He told me not to, but I know I'm falling hard for him and, after I come clean about everything, whenever I get the courage, I am going to tell him how I feel.

I can hear the front door open and Casen immediately turns the alarm off so it doesn't wake me at just past seven o'clock in the morning. It wouldn't matter. I am wide awake. Deciding it's better if I just wait for him to crawl into bed with me, I listen as he moves through the house, making minimal noises. Fifteen minutes after he arrives home, the door to his bedroom drags across the carpet and I can already feel my senses on overdrive. He walks over, kissing me on the cheek as I face away from him, and continues on into the bathroom to take a shower. Tingling starts to develop between my legs. He told me he loves me and despite my sleepless night, all I want to do is have him make good on his promise to fuck all past lovers out of my system. I wait a minute, hearing the sound of the shower turn on, and get up. When I open the bathroom door, steam escapes and I quickly shut it behind me. My arms cross over, grabbing the hem of my shirt and lifting it over my head. My breasts ache with need as I drag my panties down my legs and step toward the shower.

I peek in, finding Casen lathering up his chest, his eyes closed. "Can I join you?" I speak up.

He opens his eyes. His green irises shine beneath the lust they now hold, and a smile brightens his tired face. "Always,"

he tells me, setting the soap down and reaching a hand for me to join him. I step in, trying not to slip until I meet him on the bath mat and Casen wraps his arms around my waist, bringing my stomach against his ever growing erection. I reach down, taking it between my hands and pump gently as the water cascades between our bodies. "I missed you," he murmurs just before he licks my lips and slips his tongue between them.

I moan, allowing myself to forget the past couple of days and be lost in all things Casen Parker. There is a possibility that this will end soon and I want to cease every moment until it does, starting with some shower action.

"I missed you, too," I say when we come up for air and watch his eyes as I lower myself onto my knees.

Pure lust has taken over and Casen grabs my, now drenched, hair and leads my mouth to wrap around his dick. He controls all of the movement, slowly thrusting in and out, my tongue dragging along the underside. I watch his head fall back, and his muscles strain with resistance. I push against his hand, his cock falling out of my mouth, and I tell him, "Don't hold back. Fuck my mouth, Casen."

He groans, tightening his grip on my hair and leaning forward to place his other arm on the back of the shower. I lift a hand to the root of his cock and prepare for the assault. He begins to quicken his movements and within a minute, he is fucking my mouth. With my hand as a barrier from chocking on his massive flesh, I still feel him hit the back of my throat.

He growls. "I'm going to come in that pretty mouth of yours."

My other hand grabs the back of his thigh, egging him on, pushing him until I can feel him swell against my tongue and my teeth. Then, a hot spurt of come hits the back of my throat and I have to take a breath before I swallow it all down. His pumps continue until he is fully satisfied.

Before I can stand up, the water is shut off and the shower curtain is whipped open. Casen leads me over to sink and turns me to face the fogged up mirror. He uses his hand to clear a spot on the mirror, so I can see him and then pushes his semi-

hard cock into me, nestling it between my ass cheeks. My hands are braced on the counter and his are holding tight onto my hips, rubbing himself up and down between my ass cheeks. One hand escapes and he slides it in toward my pussy, gently rolling my clit underneath his pointer finger. It's so sensitive that I buck back against him, earning myself another groan from Casen.

"That feels so good," I tell him, pushing myself into his fingers for more friction, but he doesn't allow it.

"I'm in charge, Embyr," he growls into my ear. "I told you that I was going to fuck every single memory of any asshole that ever fucked this sweet," he pinches my clit, "tight," he dives his fingers inside me. "Pussy."

I can only whimper as he holds my hips tightly to keep me from moving and gently caresses the inside of me with his long callused fingers. His leg spreads mine apart and I am at the complete mercy of Casen Parker. Right where I want to fucking be. He adds another finger in my pussy and dives deeper, going knuckle deep. I buck as his thumb pushes down on my clit.

Holy shit.

My head falls forward. I can't take how intense this feels. He lets go of my hip and reaches up to grab my tit, pinching the shit out of my nipple. I scream in pleased pain.

"Your pussy is tightening around my fingers, Em. Should I add a third?" he asks, but doesn't wait for the answer. Now with three fingers inside me, all I can do is ride his hand. I can feel him hardening between my ass cheeks and he thrusts between them. "I'm getting hard again, Embyr. I may just have to fuck this ass."

I tense up and he feels it. "No?" he asks, pulling his fingers out. "Then I'll just dip my dick in that sweet, dripping pussy of yours."

He pushes me down between my shoulders, my tits touching the sink, my face lying on its side on the acrylic. I

feel Casen line himself up at my entrance and at a painful pace slip inside me.

His palm is on the middle of my back and the other is wrapped, once again, around my hips. His rhythm is slow. Torturous. I can feel each and every ridge his glorious cock has. Every thrust brings me to a higher pleasure. I reach back, grabbing his hips, and urge him to go faster, but it has the opposite effect. Casen pulls back and out of me. I'm feeling the void until he lifts my upper body, wraps an arm around my chest and shoves three fingers back into me.

"You're kind of greedy, Embyr," he whispers in my ear before biting the lobe. "You want me to fuck you?"

I nod as he walks me out of the bathroom, his fingers still deep inside me until we reach the bed. Releasing the vice on me, he turns me around and pushes on my shoulders to lie down before he kneels and places one of my legs on each shoulder.

"It's glistening, baby," he says, viewing my pussy on display. "I'm going to lick up every last drop."

He leans in, his tongue darting out and shoving its way inside me. I'm so turned on; I almost come on the spot. I fall back onto the bed and allow Casen to do as he promised. His tongue reaches every crevice before taking my clit between his teeth. My body bows off the bed and I grab the back of his head and push my pussy into his face. His muffled "Yes!" vibrates through me and he shakes his head side to side, teasing me. I sit up on one elbow, my free hand still rubbing his head into me and I grind on him until I feel all three fingers re-enter me while he sucks on my clit. I'm gone. I'm fucking off like a rocket, screaming louder than I have every screamed before.

"Casen! Fuck! Casen!" I yell. "Holy shit." I ride the orgasm out and watch him pull back and look at my pussy. He leans in, licking from bottom to top with his eyes on me. A devious smile appears before he stands both of us up.

