

Heirs of Havoc



# RUTHLESS

s a i n t s

vanessa winters

**RUTHLESS SAINTS | A  
DARK COLLEGE BULLY  
ROMANCE**

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HEIRS OF HAVOC

VANESSA WINTERS

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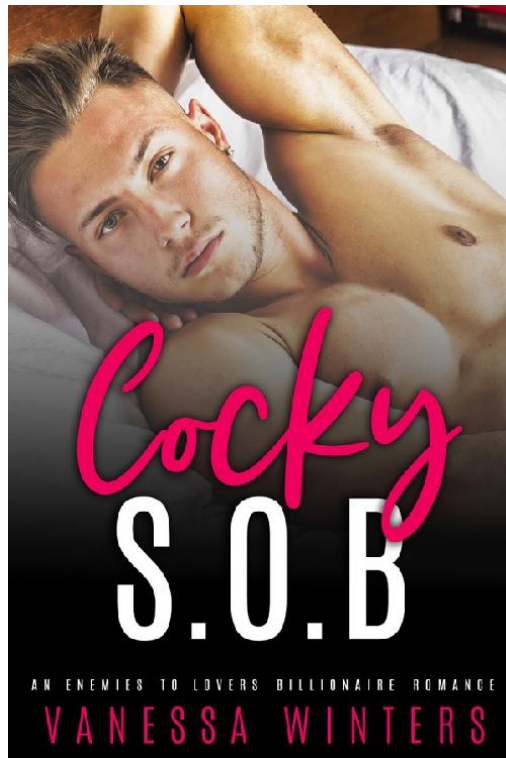
**Disclaimer:** This book is intended for adult readers 18+. THIS book contains dark themes of bullying and may not be suitable for all readers.

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## BLURB

**Perfect.**

**Privileged.**

*And poisonous ...*

You know them. The Instagram-influencing, pampered, never-had-a-problem-money couldn't-fix, heirs of our nation's elite.

Most people never get any closer to these 'American royals' than their social media streams, but not me. No, I spend my days up close and personal with the famously infamous.

Picking up trash and cleaning their toilets is the opposite of glamorous, but it's afforded me a few perks—like a scholarship to the exclusive Bryers University.

Thank god the Carlisle heirs, brooding sexy Jude and colder-than-ice Lila, haven't caught on to the fact that their housekeeper—is also their classmate. I'm already an outsider in enemy territory, and if the rest of the school finds out, a huge target will be placed on my back.

I've been careful and kept my head down. But I screwed up.

Because now, I've found myself on Jude's radar.

Suddenly, our paths are constantly crashing into each other and I can't escape him or his dark, pensive stare and wicked smile. Deliciously hateful sparks fly with each meeting, and it should push me away, but all it does is draw me in.

But I have to be careful.

Because letting him in, comes at a high price.

And the odds favor one outcome.

***This is a dark bully romance intended for readers 18+. This book contains dark themes, including abuse, violence and sexual relationships that some readers might be uncomfortable with.***



## BROOKLYN

Damn, damn, *damn*.

I ran down the stairs, yanking on my coat as I went. I was late again, and the Carlisle Manor was not a forgiving household when it came to tardiness. When I got to my car, I prayed a thousand times it would start on the first try—at least just this once. Shoving the key into the ignition, I held my breath, smiling in relief as my beat-up little Civic roared to life right away. I quickly peeled out of the driveway, knowing that if I could hit every light just right, I had a slim chance of being on time—*maybe*.

The looming clouds overhead boasted of a storm approaching. A dark storm, swallowing up everything in its path. It reminded me of the Carlisle Family and their fortunes and fames. It reminded me of the rich elite I tailored myself to for my job just to put myself through school. It reminded me of the wasteful byproducts of their parties I swept up after, and the women they trolloped through the house at all hours just to simply shove the scantily-clad women out the door before someone caught them. Not that they'd get into any real trouble. Oh, no. Their money saved them from things like that.

But apparently, the gods were in a forgiving mood, because I sailed through town effortlessly. Which meant less forethought was given to the work I was about to do just to earn myself a bit of cash. I knew the world wouldn't stay kind to me, though. And when I hit the front entrance of the sprawling estate, the 'luck' I was all too familiar with in my life reared its head again.

Blocking the gate was a sideways-parked Ferrari, white smoke choking out of the back exhaust. A group of people, too well-dressed to even consider walking the five-hundred feet of concrete to the front door, milled aimlessly around the gate. I pulled up behind the overpriced piece of metal and leaned out the window. The only thing I cared about was trying to gauge if I could slip my car between its bumper and the iron bars. The thick smoke made it hard to see clearly, but I had a feeling I could do it.

It would definitely be close, though.

“Ew, Jude. Who’s driving up in a *Honda*?” A snotty voice that I knew all too well groaned from just beyond my window. Her golden blonde head peered through my windshield, trying to figure out who could possibly be behind the wheel of *this* car and headed into *that* house.

Not like I needed the reminder.

The vast dissimilarity between my life and theirs was wider than the distance between here and Mars. My only consolation was that I could take refuge in knowing I was not infinitely alone in my situation. Most of the world were mere paupers compared to the upper echelon of the wealthy elite. And when I say ‘wealthy elite,’ I’m not talking about pro football player money or entertainment money. I’m not talking about ten-million dollar contracts a year and owning a first vacation home down in Florida. I’m not even talking about famous actors and actresses that can afford to preach about climate change before dipping in and out of press conferences in their private, gas-guzzling jets!

No, I’m talking about *them*.

The ‘one-percenters’ whose family wealth started in the early days of America’s creation. The people whose net worth isn’t only derived from the land they own and the money they have in the bank, but how much of the world they possess at their fingertips. I’m talking about the top of the one percent. The people who threw their money around in politics to keep their position in life. The people who can’t flood the stock market with their money all at once for fear of crashing the

rest of us into oblivion. I'm talking about the kind of wealth that makes The Queen of England look like a woman that might reside in a two bedroom, one bathroom apartment. That's the kind of wealth I'm talking about. And it was gathered right outside this stupid gate.

Which brings me to the 'king of heirs' standing before me—Jude Carlisle.

Jude was... hard to explain. The man himself was a conundrum of frustratingly sexy with a huge dose of entitled jerk. Unfortunately, he was also the most attractive guy I had ever seen. Tall, ripped, with black curling hair that fell across his forehead and over his ears, he had the tan of someone who never sat inside for very long. He had no idea who I was, but I had worked for his family for a long time, and anytime he was near enough, it was his dark eyes that caught me. His brooding look and laid-back persona told the world he didn't give a fuck, but those eyes said something different. To me, it seemed like he was always watching... and always ready.

Ready for what? I didn't know.

This time though, he didn't even look at me; instead, he flicked a dismissive glance at my car before turning back to the gate. "Just the help," he said. "Yo, Manuel, you getting this figured out or what?"

This was directed to the poor security guard, who stood sweating outside the entry house, probably trying to both get the car towed and organize a ride for the group up to the house. I looked at the clock. *Crap*. My shift started two minutes ago. I sighed and leaned forward.

*Nothing to it but to do it.*

I eased my car slowly past the poor, wounded Ferrari, watching out for the feet of the people loitering at the gate. At one point, I sucked in my breath, absolutely positive I was going to scrape the side of the car that cost more than any home I had ever lived in. But thankfully, I squeezed by. I did it. I got past the loitering million-dollar madness without so much as a hiccup. Now, all I had to do was throttle it up the hill, park my car in the shadows, and throw myself through the

front door with as much fervor as they used kicking women out. Easy enough, right? Wrong. Because just as I hit the gas to cruise up to the employee lot, a loud smack sounded, sending me almost completely out of my seat.

I whipped around to see the smirking face of Jude.

“Better leave more room next time, Dollface. Wouldn’t want to be responsible for ruining anyone’s car here, would you? Might not be the kind of problem you can get out of.”

I turned quickly before he could see the murderous rage in my eyes and took off, waiting to press a hand to my chest until I was out of sight.

*What a prick.*

By the time I was parked in the employee lot and made it to the kitchen, I was a solid ten minutes late, and my boss was waiting by the door. I avoided her eyes as I pulled on my apron and stuffed my hair into my Carlisle-approved cap.

“I know I’m late, ma’am, but Jude’s car was blocking the gate and—”

“I don’t particularly care to hear your excuses.”

Mrs. Janey Carlisle never budged an inch. She had more iron than calcium in her bones, and at five-eleven, she cut an impressive figure—her steel gray hair knotted tightly at the nape of her neck. Her long legs boasting of the years she spent in servitude to someone else. Her eyes, piercing and unforgiving.

Her penchant for perfectly-creased pantsuits only added to the overall effect

She sighed. “I’m going to have to dock your pay.”

“But the gate—”

She leveled me with a look. “When will you learn that the only reason you’re tardy is due to your own poor planning? You have no one to blame but yourself for being late. Now, go. You’ve missed enough of your shift already.” With that, she turned sharply on one heel and left the kitchen.

I suppressed a grumble as I opened the dishwasher and began to put away the clean dishes. The Carlisle Manor had dozens of low-level employees like me, a number of higher-level employees, such as assistants, chefs, and personal trainers. Plus, there were always guests milling around, enjoying the estate or gawking at the artwork on the walls. You could never be sure you wouldn't be overheard, and Mrs. Carlisle did not stand for gossipy or whiny employees.

My job at the manor was pretty straightforward. I was part housekeeper and maid, responsible for any little tasks that came up throughout the day. In a home with this many bedrooms and bathrooms, the upkeep was an enormous task. The job didn't pay all that well, and of course, there were no benefits, but it paid the rent, and even better, there was one advantage that made all the bullshit worth it.

And I kept a picturesque reminder of it taped on my bathroom mirror for me to see every morning.

I always saved the best part of my job for last. After making the beds up for guests arriving today, scrubbing toilets, sweeping, and dusting, I was ready. I pushed open the back door and was hit by the sweetest scent of jasmine, honeysuckle, and freshly cut grass. I took a deep breath and wondered if I would ever get sick of this feeling. Walking out to the shed to grab my tools, I decided I probably wouldn't.

*Here I come, you beautiful garden.*

At the shed, I clipped on my tool belt and checked the list left for me by the head groundskeeper. Pruning, weeding, and harvesting, the perfect way to end a day's work. I was a journalist, and one day I'd graduate and leave this snobby little rich town behind to go work for one of the top newspapers in the country. But, I also loved to garden. I loved tilling the land with my hands and watching my creations grow. I loved planting and eagerly watching every morning as their greenery slowly poked up from the dirt. And one day, after I purchased a reliable mode of transportation and established myself enough to purchase my own place, I'd have my own garden. I'd live off my own land as much as possible. And I'd be rid of the Carlisle Family for good.

Digging my hands into fresh-tilled soil, getting out in the sun after a long day of classes, and working for my incredibly spoiled classmates, there was no better medication.

I had been a student at Bryers University for two years. Two full years of walking the ivy-shrouded campus on charming cobblestone paths, of award-winning professors, gourmet café meals... and of being surrounded by absolute idiots. My classmates were a spoiled group of narcissistic, entitled douchebags used to having everything they ever wanted, not only on a silver platter, but a silver platter being presented to them by a white-gloved butler.

That's not to say they were all bad. I had found one decent, reasonably human student on the campus that was often used to film blockbuster hits. My best friend, Tae Hawthorne, was—it had to be said—entitled, rich, and even spoiled. But she was also funny, supportive, and kind. Other than Tae, this was a school chock-full of people who made me feel like stabbing myself in the eye within ten minutes of being together.

It probably doesn't have to be said at this point that I didn't quite fit in here. An outreach-student, I had been accepted into Bryers on a journalism scholarship. Between that and my need-based aid, I would be able to walk away debt-free from one of America's most prestigious universities—home of alumni that went on to be NFL players, supreme court judges, and senators. Without my scholarships, no way would I have been able to go to any college, much less one of this stature. But I would be lying if I said that I never wondered if all the accompanying bullshit was really worth it.

So, I worked harder than anyone around me. I had a 4.0 grade point average while maintaining a full-time job at the Carlisle Manor, where I got an up-close-and-personal look at the many privileges afforded to my classmates, although it may be an unfair example.

After all, The Carlisle's even made God Himself look lesser.

They were one of the most affluent families on campus, as evidenced by Carlisle Hall, the Carlisle Library, and the

Carlisle Rec Center. Congresswoman Carlisle was the star of our little affluent town of Hampshire, where I'd been born and raised. Steadfastly conservative and hailing from a long line of high-class elite, the Carlisle name held a huge amount of influence here. All I could do was ride their coattails on my meager salary and Carlisle scholarship—*you see what I mean when I say this family runs this town?*—and keep my head down until I graduated and sailed out of this town forever.

## **JUDE**

Well, I'd run another car into the ground.

Mother was bound to be unhappy about that, but nothing much could be done now. Who had time to take a car in for regular maintenance, anyway?

People who didn't have better shit to do, that's who.

Maybe if the car were in my name, I'd take a greater interest. But, this wasn't my car, and that fact was made very clear to me. A luxury birthday 'gift' last year that my mother flaunted before every friend and associate to show her generosity. In reality, my 'gift' remained in my Mother's name. It was just another reminder of who was in control. Another way to show that she could give and take at any moment. So again, Why did I have to take on the responsibility of caretaking something I didn't own?

We had people to do that for us.

As I waited for the gate guard to figure us out another ride to the front door, I noticed the shittiest Honda I had ever seen attempting to creep past the immaculate fender of my Ferrari.

Not that random shitty cars were unheard of around my house. We had plenty of staff who drove crap cars, but normally, I didn't have to see them.

I kept my eyes on that rusted bumper, my hands tucked against the inside of my pants pockets as I waited to see what happened. I was torn between being irritated and entertained



as the car's brakes wheezed and groaned, readjusting to steer as clear as possible from the Ferrari.

When it made it past safely, I couldn't help but be disappointed. The thought of seeing my mother's face when *her* car was scuffed—by one of her employees no less—was one of the few things I'd pay my own money to see.

As I peered into the cracked window of the beat-up piece-of-shit car, I couldn't make out the face of the person in the driver's seat. But, I was sure it was a girl. And if the shape was anything to go by, a cute girl at that. She looked to have long hair, and a shapely torso. I didn't see a gut sticking out anywhere, so that was nice. And as my eyes traveled down the fuzzy expanse of her legs, I felt myself lick my lips.

*Time to stir up a little trouble.*

I could never resist.

I slid my hand out of my pocket and slapped the trunk of the car as hard as I could, my class ring sending a satisfying 'crack!' that paled in the face of watching the girl's body jerk and whip around in her seat. I grinned as her head twisted about, seemingly terrified she had scraped my six-figure car. Damage that would cost more to repair than her yearly salary here at the fancy Carlisle Manor.

Margeaux cackled beside me as I heard the gate attendant making his way over for us, probably because he finally figured out a way to get us to the front door of our estate up the hill. I knew he'd probably ask if we needed anything out of the car before it was picked up, but I didn't care. I let the voices wash over me as I watched that disgusting dipshit of a car speed up the hill as if it had nothing better to do.

And as I watched that shitty little beater roll into the employee parking lot, a grin crossed my face.

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We ended up leaving my house and cruising the dull streets of Hampshire. My set was a bored one, and often it seemed like

we didn't even like each other all that much, but what else were we supposed to do? We had known each other all of our lives, gone to the same schools, made the same travel circuits across the same big-name resorts in the same big cities, and our families were all so intertwined it was practically incestuous.

None of us worked or had plans to, unless it was helping our parents out in their businesses. So we spent days together, rolling our eyes at each other's comments, snarking behind each other's backs, and generally hating our privileged, protected, luxurious lives. Case in point: my beautiful and irritating-as-hell fiancée, Margeaux Abbot.

"Juuude," she whined from behind the wheel of her Barbie pink Lexus. "Where are we even going right now?"

"I don't know, my love." I clicked the spinner on my lighter. Margeaux didn't let me smoke in her car, and I was getting jittery.

My twin sister, Lila, spoke up from the back. "Let's just go to the club."

I heard my 'best friend', Preston, scoff. "Great, so me and Jude can watch you two get sloshed."

If anyone looked in from the outside, they'd most certainly dub Preston my best friend. But, in reality? We were much too competitive with one another to ever be friends in the first place. Nothing made us happier than watching the other fail. And bonus points if that failure happened in public. He was fun to keep around because he pushed me to be better in some areas. However, other areas, he only pushed me to be more obnoxious. Which I didn't mind one bit, especially when it got my fiancée to roll her eyes.

I loved pissing her off sometimes.

"Perfect." Margeaux flicked on her signal and headed toward the club. I rolled my eyes and settled back into the seat.

---

When Lila and I got home that evening with me driving Margeaux's car so I could put her drunk ass to bed before driving home. But, our mother's assistant was waiting at the front door, and I knew that wasn't good.

“Your mother would like to see you both.”

I blinked, with Margeaux slumped against me. “Can it wait? If it was urgent, I'm sure she would've messaged us.”

Her assistant shook her head. “She wishes to see you now.”

Lila came up beside me. “Surely, you must be mistaken. Mother's never up this late.”

I scoffed. “Yeah. At three in the morning? Shouldn't she be in bed or something?”

Margeaux hiccupped. “Bed. Please.”

Lila sighed. “Great. Mother wants us and Miss Priss over here is about to vomit.”

I rolled my eyes. “If you would've just listened to me and not had those last two shots, you'd be fine. Now, stand for a second, okay? Can you just do that for me?”

Margeaux scoffed. “Whatever.”

I turned my attention back to Mother's assistant. “Let me get Margeaux in a bed somewhere and I'll—.”

Her assistant interrupted me. “Follow me, please.”

I drew in a sobering breath before I scooped Margeaux into my arms, following behind Lila who somehow found herself in front of me. Damn it, if she puked all over my Gucci suit, I'd have her hair for it. Plus, now that Mother was on one of her power trips, I knew this three-in-the-morning altercation wouldn't go well with a drunk fiancée in my arms. I think Mother liked her little power trips of having an assistant stand by the front door—for who knew how long—waiting for us to return so she could deliver a message. Nonetheless, I followed the assistant to Mom's office with Margeaux practically snoring in my arms.