Reaching into his nightstand he pulls a condom out of the drawer, effortlessly opening it and gliding it over himself. He

sits on the bed, sliding back a few feet and stroking his cock. “Get up here and ride me.”

I don’t hesitate. My knees lean on the bed and I straddle his legs as I make my way up. I hover over him, pushing down slightly so just the tip is inside. It feels fucking glorious.

Casen reaches around and slaps me on the ass—hard. “Get on my cock or I’ll put it in your ass, Embyr.”

I bite my lip and sink down onto him just as slowly as he sank into me in the bathroom.

“I love your pussy, Embyr,” he says, his breath blowing across my collar bone. Both of his hands reach behind me, grabbing both ass cheeks. “Now, fuck me hard.”

I didn’t think it was possible to get any wetter but with those words I am launched into a fucking machine. Pounding down on him, breathless noises escaping from both of us. Casen’s teeth bits one nipple and then the other before pulling back and releasing it.

“Fuck.”

I can feel Casen swelling again inside me, and the threat of another orgasm appears. It’s just out of reach and when I finally think I’m going to go over the edge, Casen flips me over onto my back and puts one leg on each shoulder while holding me by my thighs against his chest. He hammers into me and his fingers dig into my legs. I can’t reach anything. I can’t touch Casen. I can only grab a hold of the sheets beneath me while I’m consumed with my second orgasm. As I come down from my high, Casen drops my legs and leans in close, taking my lip between his teeth. His hips are still driving his cock into me but he starts to kiss me so passionately that I feel like we’ve switched from fucking to making love. His pace slows and he rises up to look into my eyes, saying nothing, just staring at me.

I watch him, his beautiful face, as he starts to climax once again and as he swells with his release, another unexpected orgasm takes over me. It’s long, and amazing, and when we

are both finished he pushes my damp hair off of my forehead. "I meant it. I'm in love with you," he breathes.

I smile back, and drunk off my euphoric state I tell him, "I love you, too, Casen."

After each of us takes an uninterrupted, innocent shower, we change the wet sheets on the bed and crawl underneath the freshly washed covers. Even though we have been together for the past hour and a half, I am just now noticing that Casen looks sullen.

"Are you ok?" I ask, rubbing circles in his bare chest as I lie on his arm.

He inhales a deep breath before quickly releasing it. "It was a bad night," he voices, rubbing my shoulder up and down.

I look up at him. "You can tell me. Isn't that what I'm here for?"

He licks his dry lips and nods. "Yeah."

I give him a minute to compose himself. Whatever is bothering him must be bad, and then I freeze. What if he is going to bring up what Reece said to him?

"We had a call last night to an accident," he begins and I breathe a sigh of relief. "An SUV hit a minivan and the SUV caught on fire. We were able to get everyone out of the minivan but the SUV had three people. A mom, a dad, and a seventeen-year-old girl."

My eyes begin to burn. "Did you get them out?" I ask, knowing that maybe they didn't.

"We got them all out, but the mother and father didn't survive," he chokes up on the last word and my heart instantly breaks for him.

I hold him tighter. "I'm so sorry, Casen."

I feel his body shake from side to side. "No. Don't feel bad for me. Feel bad for that girl. She has no parents now."

My eyes shut, trapping the tears. That was me, ten years ago; left alone in a cruel world with no one. I hope that girl has aunts, uncles, or grandparents to take care of her. God knows I didn't. If I did, then maybe I wouldn't have set out to do things that I am not so proud of.

"I know. That had to be hard seeing that," I emphasize. "I can't even imagine the horrible things you've witnessed."

"It stays with you," he admits, turning both of us on our side so my back is to his front. "There are some things that we see that don't affect us and then there are other instances, like today, that stay with you for the rest of your life. Seeing the look on the girl's face when she saw her parents lying on the street like that? It just stays with you."

That's the last thing I heard Casen say before we both slipped into a deep sleep. A few hours later, I wake from a nightmare and have a hard time falling back asleep. I crawl from beneath Casen and grab my phone off of the nightstand, quietly leaving the room. Checking my email, I almost squeal at one asking to come in for a second interview from the famous hotel down the street from my place.

My condo. The one I got a call about today, letting me know I can return to. The one that doesn't hold Casen? The one where someone tried to light my hallway on fire? I'm not sure I can ever go back there. I don't feel safe. I may need to find a new condo.

I lean back into the couch, shooting off a text to Trinity about the interview and seeing if she wants to escape yet to a new place with me. As I go to set it down on the cushion next to me, it vibrates with an incoming text. I expect it to be Trinity. It isn't.

Unknown: Embyr. This is Reece. We need to talk. Alone.

22 TWENTY THREE

I left Casen a note on his nightstand this morning, letting him know I had to get some things taken care of at my apartment. I didn't want to wake him. After the shitty day at work, I knew he had to be tired. I never responded to Reece's text. I don't trust him, so why the hell would I want to be alone with him?

My nerves are off the charts. I feel like it may be time to go back to the doctor and have them prescribe me some Xanax. I've been feeling more and more anxious lately; it's as though I am constantly on the verge of a panic attack. I guess that's what happens when you have a lot to lose. I never had anything I was concerned about until I became friends with Trinity and Casen weaseled his way into my heart, tearing my plans to shreds. I don't regret anything for a moment, but I can't help feeling like the walls are about to come crashing down.

I get home and make the phone call to schedule a second interview. The Administrative Assistant said I was the only call back so far; she thinks I am a shoo-in. She told me they loved my ideas and were looking forward to introducing me to the bigger bosses upstairs. That news brightened my day up, and I had long forgotten about Reece's text.

I had just finished cleaning up all the dust left from my apartment, being vacant for the past few days, when I get a text from Casen.

Casen: Want to meet up for drinks tonight? And then stay over again. I hated not waking up next to you.

Me: Drinks sound good and, if you're lucky, you might get lucky ;) and I'm sorry. I had to get things taken care of at my

condo.

Casen: I was lucky to find you, but it's all skill that gets you in my bed, Embyr. Bring an overnight bag. I saw you took yours.

Me: So sure of yourself. What time tonight?

Casen: Five. Reece and Trinity are joining us.

Fuck.