*I hate it when she snores.*

The first thing I saw when we entered Mother's office was her sleek, thick black hair that Lila and myself had inherited. She had it pulled back into her signature tight French twist, glistening with diamond-studded bobby pins. And as I stood there, hiking Margeaux up my chest a bit, I chewed on the inside of my cheek until she spoke.

"Children, she said as she turned to give us that proper smile of hers, "take a seat."

We sat, and she continued. "As you know, the primaries are coming up, and this time is critical for our family. In our five-year plan, I'll be announcing my candidacy for the presidency, so our family must present a smooth, unblemished image at all times. Jude—" She looked at me. "That means no more smoking in public. No vaping either," she said before I could say anything. "I can't run on a health and family platform if my son is smoking like a chimney. Do what you want in private, but no smoking out front or on campus."

I couldn't even rebuttal before her eyes flew to my sister beside me.

"And you, Lila." She assessed my sister, who I had thought was doing an incredibly admirable job of appearing sober. "You are cut off at the club. Two drink limit. Come home and get drunk in your room like a proper socialite."

Lila grinned and only slurred her words the smallest bit. "So, Mother dearest, what you're saying is you're less concerned for our health and more concerned that we appear to be healthy."

Mom rolled her eyes. "Don't be dramatic, darling. You're healthy enough. And it's because of our image that one day our family will live in the White House and you'll never have to work a real job in your life." She turned back to her bookcase, signaling we were dismissed. "These changes go into effect immediately."

I looked over at my sister, who had the most dumbfounded look on her face. Both of her eyes were widened, but one was

a bit bigger than the other. She slowly looked over at me and I stifled my chuckle as she slowly shook her head. She looked like a haggard bird from a coo-coo-clock or something like that. I don't know. Some dumb bird or whatever, I was too tired to come up with something snappy. Nonetheless, we left the office, and I dumped Margeaux in my room before I followed Lila up to her room where she started to open a bottle of wine and I cracked the window for a smoke.

"We could have argued," Lila said as she poured herself a healthy serving of wine and started to drink, not bothering to aerate it.

I lit my cigarette. "What would that have done us? She always wins."

She sipped her wine. "Remember when you tried to take a stand on not going to church anymore? By the time she was done with you, you were practically begging to be allowed to go to church again."

"Was not."

Lila snorted. "Mommy, please, give me my car and credit card back and let me sleep in my room again! I don't want to sleep in the basement anymore!"

"Our basement is terrifying. You weren't so amused when she was making you sleep down there because you didn't want to be tutored by Mr. Gray anymore."

Lila's smirk faded. "Mr. Gray was a twisted fuck."

"Exactly." I took a deep drag, all the way to the end. "We're not the problem here." I stubbed out my cigarette on her windowsill and pulled a baggie out of my pocket. "Come on. I'll share my weed with you so you can forget all about the horrors of the basement and Mr. Gray."

Lila smiled and joined me at the window.

"Ew, Jude, be careful, you're getting that all over my floor."

I shrugged. "Whatever. The maids will get it in the morning."

## BROOKLYN

Mondays were my morning shift at the Carlisle's.

I started downstairs and worked my way up, giving the family plenty of time to get out of their bedrooms by the time I got to them. So far, Jude and Lila had never recognized me as a classmate, and I had really hoped to keep it that way. Unfortunately, today was not my lucky day.

When I knocked and opened the door to Lila's room, a lump buried beneath the snow-white duvet grumbled. Our training on this was clear: if the younger Carlises were in the room during our scheduled time to clean, we were still to clean and get out efficiently and silently. And from what I heard around the house, Mrs. Carlisle had no sympathy for sleeping late, *especially* when it came to her children.

I dusted the shelves of pageant and science trophies lining the walls, trophies I knew intimately because once a week I took them all down and polished them to a high shine. And from them, I learned that Lila wasn't just a pretty face. Oh, no, she had smarts to back up those looks.

She had won a number of state and regional science competitions, as well as competitions on the debate team at school. And that just served to make me all the more uncomfortable around her. I took out her trash and washed her windows, where I noticed streaks of ash and what looked like seeds and stems belonging to substances I knew Mrs. Carlisle wouldn't be happy to have in her home. But, when I looked down at the carpet I had to bite back a groan. Ash and leftover

pot were crushed into it, and I knew it would be a nightmare to get it all up. I knew I still had to, though. And, hopefully, by the time I'd have to wheel in the vacuum, Lila would be up.

I picked up her dirty clothes, hung up the clothes draped across the furniture, and cleaned her toilet, sink, and shower. Thankfully, by the time I was out of the bathroom, Lila was up and in her robe, ready to shower. She brushed past me without a word and locked the bathroom door shut behind her, allowing me to tackle her floor.

Which needed a lot of work.

I saw footprints where they had ground the ash into the carpet. I saw footprints dancing around it as well, almost as if the grinding had been done on purpose. It ended up taking me forever to scrub the ash out of the white carpet on my hands and knees so that the vacuum would pick up the rest, while also trying not to soak the carpet with my own sweat. But, when Lila came out of the bathroom in a perfumed cloud of steam, I was scrubbing the marks off the windowsill.

“Ugh, you’re still here?” she asked, dropping her wet towels on the floor and heading to her closet to get dressed. I ignored her condescending voice and the scoff that practically hung off the tip of her tongue. I simply finished up and slipped out before she emerged from her closet, mostly because I was eager to wash the stale scent of weed and ash from my hands.

I'd had classes with the Wonder Twins over the years, and worked in their home for years, passing them as close as shoulder-to-shoulder at least a thousand times. They had never once noticed me in either sense. Bryers wasn't all that big of a school, but I was pretty sure the first day I showed up to my first class shared with Lila, in black Converse and jeans I had bought at the Goodwill, she had decided to take absolutely no notice of me.

And I never let enough cleavage hang out to catch Jude's eye.

I hadn't started out trying to fly under the radar of the Carlisle family, but now, I was grateful I had. My hair could be a little distinctive with its color and size, so I made sure it

stayed tucked up in a cap or headband when I was working at the house. I was pretty sure if they ever figured out their loner classmate worked in their bedrooms, they would either want me fired or would make me a laughingstock on campus.

Neither of which I was up for during my school career.

When I finished my shift, I headed to campus to get some work done. I was working on a big story, and it was going to be a crazy week. I'd been on our university paper's staff since I started at Bryers—it was part of my scholarship stipulation—and *The Bryers Beat* was known around America for being one of the top student-run newspapers. Graduating with it on my resume was a big step in the right direction for my future, so I made sure to do whatever I could not to squander the opportunity. Graduating as someone who had written something that got picked up by a real newspaper—one that wasn't run by a team of undergraduates—could land me the job of my dreams.

That's how I had ended up fixated on a certain local politician with a reputation of being just a little bit dirty.

Spending so much time at Carlisle Manor afforded me certain privileges outside of my paycheck. Congresswoman Carlisle was incredibly protected and private—staff members of my level weren't allowed in her office even to clean, for instance—but in a house with so many employees, you were bound to overhear something. And while I loved the garden out back that I kept tailored as part of my duties, the one secret about my job that I adored was getting close-to-unfettered access to the woman that was rumored to be running for President this year.

That's why I kept a picture of Mrs. Carlisle—along with that beautiful back garden—taped to my mirror to see every morning.

About a year ago, I started getting the idea that the Congresswoman was working on something. Something big. Something that maybe wasn't going to paint her in the best of lights. Something that, if revealed by a savvy student reporter



rather than her spin team in a flashy news conference, just might cost her a few points in her next election.

I wasn't naïve, though. I knew I couldn't knock her family off their pedestal with one scoop, but I did know that getting information out there was the only way to start that process. I had lived in Hampshire all of my life and had seen firsthand what kind of priorities the congresswoman had. Working inside the front doors of her home had only expanded that view. The Carlises thought the world revolved around them, and they constantly hurt our town with their actions and choices. Writing was my outlet, the tool at my disposal that I could use to save Hampshire from her politics.

Which is exactly why I wanted to get as much of a scoop as possible.

I stayed at the paper's office late that night. Tomorrow, I'd be approaching a few groups to spread awareness of what I was working on. And this Friday? The day of our homecoming game? When current students, alumni, and throngs of locals would flood the campus? That was where I'd hopefully have a nice little event ready for the Carlises.

I figured out what groups would be the most bothered by what was going on, so all I had to do was convince them to get involved. I mean, there was no way I could stand at the forefront for any kind of event, because as much as I knew that the Carlises never spared me two glances, it still seemed too risky to make myself the face of any protest. But, I was going to do what I could to inform the town about what she was planning while also not drawing too much attention to myself.

At least, that was the plan.

**JUDE**

What a boring week.

Classes I would be failing if it weren't for my tutors and last name—along with dull nights with Lila, Margeaux, and Preston—made for a tedious week. Lila and I were spending a lot more time at home now that our vices were limited in public settings, and my frustration was high. My boredom, at its max.

And when I got bored, bad stuff started to happen.

Friday arrived, and with it, a strange buzz around campus. Were the campus sheep seriously this excited for the weekend? I still didn't understand it. Homecoming seemed pointless, especially with the type of crowd that Bryers drew. Did they really think they could throw a party worthy of one of my Friday nights after the kinds of charity balls and college parties I already attended? Because if they thought they could top any of that, they were out of their minds. And their budgets. Still, I had made it through a day of classes and was on my way home when a voice called out and stopped me.

“Judie-kins!”

It was Margeaux, and I bit back a sigh. I hated it when she called me that, especially in that tone of voice. She had this tinny voice that only got higher and more piercing the more excited she became. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes because God forbid anyone see and inform my fiancée of the sin. And as I drew in a deep breath of toleration, I turned to face her with my best smile plastered against my cheeks.

“Hey there, beautiful.” I gave her a cursory kiss on her cheek, trying not to wince at the brush of her thick makeup against my lips. “What are you all dressed up for?”

Margeaux’s short blonde hair was slicked back, and she wore towering golden gladiator sandals with some kind of strappy black dress. She looked like a million bucks, mostly because the diamonds she dripped herself in with the outfit probably cost about as much as that valuation. Her sandals looked cheap, but that was the funny thing about my fiancée. She wasn’t as shoe-obsessed as some women I knew. Her vice wasn’t tall heels or red bottoms or whatever new thing was in style for shoes nowadays.

No, her vice was purses.

And the leather one with the ‘Coach’ logo embroidered on the front reminded me of the separate closet we’d one day have in our own place that was filled to the brim with pointless bags she’d only use once.

Margeaux giggled. “Silly Judiekins.” She flicked one manicured nail against my chest. “It’s homecoming! I hope you’ve got my corsage.” She smiled, but I could tell she was about half a second from full-blown pissed. So, I put on my best face.

“Yeah, of course I’ve gotten your corsage. Do I look like an idiot?” I lied. Homecoming already? Who gave a shit about corsages for homecoming once you were out of high school anyway?

Her eyes hooked with mine. “Well, it better match my dress.”

*Your fiancée cares, apparently.*

Then, her demeanor completely changed. “Gotta go, sexy. Mwah!” She smacked a kiss on my cheek and spun away, her Coach bag swinging off that skinny arm of hers.

Here was the thing about Margeaux: our relationship was a total sham. You may not believe that arranged marriages still happen in the twenty-first century, but they do. Maybe not in regular families, those idyllic white picket-fenced houses with

two children and a golden retriever. But in *my* circle? Arranged marriages were ‘de rigueur.’ How do you think so many generations managed to keep the kind of wealth they have? Why do so many WASPs look suspiciously similar?

Because we are all arranged to marry one another eventually.

Seriously, think about the richest people in America. Take a look around one of my classrooms. We all look so much alike we could be siblings. And as we’ve all heard time and time again, our parents didn’t work their asses off for us to marry middle-class nobodies and *share* that wealth that had been so painstakingly hoarded. No, sir. It was our job to marry another, similarly rich family. Preferably in a different industry. This is how our ancestors built dynasties that outlasted generations. That’s how our influence got passed down through hundreds of years while maintaining our control.

Take me and Margeaux, for example. My family was in politics. Margeaux’s family, the Abbots, owned a media TV syndicate, a whole fleet of cable channels, and were in investments as well. What could be a better match for the son of a family high-placed in national politics? Whose mother just might be interested in throwing her hat in the ring for the American presidency?

Yeah. I never stood a chance.

When Mom sat me down to tell me I would be marrying Margeaux, I begged her to let me marry someone else. Actually *begged*, which was not something I was comfortable doing. Everyone around me thought that I didn’t give a shit, and partly, that was true. But a life tied to someone like Margeaux was enough to make me try and fight back. I had known Margeaux since she was born, more or less. She, Lila, and I were in the same playgroups, kindergarten classes, and sailing clubs growing up. As a child, she had been spiteful, superficial, and a champion grudge-holder. And as an adult, she was the same, just more aware of her power.

Even thinking about a life sharing a bed with her, a dinner table, vacations, and children scared the shit out of me. Mother hadn't given my pleas a second thought, either. She simply waved her hand at me and told me to grow the kind of pair our father should have had. Then, she reiterated her plan: I would marry Margeaux and make the family proud. It had already been determined. And I knew better by now than to fuck with her once she'd decided on a course of action. Consequences would be swift and severe.

As for Margeaux, I'd never been able to work out what was in it for her. Maybe she was stuck as much as I was. I mean, knew her father wanted the match to go through. They had plenty of money, but our family name went far enough back to have more influence than theirs. Maybe that's what they were looking for? Plus, there was the chance she would get to be the daughter-in-law of the president someday, and Margeaux taking my last name would afford her the full deck.

But, what did Margeaux want?

I tried to ask her a few times before, trying to suss out something deeper in my fiancée. But, I had gotten nothing but lighthearted banter in return.

"Hey!" Lila interrupted my thoughts, appearing at my elbow with a bag in one hand that she held out to me.

I furrowed my brow. "What's this?"

"Your corsage for Margeaux. It matches her dress for the game. You owe me one."

I snickered. "Thanks."

She shoved it into my chest. "Whatever. You ready to head over to the game now?" We fell into step together, heading toward the edge of campus where the classroom buildings met the football field. The walkways were packed. We crossed paths with some older students who had graduated and moved on to greener pastures but had returned to show their school spirit for homecoming. As we got closer to the entrance to the field, though, it looked like there was some sort of hold up.

"What's going on up there?" Lila asked.

“Some noob ticket-taker local maybe. Screwing everything up.” I slipped my hand into my pocket and flicked my lighter in my pocket, itching for a cigarette.

Lila shook her head. “No, they’re shouting.” She stretched up onto her toes, trying to catch a glimpse over the heads of the people in front of us. Then, I heard the crowd chanting.

My sister looked at me. “Is that... are they saying our name?”

I immediately took her elbow and pushed forward through the people in front of us who had slowed down to take in whatever was happening. Four tables were angled together toward the mouth of the field entrance, a prime spot to get the attention of every single person walking into the game. I noticed the matching shirts of the environmental club, those hippies, and the... was that some kind of mom group? There were a bunch of old ladies with kids running around them. There was also a group of locals, and not ones involved with the university from the looks of them. I watched as a blonde mom stood on top of a platform, a bullhorn to her lips, and I knew this wasn’t good. I knew what was about to happen. Around the tables people walked, holding up signs reading something I couldn’t make out from where Lila and I were. But, toward the back, I saw a girl with a head full of fuzzy red curls making notes on a clipboard.

“That’s the public-school PTA group,” said Lila as we edged forward. “What are they protesting?”

Whatever it was, I knew we were hearing our name chanted now. Shit. I was done trying to puzzle this out. I shoved the last few people out of the way and grabbed the shoulder of a long-haired dude in vegan shoes holding one of the signs, yanking him to face me so I could read what it said.

### *CARLISLE MAKES A PILE*

I let go of him and turned to meet Lila’s eye. She looked pale and pointed to another sign-holder who had turned to see what the commotion was.

### *THIS IS CARLISLE’S STYLE*

Now we were close enough to hear the mom speaking.

“Congresswoman Carlisle gets away with a lot in this town,” she said. “But this has gone too far. Making deals with shady businessmen who aren’t even from here to take over the park and turn it into a factory will only hurt this town. Hampshire doesn’t need more factory jobs. We need a safe place to take our families and our dogs. We need a space to enjoy the scenery. The Green Group has determined that there are over 147 species of wildlife who have made that park their home. Tearing down this park will be devastating to our ecosystem, and theirs. But aside from that, it removes one of the *few* areas in this town that is set up for the people, somewhere free they can go to get fresh air. Maybe the Carlisle family has plenty of money to just vacation to places so they don’t need a local park to visit, but what about the locals they’re scamming in the process? Huh? Don’t we matter? Don’t we deserve a space to go and enjoy things!?”

A cheer went up from the surrounding group.

“My dear friend Marcy, from the Green Group, is going to go into a little bit more detail about how this will affect the environment. Let’s give her a hand.”

The crowd went wild as the blonde woman extended a hand to someone and pulled her up onto the platform, where a board was waiting with details of the park. I watched that fuzzy-headed redhead help her down and before she began to pass out leaflets among the crowd. I didn’t know why, but she looked vaguely familiar. I couldn’t place her, though.

Lila reached out and took another girl’s hands. I looked over her shoulder and felt a twinge of fear. This entire thing looked professionally done, and to make it worse, our mother was prominently featured. Pictures of her, a timeline of her votes, and a breakdown of her platform were all neatly listed.

*This is going to be bad.*

“Mom is going to be so pissed,” Lila murmured. I took a leaflet that had been handed to her and chucked it in the direction of a trash can.

“Not if she doesn’t find out,” I said.

Then, I pulled away from Lila and stormed up to the redhead, not thinking twice before I grabbed her arm. “Hey, what’s the deal with all this shit?”

And when we made eye contact, it was clear she knew exactly who I was and why I wanted to know. But, as quickly as the look on her face appeared, it dissipated, replacing the shock and recognition with a cool demeanor that looked very unimpressed by my appearance.

“We’re educating the public about a current issue,” she said coolly.