I glance around Jedi's bar, once I've arrived, attempting to spot Casen, Reece, and Trinity. I'm on edge and not thinking clearly. I almost left my house with two different shoes and without my keys. I don't want to see Reece after not responding to his text, and this nagging feeling has settled deep into the pit of my stomach.

The large space is cramped with wall to wall people, making it difficult to see anyone through the chaos. I pull out my phone from my bag and start to dial Casen's number when his hands circle around my waist from behind. His lips find the small space behind my ear. "Hey, baby."

I turn around in his embrace and connect my lips with his. He tastes of beer and peanuts and, by the aggressiveness in his kiss, I sense he's in between drunk and tipsy.

"Hey." I smile. "I couldn't find you guys."

He points a thumb behind him. "We were right behind you." He laughs and pulls me by my waist into the booth across from Reece.

Trinity must not have arrived, yet. I offered to pick her up but she said she would meet me here. Reece doesn't look up right away as he seems to be in deep thought. His arms are resting on the table and his fingers have a hard hold around his beverage; the condensation, from the glass, dripping down the backside of his hand.

"Hey, Reece," I greet him, nervously, and he flicks his gaze to mine, shocked, like he didn't realized I had joined them. His brown hair is shorter than the last time I saw him. It's shaved

almost to the scalp and his green eyes give me a hard and cold stare.

“Embyr,” he comments dragging his beer to his lips and taking a long swig. The look he gives me is vile as though he despises me just for my mere presence. Casen seems oblivious to it all.

Panic rises within me like lightening and I jump up, hoping to make it into the bathroom or, at least, away from the table before I lose it in front of them. I don't have a good feeling. In fact, I have a terrible fucking feeling. Anger starts to bubble up and it's causing anarchy with my nerves. “I need to use the bathroom,” I inform them, pissed that I even bothered to come here after that text. Especially now with Reece acting like a dick. I throw the strap of my bag over my shoulder and head to the back of the bar and into the bathroom to catch my breath.

It takes a few minutes but after a couple of cold water splashes to my face, I finally feel the resolve I need to face Reece and his shitty attitude. I'm in the hallway when I hear deep footsteps headed my way. I look up, finding Reece staring at me. “Why didn't you call me?” He sways and his shoulder hits the wall. He's drunk. I can see the glassiness of his eyes. “Hell, even text me back?”

“Don't you think it's inappropriate to communicate with your best friend's girlfriend?”

“Oh yes,” he agrees. His green eyes, narrowing at me. “Inappropriate. Fucked up. Wrong. But then, you would know a lot about that, wouldn't you, Annie?”

My heart stops beating. My lungs can't fill with enough air, and I feel light headed. All of my instincts that said today was going to be terrible were right. I'm fucking done for, so I do the only thing I can to save myself. The only thing I've been doing for the past decade. I lie.

“My name isn't Annie. Are you that drunk?” I roll my eyes and attempt to walk past him, but he sticks his hand out, grabbing my upper arm. I try to tug away from him, but his grip is too strong. “Let me go.”

He doesn't relent. He just lowers his head so we are eye to eye. I want to be strong as steel but I'm fucking petrified right now. "Listen, Embyr, or Annie, or whoever the fuck you want to be today. I may have had a few drinks but don't think for one moment I don't see it now. You know Casen has been looking for you." He laughs sarcastically. "Yeah, Ian did some digging and finally found you. Your little trail went cold after college, but Ian is good at his job. He never gave up. He felt like after what he did to you, he owed Casen, at least, this. Then, he finds out you've been hanging around us all along. He came to the station last night and told me to talk to you before he sends Casen the information."

I finally snap, jerking my arm out from his grasp. "You all ruined my life!" I yell, giving him confirmation that Annie and I are one in the same. The first person I've ever admitted it to.

"Fuck!" he roars, hitting the wall beside him. "Are you kidding me? What is all this, Embyr? What's your end game?"

Tears start to build in my eyes. Reece's angry face starts to morph into sympathy. "Don't look at me like that, Reece. I didn't expect to fall in love with him."

"Did you know who he was when you met him?" he asks, his voice much lower than before.

I sniffle, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. "Yes."

"What were you doing? Was everything that happened with the PITCREW guys you're doing?" He shakes his head.

"I'm not going to even give a response to that," I deflect. I love Casen. I can stand to tell him who I am, but I can't let him know how devious I was being.

We stand there in the hallway, a minute passing by. Neither of us taking our eyes off one another. Neither of us speaking.

"You better tell him," Reece says, breaking the silence first. My stomach begins to revolt with a flash of how I imagine Casen's face to look when I tell him. He'll forgive me. I know he will. "Because I don't want to crush him. He loved Annie. He loves you. This is going to crush him, Embyr." His head lowers and his shoulders slump. He's hurting for his best

friend, and it breaks my heart. He starts to walk away and then turns to me. “Ian said he was mailing Casen everything today. He didn’t want to see his face when he saw what he had found. I assume he will get it in two days. You have two days, Embyr.”

Before he hits the end of the hallway I call out his name. He turns around, his face morose. “Yeah.”

“Who released that tape, Reece?”

For the first time ever, I watch Reece Craig begin to shed a tear. Moisture collects in the corner of his eyes. “I did. I ruined your life, Embyr. I started that stupid bet and I foolishly left it on my computer. We held it over your head for months and I swear I was going to delete it. You have to believe me when I say I didn’t mean to release it.”

I can’t hold back my tears. “Then, how the hell did it get out?”

He shakes his head slowly and shrugs. “I attached the wrong video. I was supposed to be our group project video and by the time I realized what I had done, it was all over the school.”

An accident?

I stalk over, tears streaming down my face. “Fuck you, Reece. You shouldn’t have ever made that bet and you sure as hell should have never kept that video. You all took my innocence away.”

“I’m so sorry,” he cries. “There is nothing else I can tell you.”

“I’m going to tell Casen tomorrow. Everything,” I whisper, brushing past him.

I wipe my tears on my sleeve and stand at the table, finding that Trinity has arrived. “You ok, Em?” she asks and Casen’s eyes are filled with concern. I probably look terrible after the roller coaster of emotions I just experienced.

“I’m fine. I just don’t feel well. I’m going to go home.” I turn around and rush towards the door.

Casen catches my arm before I hit the door. “Baby, what’s going on? Did Reece say something to you?”