Her voice sounded so familiar, but I still couldn’t place her. “Do I know you?”

Surprisingly, her cheeks flamed red as soon as I asked, giving lie to her next words. “No, definitely not.”

Why would she be blushing at me recognizing her? I knew I would remember her if I’d slept with her. I wasn’t *that* much of a player. Still, I cocked my head and tried to picture her naked just in case. And as if she could feel what I was doing, her cheeks flamed even hotter before she crossed her arms tightly across her chest.

“What are you looking at?” she snapped.

I smirked. “Why are you so uncomfortable? Something wrong, sweet cheeks?”

“I’ve answered your question. So, I think we’re done here.” She went to turn away, but I grabbed her wrist before she could, and as our skin touched I felt a spark of heat so strong I almost dropped her wrist.

No, we hadn’t slept together. I would definitely remember that kind of chemistry.

“Not so fast,” I said. “I’m not sure if you fully understand what you’re playing at here, but I would give it up if I were you before it ends up going too far.”

She slowly looked back at me. “Are you threatening me?”



I shook my head. “That’s not a threat; it’s just a fact.” Lila appeared at my elbow with her hands on her hips and her eyes so cold I could feel the redhead shrinking away from her. Yet still, I continued. “I don’t know where you got this information, but Congresswoman Carlisle has the best interests of this town and its people at heart. So, just make sure you present both sides of the story to an audience and let them decide. No use in treating those around you like herded idiots.”

Lila flicked a dismissive gaze at the protestors around us. “Look, you may have the poor mommy vote and the hippie vote, but that doesn’t account for much.

I shrugged. “And following that train of thought: not only are they the outliers here, but they also lack any sort of significant funding. They’ll all disperse when they figure out there’s nothing they can do.”

Lila gave the redhead an appraising once over. “But there’s certainly something you will stand to lose from this.” She put a finger to her lip. “Money? A seat at the table? I may not know exactly what your deal is, but I do know this: if you continue on this path, you may not be very happy with where you end up.”

My sister and the redhead stared off while the crowd chanted around us. Then, Lila turned her back. “Let’s go, Jude.”

She flicked her black hair over her shoulder and strolled off toward the entrance to the game, but I couldn’t take my eyes off this redheaded beauty. The girl looked as if she had been smacked in the face and didn’t seem to realize I still had a hold of her until I moved my thumb across the inside of her wrist. Then, her eyes jerked back up to mine.

“What’s your name?” I asked, startling her out of her reverie. She jerked her hand back and held onto it as if it had been hurt.

“You’re not entitled to everything, Jude,” she said, and some color came back into her cheeks. “I’m sorry if I’ve hurt your and your sister’s feelings, but the people of this town

have a right to know what your mother is planning, and I don't scare that easily. Make sure you remember that."

I cocked one eyebrow. "Well, then, I guess this isn't over. I'll be keeping my eye on you, Rosie."

Her face fell flat. "My name isn't Rosie."

I slid my hands into my pockets, fiddling with my lighter again. "I need something to call you. So, if you won't tell me your real name, I'll just make something up. Don't like 'Rosie'?" I stepped in closer to her, backing her up until her back hit the fence surrounding the entrance to the stadium. "How about Strawberry? Just as red and—" I leaned in until my lips were almost touching the nape of her neck. "—just as sweet." I could feel her trembling in fury and maybe even something else. I laughed and stepped back. "Until next time, *Strawberry*."

And as I walked into the game, I was pretty sure I felt her eyes watching me the whole way.

That night, after the game and the dinner, the drinks, and Margeaux's unending chatter, I leaned out my window smoking what was, sadly, only my third cigarette of the day. Because no matter how hard I tried and no matter how many times I kissed Margeaux with that stupid corsage she kept showing off to everyone who bothered to look down at her wrist, I couldn't get the redhead out of my mind.

I was sure I knew her from somewhere.

But where?

**BROOKLYN**

The end of one of the craziest days I had ever had at Bryers had me splurging on a cheap bottle of whiskey from the corner market. And rightfully so.

I'd been within breathing distance of that man. Jude. The spoiled, filthy rich boy with the brooding eyes and a fantastic grip. No matter what I did, I couldn't shake the phantom feeling of his touch. The way his skin felt against mine. So, I filled up my glass with whiskey once I got back to my place, and wasn't surprised at all to see my hands still trembling as I attempted to use them.

Lila was right, there was plenty that I stood to lose by moving forward with my plan. She didn't know how right she was, but I couldn't remain anonymous forever. The Wonder Twins might not recognize me now, but other people would. Even though I barely ever spoke to anyone on campus, there were a few people who would know my name from group projects, or the paper, or worse—the scholarship board that hung in the library which proudly listed me as this year's Carlisle Full Ride Recipient.

How could I have been so stupid to start this now, when I was so close to graduating? Just another year and a half left, and it wouldn't matter what they thought. I needed my job, and I needed my scholarship if I was going to graduate on time.

But here's the thing: if I waited until after I graduated, the park would be gone. Carlisle will have already lined her

pocket with those sweet, stacked donor dollars and managed to spin it as some kind of boon for the community. And at a point where I felt comfortable using my voice, it wouldn't matter anymore. A fact that didn't sit well with me. I couldn't in good conscience just let that happen.

*Guess I'll just be their Devil.*

I took a swig of whiskey, wincing as it burned down my throat. The other truth I had to admit was, as soon as I graduated from Bryers, I was out of here. No looking back. I never wanted to see this town again. Not the campus, not the people, and definitely not the Carlises.

I mean, come on. For years, I had worked at Jude and Lila's house, *in their bedrooms*. Years! And they had barely recognized me at all today. Lila didn't seem to think she'd ever seen me before.

*Jude, though.*

Jude was a completely different story with way too many risks in the warning section. I poured myself another healthy dose and shot it back. Jude worried me. He had shown an awful lot of interest in me for someone who had never once seemed to care about anything at all. Worse than that was the way my body had reacted. When he had gotten close, my heart started hammering a million miles a minute, and when he had gotten close enough to my neck to kiss it... I think I melted a little bit.

Damn my body. Damn Jude. And damn the Carlises.

I took one last shot and made myself put the whiskey away. There was nothing for me to do but to keep moving forward with what I already put in motion. I had started this thing and would have to live with the consequences, because there was absolutely no way I would be able to live with myself if I let the Wonder Twins scare me away with one little conversation.

When I walked away from Bryers forever, I would leave it just a little bit better for the next Carlisle Full Ride Recipient. But it was time for bed. I had a lot to do in the morning.

**JUDE**

I woke up the next morning to Margeaux flicking water in my face. I hadn't slept well to begin with. But, every time I felt something cold and wet splatter against my face, it only added to my anger. Where the hell was I? Outside, in the rain? I groaned as I forced one of my eyes to open, and that's when I heard it. That tell-tale little giggle. And a growl emanated from the back of my throat.

“One more time, and you're out,” I grumbled.

Margeaux giggled. “Wake up, cranky pants.”

I rolled away from her. “Get out, Margeaux. I'm not in the mood.”

She smacked her lips. “I don't give a shit what you are or are not in the mood for, Jude. Get the hell up. We have to talk.”

“What do you want?” I reached for my bedside table and grabbed my pack of cigarettes. But, she slapped them out of my hand, and that sent me skyrocketing upward as my harsh glare settled onto her face.

“Margeaux. If you don't chill the fuck out, we're going to have a problem,” I said, keeping my voice as even as I could.

Her eyebrows rose. “Oh, yeah? Yeah? You want to talk about a problem?” Her voice rose steadily. “What the *fuck* were you doing with that girl yesterday? I heard from three different people they saw you flirting with some bitch outside the game. You want to tell me more about that?”

I reached for my cigarettes again and managed to light one this time. And lucky for her, because had she smacked my hand again? I couldn't be held liable for the words it would take to get her out of my fucking bedroom.

She sighed. "Are you kidding me, Jude? I'm trying to talk to you and all you want is a light-up?"

She took the water bottle and poured it out over my cigarette, rendering it to mush between my fingers. I watched in slow motion as my cigarette went from flaming orange to sopping wet and dark, and I felt my heart lunge in my chest. I felt frustration bubble up my spine. I felt my entire back stiffen as I slowly turned to face her. My temper flared in contrast to the light of my cigarette, which she had snuffed out with her feeble attempt to get my attention. And while I usually never played her chick trap games, this morning was an exception. She didn't get to come into my room before we were even wedded and command my life as if she owned it. Hell, no. Not on my watch.

So, I threw the covers off the bed and grabbed her by her bony shoulders before I leapt off the bed and didn't stop moving until her back was against the wall of my bedroom.

I gnashed my teeth. "I'm not fucking around here, Margeaux," I hissed. "We may have to get married, but I don't have to deal with this kind of bullshit. So, if you're looking for a guy you can push around? I'm not it. Our parents hold a lot of power here, and I'm willing to be dragged along with that to a certain extent, but this is the line. You ever talk to me like this again, and I'll throw you out onto the street. Got it?"

Her eyes dilated and cheeks flushed, but now it wasn't from anger. I could feel an answering rise in the boxers I wore to bed. I turned her around to face the wall and yanked up her skirt. No underwear. No surprise. This was how Margeaux worked.