“No.” I wipe another tear. “I’m fine. Just emotional, but you need to stay here. Please.”

He relents, letting me go. “Okay. Do you want me to call you tomorrow?”

I nod and he kisses me on the cheek goodbye.

By the time I finally make it home, it’s close to seven o’clock. I attempt to eat some soup to calm my rolling stomach, and crawl naked into bed. The day replays over and over in my head, and I dread tomorrow. I text Casen, knowing that I want just one more night with him before all of it comes crashing down.

Me: Come to my place when you’re done. You can use the key I gave you.

Casen: I won’t be long.

I see a missed text from Trinity and answer her, as well.

Trinity: I’m worried about you, Em.

Me: Lunch tomorrow? I need a friend.

Trinity: Sure.

If I am going to come clean to Casen, then I am going to need all the support I can. Tomorrow, I will have lunch with Trinity and tell her everything and hope she can look past my lies. I’m going to need her support. I consider her my best friend. Though, I might not have anyone left soon. Just like ten years ago.

I must have fallen asleep because long and hard fingers, between my legs, wake me up, bringing my body alive. I moan, pushing my pussy against them, reaching for the orgasm that is on the brink of taking over my body.

His hands pull away. “Turn over, Embyr.” Casen says with authority and my body hums with excitement, long lost are the thoughts of this possibly being over soon. His touch makes me

forget about anything else. I fall to my back as he crawls on top of me, slipping right in. “Always fucking wet for me, aren’t you?” he asks, pulling my legs into his arms as he starts slowly thrusting into me. “You feel better now?”

“Yes,” I caress his torso, enjoying the ripple of his abs as his muscles contract with every thrust. His eyes look to where we are connected, something he does every time we screw, and he licks his lips at the sight.

“I can see your juices coating my cock, baby,” he groans. “So fucking hot.” Casen’s dirty talk sets me over the edge.

“Oh God!” I whimper. He spreads my legs wider in his arms and leaves the slow, sensual pace behind for a punishing one. My pussy is getting a beating and I fucking love it.

“Look at those tits bounce, Embyr. I want to come all over them.”

That’s it. The vision of him taking himself out of me and letting himself go on my breasts is all it takes for an orgasm to rip through me. “Fuck, Casen!” I scream, grabbing onto the back of my thighs and ride out the shockwaves.

His neck strains as he pumps into my body a few more times before he does, in fact, pull out and shoot his come all over my breasts. Casen’s hand glides up and down, milking the last of it out of his cock. “That’s fucking beautiful,” he utters, looking at my breasts.

I release the hold on my legs and Casen crawls off the bed. Moments later he is cleaning me up with a warm wash cloth. “Nice way to wake up,” I comment just as he finishes.

The bed dips next to me before he pulls my back against his front. “I’ll wake you up like that for the rest of your life, if you let me.”

His lips find my neck and shivers run up my spine, but not from the attention he is giving me. It’s from his words. I don’t know if he going to want me anymore after tomorrow.

“Do you want to talk about what happened tonight?” he asks, rubbing circles along my side.

I shake my head. “No.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

I nod, turning my head and kissing his waiting lips.
“Tomorrow,” I respond and try not to throw up with dread.

20 TWENTY FOUR

I'm back at Lake Arlington. Back to the place this entire mess started. The day is much warmer than yesterday and the sky is clear of any clouds. Since it's a weekday, the park is void of children, and with the rise in temperature, there are dozens of people using the, over two mile, track to walk, run, skate, or bike. I remember taking late night walks with friends my freshman year. Living like nothing could hurt me. Jesus, was I wrong. Now, here I am, over ten years later, looking at the world through different eyes.

As I sit here, waiting on Trinity to join me before she has to go to work, I try to work out how I am going to tell Casen. Do I tell him the truth? Should I tell him that I went into this looking to crush him and that I never thought I would fall so hopelessly for him? Or do I lie and say I didn't realize until he told me his name? I want to go with the second but you don't have to remember anything if it's the truth. If I want things to go anywhere with Casen, then I need to be one hundred percent honest. Tell him everything from the start and pray to God he forgives me.

"Are we walking today or do you want to just sit here and talk?" Trinity sneaks up on me and I startle. "Nervous much?" She laughs.

I shake my head and stand up, motioning towards the trail. "You have no idea."

"What happened last night, Em?" she speaks up just as we get about a quarter of the way around. "You left and Reece came back to the table like someone kicked his dog. He could barely look at the two of us. You guys didn't..." she trails off, leaving it up to the imagination.

“We didn’t what?” I ask, brows furrowed.

“Like kiss or anything?”

I stop mid-step and turn towards her, ignoring the fact that we are standing next to my childhood home. “No, Trin. I would never do that to you.”

She blows out a breath of air and pulls me in for a hug. “Thank God. I really didn’t want to have to cut your throat.”

I laugh as pull away. “I’d hate if you did that.”

Her hand raises and she caresses my back in comfort. “So, what then? Tell me what happened?”

I swallow down the bile rising in my throat and begin. “This is going to be a long story.”

“I’m in. Tell me.”

“See that house?” I ask, pointing to the place I grew up.

She looks over, smiling and nods. “Yes.”

“That’s my parents’ home. I was raised there from preschool to senior year.”

“It’s a beautiful house,” she compliments. “But, what does it have to do with you and what happen last night?”

I take a deep, strong breath and dive straight in. “I grew up with Reece and Casen. And that guy Ian we met the one night. All of us. We all went to high school together.”

“Really?” she asks. “That’s crazy. You all never mentioned you knew one another.”

“That’s why I’m telling you all of this. I need to tell you this story before someone else does.”

Her brows furrow in confusion and concern. “Ok. Tell me, Em.”

“They were friends with a few other guys. *Really* popular guys. There were seven of them and Casen had told them all that he liked me. They treated it like a joke, staying that I would go out with one of them before I would go out with him. So, Reece started a bet to see who could get me to go out

with them. Just a ‘friendly wager’ among them. Nothing serious.”

Her face is void, as though she is trying to process the information.

“Well, Ian won,” I say with mock happiness. “I had liked Casen, too, and was trying to make him jealous by going out with Ian. But, the night of our date, it went too far and he persuaded me to give him my virginity.”

“Em,” she interrupts from beside me as we continue our walk. “I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t tell you.” I shake my head, trying to recall the memory. “And, what I didn’t know back then, is that a security camera in Reece’s garage caught Ian and I having sex.”

Trinity gasps. “Oh, God.”

“They held that tape over my head, Trin. A few of the guys used it to get me to do their homework, pay for their lunches, just stupid childish things. Tripped me in the hallway. Made sexual comments and advances toward me. Spread rumors about me that turned everyone against me. Things that never left me. Casen and a few others in the group never took part in the bullying, but they stood by and watched it happen.”

“Why are you with him, then?” she asks, sounding horrified.

“I’ll get to that. Well, my senior year, someone released the video. I found out last night that it was Reece. He released it, but said it wasn’t intentional.”

“Reece?” she asks, like she is just now realizing this isn’t just a story about me, but one about her current guy.

I turn to her. “I’m not telling you this so you can think badly about him. I just need for someone else to know the whole story. That tape?—it ruined me. My parents saw it, my friends saw it, and everyone shunned me. No one would talk to me or even look my way. Even though my dad was a cop, the police wouldn’t do anything. It was a nightmare.”

She turns to me, gripping both upper arms in her hands. “Embyr, that is horrifying.”

I can’t hold back my tears any longer. “It was. I was so alone. Then, my parents died. My mom committed suicide,” I choke out. “My dad died a few months later on the job. It made me cold and bitter, Trinity. So bitter.”

She engulfs me in a hug. “Honey, that would make the toughest man break.”

“I survived, though,” I tell her, sliding my arm through hers. “But, it set me off at freight train speed towards redemption.”

She pulls me over to a bench along the paved trail and we sit down. Her hands clasp mine in her lap, her beautiful blue eyes searching for answers. “What do you mean?”

“I went to college. Changed my name. Changed my appearance by losing some weight and getting colored contacts. Dyed my hair.” I twirl a strand of it between my fingers.

“Embyr isn’t your name?”

I look at her. She’s my best friend and I’ve lied to her. I know she’s going to be hurt by the rest of the story. “No. It’s Annie. Annie Barnes. I mean, I’m officially now Embyr, but I used to be Annie.”

She takes a deep breath and shakes her head. “I just don’t understand. If they did that to you, and you went through all of those changes, why are you hanging around all of them now?” She shrugs in confusion.

“This is the hard part. Where I tell you the rest of my story and pray that you still want to be my friend.”

“Oh, Embyr. I will always want to be your friend.”

I look out at the water. It glistens with the beating sun but I feel as though I’m in a world of darkness. “Over the past five years or more, I have been trying to plot a way to get revenge on them for taking everything from me. The pride of my parents. My friendships. Do you remember Patrick, my old

boss?" She nods. "He was one of them. I helped to make sure clients noticed Patrick was taking their money. He was taking it; I just helped them figure it out quicker. Another classmate, I was blackmailing him for sleeping with a student. That's why I had all that extra money."

Trinity starts to pull back a little, still keeping our hands intertwined, but I can sense a slight shift.

"I was trying to make their lives miserable like they made mine. My intention with Casen was to break his heart. Make him fall for me and then leave him in the cold, but things changed." I start to sob. "I fell in love with him and now I have to tell him what I've done."

"You already knew who he was when we met him at the bar?" she quietly asks.

I shake my head. "Yes. I knew."

"And, Reece?"

I swallow the lump forming in my throat. "I knew who Reece was, too."

I let that set in for a moment. Waiting for her to process it all. "So, Reece started the bet and released the tape of you having sex with his friend?" she asks in disbelief.

"I found out last night it was an accident. He didn't mean to release it."

She side eyes me. "So, Reece knows who you are?"

"He does now. Ian is a private investigator and Casen had him looking for Annie. I don't know why but, when Ian found out who I really was, he talked to Reece. He told Reece that I better tell Casen before he gets all of the information, tomorrow, in the mail."

"Is that what last night was about?" She seems almost relieved that she now knows the answer. "Why the two of you acted so weird?"

"Reece confronted me. Told me about Ian's findings and he apologized." I smile, happy to have received the first apology

since it all happened. I look to Trinity who has her head down. “I thought long and hard on it last night, and I forgive him.”

“Thank you for telling me, Em.” She wraps her arms around my shoulders and brings me in for a side hug. “Do you want me to come with you to tell Casen?”

I shake my head no. “I have to do this myself. I know what they did was wrong, but I wasn’t in the right, either. I have to face up to my misdoings.”

“I’m here, if you need me.”

I sniffle. “I just want to make sure you don’t hate me.”

“Em, I couldn’t hate you. You’re a woman scorned. I told you it would break down a tough man. What you went through was horrific, but I do believe you have to make this right.”

I agree. “I know. I’m going to, tonight.”

Trinity and I eat lunch before she has to leave for work. I’m barely touching my food. We talk more in depth about my life in and after high school and I tell her about Thad and Evan. She doesn’t look at me like I’m a terrible person, and I need that. I need someone to be there for me should I lose Casen. Lose it all.

“Can I ask you something?”

She hums a yes.

“Does what I told to you change the way you feel about Reece?”

She sighs, taking a big sip of her tea. “I’m a big believer that the past is in the past. Do you truly believe that Reece is sorry for what he did and forgive him?”

“I do now. I wasn’t so sure until last night. I know he’s torn up that Casen is going to be hurt but he looked remorseful. I believed him when he said he was sorry.”

“Then, I think this won’t affect my decision to date him or not. I like him but if you want me to drop him, I’ll do it in a heartbeat.”

I laugh. The first laugh in almost twenty-four hours.
“Thank you, but it’s not necessary.”

She grins at me. “You’re welcome. You know I love you, right?”

I smile back at her. “So much you would move back in with me to a new place?”

“As soon as my sister gets back on her feet, I’m all yours again. Unless you move in with Casen.” She wiggles her brows but it doesn’t make me feel any better. She notices. “Oh, Em. I’m sorry. He’ll forgive you. He has to.”

“I hope so.”

“If he loves you as much as he says he does, then he will listen and he will let it go. Just be honest with everything you tell him.”

We leave the restaurant. She goes to work and I’m headed back to the city.

The traffic is terrible, due to an accident, and I don’t get back until after four o’clock.

I decide to go for a run to release some of the anxiety I have over what I am going to do today. After a long hot shower I pull out my phone. My fingers tremble as I type.