"So this is what you came for," I growled in her ear, pulling down my boxers and burying myself into her warmth. Say what you will about Margeaux, but she was always ready to go. I slammed into her, knowing exactly how to get her off.

Her cries got louder and louder; she never gave two shits who heard us, and then peaked as we finished one after another. As soon as we were done, I pulled her off me and walked into my shower.

She pulled open the door and edged into the shower with a purr. “You like that, baby?” she said, snaking her arms around me. I shrugged her off and dumped shampoo into my hair. Being with Margeaux always made her voice seem extra grating afterward.

“I don’t want to see you messing around with that bitch again,” she said, combing her fingers through her long blonde curls.

“Actually, Margeaux, you *will* see me messing with her again. She’s protesting something my mom’s been working on, dragging the family name through the mud. That affects you too, dollface.” I turned away from her but felt her eyes boring into me still.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

I stepped under the running water. “Lila and I are on it. Don’t worry your pretty little head.”

She grabbed my elbow and yanked it down, forcing me to look at her. “You better be on it. If my father hears about anything like this, he’ll kill us both. You know damn good and well our parents worked hard on this marriage deal, and it’s up to us to make sure our names aren’t sullied.” She smiled a cold smile. “But if your mother does, it’ll be even worse.”

“Yeah, got it. Thanks, babe.”

I rinsed off and walked out of the shower, not bothering to wrap myself in a towel. I enjoyed a nice drip-dry, especially now that I had full rein to smoke in my room whenever I wanted. And what I wanted was a nice, hot dose of nicotine while my balls dripped dry themselves. But, when I emerged from the steamy bathroom and into my bedroom, I saw one of the housekeepers was in my room. I bit back a groan as I saw her, with her back to me, while she cleaned the ash and cigarette butts from my bedside table.

Yeah, she needed to go.

I growled. “Get the fuck out. You can do that shit later.”

I turned without waiting for her response and made my way for my closet. That damn maid had ruined my mood, and now I felt too exposed. With Margeaux giggling in the shower like a fucking schoolgirl and some maid trying to sweep as quickly as she could, all I wanted was for everyone to leave me the hell alone. All I wanted was for the world to pretend I didn't exist for one fucking day so I could get my head screwed back on straight.

*Fuck everyone today.*

It was time to learn more about that damn redhead. Once I figured out how I knew her, maybe I would be able to figure out why I had pictured red hair tumbling down a naked back, her in front of me against the wall, instead of my fiancée's blonde curls.

Today, I would figure out the redhead's name.



**BROOKLYN**

His growl rose behind me. “Get the fuck out. You can do that shit later.”

My heart lurched into my throat as my entire being paused. I froze, as if my body felt that if I were still long enough, he’d cease to see me. I heard his feet pitter-pattering around on the floor, heading straight for his closet. A space I had dusted down and cleaned many, many times throughout the course of my job at the Carlisle Estate.

I heard a woman giggling in his shower and I felt more than mortified being there. But, with the cigarette remnants on the floor and ash coating the windowsill of his bedroom, I knew Janey would have my ass if I left his room like this.

So, when I finally got my wits about me, I started sweeping faster.

I mean, I could come back after cleaning Lila’s room. That wasn’t an issue. I had two entire hours before I had to check back in downstairs, and that was plenty enough time to dust down Lila’s room, sweep, then come back and finish up Jude’s room. But, for some reason, I didn’t want to stop. I continued sweeping in the quickest fashion I could while Jude got dressed in the closet. And when I heard his footsteps padding back for the main room, I gathered my things and practically threw myself out of his bedroom.

And just as I closed his door behind me, I heard him yelling for Margeaux from the closet.

*Holy hell. Holy hell. My God, that was so close.*

My heart beat so hard that my hands began trembling. I tried picking up my things, but they kept falling out of my hands. With my stumbling feet, I couldn't even get myself far down the hallway without dropping something from my arms. But, I had to gather myself before I tackled anymore cleaning. Sloppiness like what I was experiencing wouldn't be welcomed within the private bedrooms of the Carlisle Estate. So, I had to slide into a closet and lean against the shelves for a minute.

"You're such an idiot," I whispered to myself.

When I got to work this morning and headed up to tackle the twins' rooms, I'd heard Jude and Margeaux going at it like a couple of wild animals while I cleaned the guest bedroom and hadn't thought much of it. But, when I got to his room, I overheard them talking about me in the bathroom over the sound of the shower.

*"... you will see me messing with her again..."*

It probably wasn't the most amazing thing that I had fully eavesdropped onto their private conversation. But, my curiosity got the better of me. The berating conversation I heard Margeaux practically yelling about through the walls perked up my ears. However, it was Jude's verbiage from the shower that pulled me toward the door. Had I not been so damn nosy, I probably could've had his room cleaned by the time he got out of the shower. I couldn't help myself, though. If anyone found out that I'd had my ear pressed against that man's bathroom door, I'd be fired. I'd become a laughingstock. And no one on this side of the country would hire me for any job if I dared to smear my reputation while working for the Carlises.

*"She's protesting something my mom's been working on, dragging the family name through the mud. That affects you too, dollface."*

That statement was when I knew they'd been talking about me. And that was when I abandoned all modes of work in order to fully concentrate on my ear fully against the door.

*"Lila and I are on it."*

That part became a bit fuzzy while I stood there. I knew there was something else said after that. Something I couldn't hear that followed. On it, together? Maybe? Shit, is that what Jude really said? I kept playing that part of the conversation in my head as I stood there in the storage closet. Over and over, it played. I couldn't come up with a concrete answer, though. That wasn't the part of the conversation that mattered, however. That wasn't the part that made my blood run cold. It was the sound of the sliding door of the shower opening that happened shortly after that had me running back to my cleaning station.

I'd spun around and flew across the room, kneeling in front of his nightstand with my head ducked, trying to sweep up the excess ash off the floor with my broom. And thankfully, I made it in time. Otherwise, Jude might have seen my face.

"Just breathe. Just breathe. Just breathe," I whispered softly.

I sank to the ground on shaky knees. I plopped down onto my ass and curled them against my chest. That had been too close. Way, way, way too close. A second later and he would have come face-to-face with the exact girl he was looking for, right there in his freaking bedroom. Maybe I could request a transfer from Janey and get out of their bedrooms. Maybe she'd put me in the kitchen or stick me out back with the garden permanently. The thought made me smile. I could trade this for hot garden work and be just fine during my days. Plus, I couldn't risk this every day. At some point, they were bound to get a good look at me.

*Get up, you still have work to do.*

The voice in my head was right, and it filled me with the strength I needed. I stood to my feet and took a deep breath, feeling the last of my nervous tremors calming down. Time to get back to work. Because if Janey decided to perform random inspections and she found me in this closet? Jude finding me would be the least of my worries. I checked the edges of my cap to make sure no stray strands of hair were sticking out, then I picked up my cleaning supplies in my hands.

And after one last deep breath of stifled air, I left the closet with my head pointed toward the floor.

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Late that evening, I was sitting in the paper's office, my best friend, Tae, painting her nails at the editor's desk to keep me company.

I tried to time my hours to be the only one there and was usually successful. My work hours made that pretty easy anyway. Tae and I hadn't had much time together this week, so she'd decided to join me so we could catch up while I worked. She didn't seem to see the irony in that or to catch on to my sighs as she chattered while I tried to focus.

"Brook-LYN!" she groaned, dragging my attention away from my screen.

"What?"

"You have been so obsessed with the freaking paper lately. It's irritating the shit out of me."

"I have not been obsessed," I said, but I sounded guilty, even to myself. Every hour I wasn't working or in class, I had been right here at this desk.

"You have got to get out more." She rolled her eyes and waved her hands in the air to dry them. "I need some bestie time. And you need to get laid."

"Get laid? Are you serious?"

"Yes! You need a date to shake your work obsession. Obviously, you're not getting what you need from me. Maybe a little lovin' will do the trick." She waggled two perfectly waxed eyebrows, making me laugh.

"I don't need a date. I need to finish this piece. Give me ten more minutes, and then we can go get Chinese."

"Yay!" she said, clapping her hands. "I'll shut up. You hurry up." I smiled and turned back to my screen.

I had gotten a few hours of solid work in, and my report for the newspaper was finally complete. I stared at the blinking cursor that followed my title:

***Congresswoman Carlisle Sells Out Hampshire Park to Foreign Business Collective***

I had read over it four times now. There were no mistakes, my research held up, and the quotes were strong. But did I have the guts to submit it? If my protest had sparked action by the Carlisle twins, this was sure to do even more. The smart thing to do, for me and my future, would be to delete it. There were two things stopping me. One, it would make me a coward. Two, and this seemed even more important for some reason, I couldn't bear to delete what was, in my opinion, my best work. I had spent hours, weeks, pulling all of this together. My article was tight, informative, and hard-hitting. I could use this to pitch big-named papers across America if it were published, establish myself as a hard-hitting journalist unafraid to face the big issues.

"Hey," a guy's voice said, scaring the shit out of me.