Me: Can I come over?

Casen: Can you give me an hour. I’ve been out most of the day and I have to pick up my laundry from the station; I forgot yesterday.

Me: Sure. See you soon.

Casen: I love you.

Me: Me too.

I can’t bring myself to say the words back. Not until he knows the full truth. Reece is right. This could break him as much as they broke me. Why could I ever think that doing this would make me feel good? That the evil I was doing in their lives could make my life better?

If I'm honest with myself, while I was doing it, it did feel good for them to get what I believed was coming to them. But, like Reece, I don't know if they have changed. I never gave them the opportunity to tell me if they regret it like both Reece and Casen do. I could have walked into their jobs, demanded to get an explanation and the worst they could have done to me was kick me out. How different would today be if, when I saw Casen at the bar, I reminded him of who I was, and went on with my life. You grow up hearing that two wrongs don't make a right; I should have listened. I no longer feel good about anything that I have done.

I pull up to Casen's building and shut the car off, taking a few moments to compose myself before I get out. The elevator ride to his floor seems torturous, and I use the mirror to take a good look at myself. I barely put any make up on, so the dark circles under my eyes are prominent. My lips look chapped and my damp hair sits just on top of my head. I didn't want to wear a skirt or dress, so Casen doesn't immediately start to ravish me before I can get a word out. My jeans are snug over my legs, flip flops in place, and a modest purple top. I don't usually dress myself down when I go anywhere, but I want Casen to focus on what I have to say and not what I am wearing.

The elevator chimes, alerting me that I have arrived at his floor and I slowly exit into the hallway. My feet feel as though I am wearing concrete shoes. Each step is heavy and it seems my stomach feels the same. Dread consumes me, and I feel as though I am swallowing large lumps in my throat. I'm more than nervous. I'm anxious, panicked, and uneasy. I try to tell myself that the worst that can happen is that Casen tells me he never wants to see me again, and then I feel nauseous because the worst that could happen is that Casen never wants to see me again. I'll be devastated.

I get to his door and, after a deep breath, I knock.

25 TWENTY FIVE

I knock three times, waiting for Casen to open the door. I left the key the day I returned to my apartment and even so I'm not sure I could just walk in. I almost text him to see if he had made it home, yet. When the door swings open, my nerves go into overdrive. He looks amazing. He has pajama bottoms on, no shirt so his rippled abs are on display, and his hair is damp from, what I assume, is the shower he just got out of. He doesn't say a word as he lets me in and kisses me on the cheek. I'm greeted with the aroma of tomato sauce filling the air.

"It smells amazing. Are you cooking?" I ask, looking over to the kitchen.

He comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. "I am. Are you hungry?"

My stomach growls but I'm not sure I can eat anything right now. I fill my lungs with air and slowly breathe out. If I'm going to do this I can't have a panic attack. I need take this one minute at a time. "I could be. Do you need help?"

He lets go, walking toward the kitchen, and throws some noodles in the pot of boiling water. "I'm making spaghetti for us. You can mix all the stuff into the salad, if you want."

I join him in the kitchen and get to work on the salad. He has already chopped up the vegetables, so my job only takes a few minutes. I carry the bowl over to the table where Casen has lit two tall candles. I smile at how romantic he can be one minute and how wild he can be in another. He'd hold the door open for me and then push me against it and fuck me senseless.

I feel his lips brush against my neck before he sets a couple of plates down and then walks back to the stove, mixing the noodles. I watch him gracefully move around the kitchen, taking a colander out and placing it in the sink. The noodles are in a roaring boil and the sauce is simmering nicely, so Casen comes over and gives me a proper kiss. He takes my lips between his teeth and pulls.

“I’ve missed you all day, baby.”

I circle my arms around his waist and lay my head on his bare chest. “I’ve missed you, too.”

I don’t let go when he releases me and I try to hold back the tears. I have to tell him, but he’s cooked such a nice dinner that I want to wait until after. At least, help him clean up before I unleash the shit storm of lies I have told. At least, that is how I am convincing myself to not tell him just yet.

Grabbing my shoulders, he holds me away from his body. “Are you ok?”

I shake my head no. “I’m not, but we can talk about it later.”

His eyebrows scrunch together. “Are you sure?”

A hissing sound comes from the stove and we both look to find the water boiling over onto the hot surface. Casen releases me and runs over, pulling the pot up and placing it on a cool burner. I help him clean up and after he puts a shirt on we settle into our meal.

“How was your day?” he asks in-between bites.

I swallow my sip of wine. “It was okay. I met Trinity for lunch before she went to work.”

He chuckles.

“What?” I ask.

“Your friend must have super powers, Embyr.”

I eye him confused.

Another laugh. “I’ve never seen Reece smitten with anyone before. He’s got it bad for her.”

“Smitten? How old are you, fifty?” I joke with him.

“You think I’m joking. I have never seen Reece out with the same girl twice and now he is talking about a relationship with her.”

I stop mid-bite. Relationship? “Trinity didn’t tell me they were dating.”

“They aren’t but Reece told me this morning that he is going to try to make it official in the next few days. Said it depended on how today went.”

I freeze. “How today went?”

“Yeah. He said she may find out some things about him she may not like today. Hell, I find things I don’t like about him every day.”

Reece knows I would probably tell Trinity and that she may not want to see him afterward. “I’m sure he has nothing to worry about,” I tell him, taking my last bite. “I know Trinity has strong feelings for him. What did you do today?” I ask, trying to take the subject off of Reece.

His fork drops to his plate. “Nothing much. I tried to get a hold of Ian. He called me last night while I was balls deep inside you, but didn’t answer when I called back.”

I’ve lost my voice. Dinner is over and the mention of Ian is a hard reminder that I need to tell Casen what is going on. He picks up both of our plates and I follow him into the kitchen with our empty glasses and begin to wash them out. My fingers shake with every stroke of the sponge. As I set them in the dish drainer, Casen’s large, skilled hands dip underneath my shirt and stroke my bare stomach.

“Casen,” I whisper. “I need to talk to you.”

His lips brush against my ear. “After I get you out of these jeans that are making that sweet pussy inaccessible to me. His fingers travel lower and pop the button, and before I can reach up to stop it, they slide down my zipper. I moan, pushing my ass back, giving him the space needed to slip his hand down to my core. It’s already wet and he just began.

I'm going to hell. I'm supposed to be here to tell Casen the truth. To tell him that I am the Annie he fell for in high school. That Ian didn't have to look for me because I had already found him. I need to tell him what I had done to Patrick, Thad, Even, and Wesley, and then, I need to beg him for forgiveness. But, I can't. All I can focus on is him rolling my clit between his fingers, and his harsh breath whispering very dirty words in my ear.

"I want to get inside that soaking wet pussy, Embyr, and live there for the rest of my life. Fuck you until we take our last breath."

"Oh God."

"You want that too, don't you? You want to spend every waking moment with me driving into to you. My tongue, my fingers, my cock. You want everything I can give you." He growls, his breath tickling the inside of my ear. He bends down, taking my pants with him and then grabs me by the hand and pulls me over to the sofa. "Take your panties off."

I fight the urge to comply. "I think we should talk."

"I think you need to lose the fucking panties," he responds, dragging my shirt up and over my head. "And, the bra."

All I can do is stand here and look into his beautiful eyes, knowing what I'm about to do is all kinds of wrong. I reach behind my back, unclasping the snap of my bra and watch him as his eyes follow it down to the floor. Lust clouds his pupils and he barely waits for me to pull my panties all the way down before he pushes me on my ass and spreads my legs before his hungry mouth.

"You have no idea how fucking hot it is to look down here and see you glisten with the arousal only I can give you, Embyr."

Fuck me. Fuck the afterlife I will spend in hell. "Lick it up, Casen."

He growls, literally growls, before crashing his lips to my pussy. Licking and sucking and bringing me to edge before pulling back and teasing me. I hear his phone ring in the

distance but neither of us cares. He continues his torturous lapping of my folds. And, right as I'm about to come all over his beautiful face, his phone rings again, causing me to lose my orgasm once more.

“Don't pay attention to it, baby. Think about how I'm going to pound you into this couch so hard, I'm going to break the fucking thing.”

I moan, the orgasm surfacing once again and throw my hands down when the ringing starts all over again.

“Fuck!” he yells, standing up. “I'll turn it off.”

I sit there and wait, legs spread apart, watching as Casen picks up his phone and glances at the screen. The small ding of his text goes off and the lust filled eyes he had moments ago are filled with shock.

“Oh my God,” he says softly, his fingers furiously pushing buttons on the screen.

I sit straight up. “What?”

He brings the cell up to his ear. “It's Reece. Text said it's an emergency.”

Standing up, I look for my clothes that are scattered all over the floor. When I get my panties back on Casen's call connects.

“Reece. What's up man?”

I slowly dress myself, trying not to make too much noise so that I might be able to hear Reece. Casen isn't saying anything but his face is turning white. He bends over at the waist as though he is willing himself to breath. “What hospital is he at?”

That stops me in my tracks. I walk over to Casen, rubbing his back while he gets information from Reece before he says, “Embyr is here. I'll have her drive me over.” He hangs up the phone, throwing it down onto the dining room table and screams, “DAMN IT!”

“What happened?”

Tears pool in Casen's eyes and my heart starts to break. "Ian got mugged. Someone shot him and left him in an alley."

I start to cry along with Casen. "Oh my God. Come on, I'll take you."

The drive to the hospital seems to take forever. Casen hasn't said a word since we left and all I can do is hold his hand and comfort him. We pull up to the emergency room and park, running into the hospital. We give Ian's name to the receptionist and she points to a waiting room just around the corner. She won't give Casen any information except that a doctor will update him when he can. Slamming his hands down on the desk, I pull him away and drag him to the waiting room. Reece is already in there. His head is in his hands, and his back is bouncing up and down as though he is crying. He looks up to find us standing there, and I can see the numerous red lines of blood shot eyes.

"Have you heard anything yet?" Casen frantically asks.

Reece shakes his head no. "Nothing. They won't tell me anything and I can't get a hold of Ian's parents."

"What about his sister?"

"She lives all the way out in Lake Forest." Reece sighs. "She is on her way."

Casen takes a seat and I take the one across from Reece. He looks up at me questioningly. I shake my head no to his unspoken question. His face goes hard. "I think you should leave, Embyr."

I stiffen. "Why?"

Casen chimes in. "Yeah, baby. You should go home." He looks at the clock above the vending machine. "You have that big interview in the morning. I can call you if we hear anything."

"Are you sure? I don't mind staying," I tell him nervously. I don't like the look in Reece's eyes.

Casen kisses me on the cheek. "I'm sure. I'll call you."

The drive home is long. Even though it's a short distance, every second that I'm not with Casen and he's with Reece feels like an eternity. Is Reece going to tell him? Will Ian when they get to see him? I have a huge mix of emotions running through me, and I don't know how I am going to fall asleep.

I wait up until after two o'clock in the morning and send a text to Casen.

Me: Any news?

I get no response and before I realize it, I've fallen asleep.

26 TWENTY SIX

I wake up just after seven o'clock in the morning and immediately check my phone. I still haven't heard from Casen and every minute is torture. I want to know what happened to Ian, and as soon as I see Casen, I have to tell him. No pushing it off any longer. The harsh realization that he is going to find out today, whether I tell him or not, makes my hands shake as I get ready for my nine a.m. interview.

I swipe my last brush of mascara over my lashes and set it down just in time to hear hard raps on my front door. I throw my makeup back into my bag and zip it up. The banging comes again and I look through the peep hole, finding Casen leaning into the frame of the door. His head is down and his hair looks disheveled.

I unlock the door and open it wide to allow him in but he doesn't move. He has a bag in his hand and he is wearing the same clothes he had on last night. When he looks up, his eyes are red with tears pooling in them, threatening to overflow. "Ian's dead. He died."

"Casen, oh my god! Are you okay?" I pull him into my apartment and wrap my hands around him. He stiffens at my touch and doesn't reciprocate the hug. I let him go and watch as he walks over and sets his overnight bag on the table.

His hands ball into fists and his head is lowered. "No. I'm not fucking, okay, Embyr."

I recoil. His tone is callous and it makes me uncomfortable. I fumble over my next question. "Is ... is there anything I can do?" That's a stupid fucking question. He just lost one of his best friends.