The voice's owner stood in the doorway, leaning against the jamb. I was sure I'd had a few classes with him before. He had some douchey rich guy name, like Morris or Roman or—

"It's Merritt. We had philosophy together last semester," he said, smiling a little like he could read my thoughts, and popping a piece of gum in his mouth.

"Oh, yeah. Hey. Sorry, you scared me," I said.

"My bad. Want a piece?" He walked in and stood in front of the desk and held out a bag of Big-League Chew. I stifled a grin. What was he, ten?

"No thanks. So... did you need something? Are you looking for someone...?" I trailed off, glancing at Tae, who shrugged in response.

"I'm actually looking for you." He leaned across the desk and smiled at me. He was pretty cute. I hadn't really noticed that before.

"Me? Why?"

“I saw you the other day, hanging around in front of the game. I got to say, all that passion and intelligence, it was pretty hot.” He grinned, and it sweetened some of the arrogance in his words. “I was wondering if you wanted to go out on a date sometime.”

“A date?”

I could feel Tae’s excitement off to my right. Damn it, I wished she weren’t here for this.

“Dinner, maybe the movies. Whatever you want.” He reached a hand across my desk and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. Tae audibly squeaked.

“This is a little strange,” I said. “We don’t even know each other.”

“That’s the point of a date, isn’t it?” I didn’t say anything. “Come on. Let me take you out. We’ll go anywhere you want. I just want to get to know you.”

In my time at Bryers, not only had I not been out on a single date, I had never even been asked out on one. And because of that, I couldn’t help myself. I glanced at Tae, who was waving her arms behind Merritt’s back and nodding wildly. So, I sucked it up.

“All right. How about tomorrow night?” I said, smiling despite myself.

He grinned. “Perfect. Pick you up at eight?”

“See you then.”

As soon as he had left the room, Tae shrieked so loud he was absolutely sure to have heard. I mean, holy shit, it’s not like he had left the building, just the room. “Oh my *gawwwd*, Brook! Do you have any idea who that is?”

“Uh, Merritt?”

“Merritt Hearst! He’s the captain of the Bryers lacrosse team! Plus, his family owns the Hearst Cosmetics Line. Do you have any idea the kind of exclusive products you could get from him?”

“Because that’s why you date someone. Their access to exclusive cosmetics.” I laughed.

“Shut up! You’re not going to ruin this moment. And there’s no way you have anything appropriate to wear to go out with him tomorrow night. I’m leaving right now to pick out an outfit for you to wear.”

“Tae! I have a date dress!” I yelled after her, but she was already gone.

I shook my head. If I had said ‘no’ to Merritt, I would never have heard the end of it. But also... he was kind of cute. And Tae was right. I hadn’t had a date in so long. Plus, going out with him tomorrow night could be my own secret celebration for finishing and submitting my article. I looked back at the blinking cursor. One more read through, and then I would decide for sure.

I had just finished reading, finding absolutely nothing to change or even tweak, when I was once again scared by another guy’s voice at the door.

“I found you,” he singsonged.

Before I even looked up, I knew it was him.

Jude strolled casually through the aisles of the newsroom, dark eyes locked on mine. My heart jumped into my throat, and my palms grew sweaty on the keyboard.

“I didn’t know you were looking for me,” I said, forcing my voice to sound casual.

“Brooklyn James,” he said, his voice smooth as butter. “Junior. Major: Journalism. Star writer of a number of pieces in the *Bryers Beat*.” He dropped into the seat across from my desk and leaned back comfortably, crossing one long leg over his knee. “Pseudonym: Rosie or Strawberry. Feel free to use one of those as your pen name, babe.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed that you found me and know my major?” I asked. “This school is only so big, and my name and photo are in the paper every single week.” To be honest, I had not expected him to find me this quickly. Lord knows neither of the Wonder Twins read the school paper. We

didn't have any classes together this semester, and I was pretty good at riding below the radar socially. Nothing could be done now though.

"Maybe impressed isn't the emotion I was going for." He smiled, and a bolt of fear shot through me. I desperately wished Tae hadn't left.

I shrugged. "So, what are you going for, then?"

"I want you to stop this nonsense with the protests." He held up a hand before I could interrupt. "I can make life very difficult for you, Little Rosie. And before you say anything, I don't expect you to simply drop everything all at once. You can let it peter out. I don't mind. But no more big shows, no more recruiting, and no more pamphlets." He dropped a crumpled paper in front of me that I recognized as my Carlisle informational booklet.

"Journalistic integrity does not allow for bullying," I said, lifting my chin. "Say what you want, but it's a free country and I can protest whatever I want."

"Of course you can." He leaned forward. "But the question isn't can you, but *should you*." He stood, and I bit back a sigh of relief. "I've got my eye on you, Rosie." And as he turned to go, he 'accidentally' knocked an elbow into my full coffee mug, spilling coffee across all the papers neatly stacked on my desk. I yelped and picked my phone and keyboard up before they could be drowned before his sultry voice sounded in my ear. "Until next time, Little Rosie."

*What in the fuck!*

I jumped up and grabbed the nearest paper towel roll to mop up my desk. It took me nearly an hour to get everything sorted back through. The new novel I had treated myself to was swollen and brown with coffee and would be miserable to try and read. The coffee that dripped onto the floor soaked into the carpeted padding I stuck beneath it to cushion my bare feet while at my desk. The coffee had even splattered towards the back of my desk, threatening cheap picture frames filled with childhood memories that I had sitting back there, waiting for me every time I sat down. After unplugging my keyboard and



wiping it down, though, it seemed fine. And luckily, I had grabbed my phone out of the way in time.

I fumed the entire time I cleaned, though. Who exactly did this family think they were? If Jude thought that this little display had worked, he had another think coming.

I sat down determinedly at my now clean desk and attached my paper to an email to my editor titled: *For Monday's Paper*. With one last deep breath, I clicked Send.

*Fuck the Carlises.*

**JUDE**

I had left the paper's office the night before feeling pretty sure of myself and had gone straight over to Preston's to celebrate with a drink. So when I woke up on Monday morning, I was hungover. Very hungover. I'm talking pounding head, tilting bedroom, roiling stomach ready to vomit up whatever it thought it still had left. Maybe even still a little *drunk*. Nonetheless, I rolled out of bed and got in the shower to see if I could wash it away. To see if the hot water at Preston's could drown out how I felt and replace it with the victory that should've come naturally with a moment like this.

I didn't feel victorious, though.

Brooklyn had looked like a cornered little red rabbit there at her desk. But I had seen enough of this particular rabbit to know she wasn't afraid to fight back. The strength of her words held a tone no one ever used when they talked to me. Except for Mother, of course. Which is why it pissed me off so damn much. People were afraid of me, and I liked it that way. It made things easier. It made things in my life a bit easier, despite the fact that most of the populous thought I had it easy because I was rich.

*If they only knew...*

If I were being honest, I looked forward to seeing what her response would be. Dealing with Little Rosie—or *Brooklyn*—had been the most fun I'd had in ages. Her spunk was something to be admired. The passion for which she was pursuing this was inspiring. Really. I couldn't remember the

last time anyone had surprised me the way she did with our encounter yesterday. But, in the end, I'd win. I always won. My family always won, by any means necessary.

Not my fault people didn't like that.

After cleaning up and getting my ass to campus, I kept one eye out for Brooklyn. But, didn't see her. I didn't stumble across her or cross her path or even hear her voice off in the distance. And you know damn good and well I kept an eye out for that massive, unruly head of curly hair she donned. Things had been quiet since our run-in on Saturday, despite our impromptu meeting yesterday, but I wasn't stupid enough to think that meant she had taken it lying down.

At the thought of her taking it lying down, the front of my pants tightened. Something about her sent my emotions down weird circuits. Anger and arousal blended into one. Maybe a good fuck would convince her to drop all this shit. And it would definitely get her out of my mind.

I had dreamt about her Saturday night, more than once, and woke up hard as a rock. Margeaux had slept over, so I had been able to take care of my erection quickly, but I would be lying if I said it had been satisfying.

Nothing seemed to scratch the itch she left me feeling. But, my the time I got back home, I had shaken off the hangover for the most part as well as my stiff cock for Little Rosie herself. However, when I saw my mom's assistant waiting at the front door with Lila, however, the grips of my headache returned.

"Your mother is waiting to speak with you both," the assistant said. "Follow me."

Lila and I exchanged glances before we followed her obediently.

Mother was turned around, facing the window when we walked in. She said nothing, and the assistant left, closing the door behind her. Lila and I stood in front of her desk, not daring to sit without her telling us to do so. The silence stretched into minutes, and still, our mother did not turn

around to face us. This was a bad sign. At the best of times, like when she had called us into her office to tell us to chill with our vices when out in public, she tolerated us. At worst, our relationship with our mother became something else entirely.

When the silence was becoming unbearable, however, she spoke. “I have one simple question, children.”

“Yes, Mother?” Lila said.

“Where the fuck did I go wrong with you both?” She whirled around to face us, and her cheeks were bright red. “Are you two idiots? Mentally disabled? Do I need to have you tested for handicaps?” she spat.

We said nothing. Anything we said at this point would only make it worse.