He doesn't respond to my question so I continue to talk, keeping my distance from him. "I'm so sorry, Casen. That's terrible." I want to console him. I want to pull him into my arms, bring him into the bedroom, and allow him to cry on me until his pain goes away, if it ever does.

"No. That's not terrible." He starts to sob. "You know what's terrible? Wanting nothing more than to find my girlfriend, the woman I am in love with, and have her comfort me during the worst fucking day of my life."

I walk over to him, attempting to wrap my arms around him. "I'm right here, Casen. Let me do it."

He pushes away. "Don't fucking touch me, Embyr!" he yells.

I flinch, taking three steps back, and watch him unzip his bag and pull out a large white envelope that's been ripped open. He looks at me with disgust. "Or should I call you Annie?"

My body comes alive and a panic attack immediately sets in. I can't breathe. My hands shake so bad that when I run to the cabinet to grab a glass of water it falls to the ground and shatters. I jump out of the way and grab another, filling it and drinking as fast as I can. I'm hyperventilating and I can feel Casen's stare on the back of my head. I'm not scared of him, I've never had any reason to be but I turn around anyways so I don't have my back toward him. His eyes are cold, disconnected. He found out. I didn't get a chance to tell him before found out on his own.

"Casen," I cry, clutching the glass between my hands.

"Don't you say a fucking word!" He points at me. "Not one word."

"You have to let me explain," I try to tell him calmly walking around the broken shards of glass to the other side of the table. I can't let the situation get too out of hand. I need him to calm down so I can make this better. I have to make this better. I need him. For the first time in my life, since my parents, I feel truly loved. I don't want that to go away.

“Explain what?” He throws the envelope towards me.
“Explain all of that? I highly doubt you can dig yourself out of this hole.”

“I was going to tell you, I promise.”

“When?” he asks, and then gets louder. “WHEN? After I fell in love with you? Well, too fucking late. I did.” He starts to pace and then flips around quickly. “Was this all a game to you?”

“If we could just sit down and talk, I can tell you everything.” I motion towards the chairs. “From Patrick to Evan. I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

His eyes grow wide. “Did you do that to them? Did you set them up?”

Panic rises within me. “Yes, but please. Let’s sit down.”

He steps into my personal space, lowering his head so we meet eye to eye. “Yes? Did you fuck over Thad and Wesley, too? Is that why Wesley is suspected in setting the fire here?”

I gasp. “Wesley?”

“Yeah, Wesley. My friend at the station told me he is a suspect. Care to tell me why?”

I fall back into a chair and stare at nothing in disbelief. “I was blackmailing him. He was seducing a student.”

“Un-fucking-believable!” he roars, rattling the pictures on the walls. “So, all that shit? It was all your doing? This is so much more fucked up than I thought.”

I start to full out sob. He is right. I’m fucked up. My whole life has been nothing but a fucked up mess and here I am, caught in the tangled web of lies I weaved. Where did it all go wrong? This was supposed to be revenge. Payback for what they did. I wasn’t supposed to fall in love with him, and now I see how much damage I’ve done. I’m a shitty person.

“I’m sorry.”

He picks up the duffle bag and dumps everything on the floor. It’s all my stuff that I’ve left at his house. “Here is your

shit. I don't want it tainting my house."

"Casen." I stand up, full out sobbing. "Let's please talk."

"Do you know how much of a mind fuck it is to get home and have a letter, from the best friend who just fucking died, in your mailbox? Then, to open it up and find that the girl who you wanted to contact for years, the one you wanted to make amends with for all the shitty things she went through in high school, was right under your fucking tongue the night before. To find out the woman you love, who has been underneath you and beside you, has been lying to you for weeks now? The first person I opened up to."

"I was going to tell you," I plead.

"When, Embyr?" He throws his hands up. "When were you going to tell me? When I told you about what our friends did to you in high school. When we got married? After our first child or our second because Lord fucking knows I could see myself marrying you."

I walk over to him but he pushes me away. "We can still have that, Casen. We can get through the hurt of Ian and of what I did and move on. Move past it. I'll do anything I can to make it up to you."

His eyes widen. "Did you have something to do with Ian getting shot?"

I drop my hands to my side, shocked. "No! How could you even think I would do something like that?"

"Because I don't fucking know you or what the fuck you are capable of!" he yells. "You set out on this revenge scheme and who the hell knows what you had on the agenda for Ian, Reece, and me. Though, I believe breaking my fucking heart into a million pieces would have done me in ... *is* doing me in," he quickly corrects himself.

I have no words for him. I'm ashamed, and I don't know what to do. He is so emotional and mad at the moment, that I don't think anything I say right now will do any good.

"Can we just start over, please? I beg.

“Go get my stuff out of your room. I need to go. Ian’s parents are waiting for us at his apartment,” He whispers, seemingly losing all energy to fight any longer.

I nod, walking to the bedroom and collecting his stuff. When I get to the bathroom to see if there is anything in there, I only find the reflection of the monster I have become. My body crumbles beneath me and my knees break my fall, landing with a thud and all of Casen’s items scatter around me.

My skin flinches at the cold tile of the bathroom floor. My neck, aching from the pull of it falling forward in disgust. My stomach is twisted in knots and my chest is constricted. Black tears fall to my bare legs and I lift my hands to wipe them away, but it’s no use. The flow of them will never stop.

What the hell have I done?

My panic starts to set in again, and I can hear him harshly calling my name from the living room. All I can do is sit here, helplessly, as I feel the life I started to love slip away.

I don’t move when Casen finds me in the bathroom. I don’t move when he stands over me and commands that I look him in the face. I don’t move a muscle when he leans down, pulls my chin up and says “Nevermind. I don’t want my stuff. It’s tainted. Don’t you ever come near me ever again.” Before he kisses my forehead and walks out of the front door.

To Be Continued...

To the Reader: SEVEN was not supposed to end in a cliffhanger. It wasn't. It was supposed to end with Casen flat out leaving Embyr on her ass, but I couldn't do it. Casen grew on me and he means too much to let him just go out into the world devastated and heartbroken. I hope you can forgive me and I think I'll make it up to you in CASEN, the next book. It will be in Casen's POV with a few chapters from Embyr's perspective. Look for it out this fall and add it to your TBR!

CASEN on Goodreads: <http://bit.ly/1TgmDwA>

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