“What the fuck is this?” She slammed a newspaper on the table in front of us. I saw the title, *Congresswoman Carlisle Sells Out Hampshire Park to Foreign Business Collective*, and beneath it, a tidy little byline and portrait of a certain redhead.

Beside me, I saw Lila’s face pale. “Mother, we were doing what we could to manage the situation without bothering you —” she started.

“Shut the fuck up. I don’t care what the two of you thought you were doing. You should have come to me at once. Are you too stupid to manage an imbecilic low-class idiot like this... *this*—” She paused and glanced down at the byline. “Brooklyn James?”

“Jude and I were on it. We were handling it,” Lila began, but Mother interrupted her with a smack. Yep, our mother, darling of the Republican party—future presidential hopeful—was an abuser. The physical abuse was not even the worst of it, either. How else do you think Lila and I ended up so fucked up?

I shoved her hand away from Lila. “Watch it, Mother. We’re a lot bigger now and harder to push around.”

Mother stabbed the panic button below her desk, and her security team swept in and grabbed us both. They knew the

drill. “Put her in the basement,” she said, and I knew I wasn’t wrong to think I detected a note of glee in her voice. She loved to torture us, and this was one of her favorite methods.

“No, stop, listen. This is all my fault,” I said. “Put me in the basement. I provoked the girl, and I was the one who decided not to let you know about it.”

Lila had her heels dug into the sumptuous carpet of the study as the men dragged her backward. Mother held up a hand to stop them.

“Your fault, hm? Well, then this is even a better punishment. Go upstairs and enjoy your evening in your room while your sister suffers in the dark.” I started forward, but she flicked a hand. “Take them out of here. Make sure he stays in his room.”

“Mother, please! Please! We’ll do better. I promise!” Lila couldn’t help herself, even though we both knew she wouldn’t change her mind. She had been locking us in that basement since we were toddlers, giving us both a deep-seated and crippling fear of the dark.

I screwed my eyes shut, fury pounding in my veins at my mother and her bullshit and my inability to actually do anything about it as her security team dragged me to my room and slammed the door shut before settling in front of it to make sure I didn’t go anywhere. I knew without even looking that one would be down below my window as well. I lit a cigarette and took a deep drag, breathing it in as if for dear life as I sat at the edge of my bed.

*Fucking Brooklyn.* That fucking bitch. This was a hell of an answering shot. I would get her back no matter what it took. I was going to make that chick’s life a living hell.

At my desk and opening my laptop, ready to do some research, I heard the click of stiletto heels coming down my hall. I swung around, wondering who was coming. My mother to taunt me perhaps. Could she possibly have let Lila come back up early?

The door swung open, and Margeaux was ushered in by one of the security team members.

“Not now, Margeaux,” I said, deflated. I hadn’t really believed she’d let Lila out so quickly, but still.

“Yes, now, Judiekins.” Margeaux’s voice dripped honey as she came and dropped a paper on my desk. *The paper*. With that pretty little redhead’s face at the top. I snatched it up and looked at her.

“Where did you—” I stopped as something dawned on me. “Margeaux... are you the one who told my mother about this?”

She said nothing, simply smiling at me.

“You? *You* did this? What the fuck is wrong with you?” I stood up so quickly my chair shot backward and crashed to the ground.

“What’s wrong with me? Are you kidding me? You were supposed to take care of this! You said that you and Lila would handle it last week, and now, look at this.” She stabbed a finger at the front page. “My family is mentioned in this article too, Jude. And if you think I’m going to hang around and let my father catch wind of this without doing something to stop it, well, then think again,” she said. “You know as well as I do the kind of life we come from. Do you know what my father will do to me if he sees this?”

“Margeaux, you know my mother. You know what she does. She has Lila locked up in the motherfucking basement right now. How could you do this?”

Margeaux shrugged. “Better her than me.”

I saw red.

“You bitch. Lila is your best friend!” Fury raced through my veins, and I was helpless to stop it.

No, I didn’t want to stop it.

I was looking at the devil incarnate, winking at me in a pretty pink cashmere top and slacks suitable for wearing around your future mother-in-law and almost certainly no

underwear on underneath. I lunged forward and wrapped one hand around her throat. This was different than our usual games, which were more silk ties than rough rope, and she shrieked in real fear. The door burst open, and the security team thundered in, separating the two of us.

As soon as we weren't alone anymore and she was safe behind the beefy shoulders of two men, Margeaux regained her composure.

“Blame me all you want, babe. This one is on you. Get your shit together and shut up the girl. You can also blame yourself for missing out on a little fun tonight.” And with that, she turned and cocked one hip, winked, and left.

Furious, I pounded my desk and howled. That bitch would pay for this.

That I was sure of.

## BROOKLYN

So, it was done.

My article was released. Nothing I could do now to change it.

My editor had loved it and hadn't changed a word. Going out with Merritt on Friday night had helped relax me, and actually, we'd had a really good time. He had taken me to a little French restaurant that I had always wanted to try but couldn't afford and hadn't pushed things too far. We had laughed, sipped glasses of rich Bordeaux, and shared a cheese plate.

It was just the right level of romantic and light, the perfect first date. I had felt flirty and free in the flared black mini dress Tae had lent me, and at the end of the night, Merritt and I had shared one perfect, chaste, gentle kiss. We had another date on Wednesday night. He was picking me up to watch his home lacrosse game.

But for each day since Friday, I had felt the pressure building.

I went through Tuesday feeling jumpy and ill at ease. If I was at war with the Wonder Twins before, my latest move had been a nuclear bomb dropped on their capital. I made it through all of my classes without seeing either of them, but as I drove to work, my heart pounded.

I slipped as unobtrusively through the halls of the Carlisle Manor as possible that day. Since I had the evening shift, I wasn't the one cleaning the bedrooms, which was a huge



relief. I made it out into the garden without seeing a single member of the family and began to relax some. That was until I heard my name drifting from one of the upstairs windows as I weeded the path.

“Fucking Brooklyn...”

I froze and looked up. Two twin lights glowed in the darkness, and I knew they were both in Jude’s room, smoking. From the smell of it, one of them was smoking pot. Just in case, I slipped my cell phone out of my pocket and hit Record.

I heard Lila speaking. “Here’s my idea. We go to the PTA group and offer a fat donation to the local public schools. I won’t make it clear that it’s a bribe, but they’ll know that’s what it is. It won’t take much to have them pull their support.”

Jude’s incoming voice dripped with disdain. “Good, but not far enough. I did a little digging last night, and guess who is a recipient of the prestigious Carlisle Full Ride Scholarship?”

*Oh, no.* “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Nope. I’m going to talk to the scholarship committee tomorrow to see if there’s anything in the paperwork that would exclude her. Surely there will be something about upholding the name of the family who’s paying for her to go to this school?”

Lila’s voice perked up. “Great. You stay on that. I’ll do my part, and between us, she’ll have to shut up.”

“Don’t worry, Li. We’ll get this handled.”

Then, Lila’s voice started to shake. “I can’t go back into the basement, Jude. This has to work.”

The basement? What was she talking about?

“You won’t. We’ll get this fixed for Mother, and she’ll leave you alone,” Jude said, his voice soft.

From there, their conversation moved onto other things and I crept away, careful not to make a sound as I finished my tasks and left the manor for the evening. And while I had a host of things to mull over, I kept coming back to that one

statement Lila made. The statement that sent shivers down my spine with the tone of her voice that echoed inside my head.

*What is this basement?*

She was obviously afraid. That much was for certain. But, why? As I sat on my unkept bed and drew in a deep breath, I ran the article through my head. The language I used and the verbiage that I knew would incite more protests, more gatherings, and more pickets. My eyes fell closed as I fell back onto the mattress, spreading my arms out and enjoying the freedom I felt whenever I was away from school and away from that insane family. I tried to focus on the good I was doing. On the evil I was trying to keep out of political office. I couldn't forget the fear in Lila's voice, though.

“What the hell is in that basement?” I murmured to myself.

As I opened my eyes, I stared at the ceiling. I thought back to a memory of my childhood that first opened my eyes to the atrocities this world had to offer. I thought about a young little boy I had in my fourth grade class. Very quiet, always sat in the back, and always got picked on. I remembered it clearly because it was the first time I ever stood up for someone. It was the first time I ever put my body in between two warring people and took a stance on something. The names those playground kids were calling that little boy seemed mean to me at the time, and how they pushed him around seemed so cruel, but it wasn't until I got older that I understood the context of things.

The bruises I found on the boy's arms and back as he cried in my arms that day weren't from the bullies on the playground. And a frightful thought crept up to the back of my mind.

*Are the Carlisle kids being abused?*

I shot up from my laid position and stared at the wall. I saw my fourth-grade self holding that small boy on the playground with dirty clothes and stinky hair. I remembered not understanding as I told my parents what happened and the concern that dripped over their faces as I continued telling them about the incident. I remember my father calling the

police while Mom kept reassuring me that everything was all right. That I did the right thing by talking, even though I had no idea what in the world she was going on about.

It wasn't until later that I understood the context of what happened.

And it didn't take a genius to see the similarities in this situation.



## JUDE

On Wednesday, I skipped my 9:00 a.m. to have a little chat with the head of the Carlisle scholarship board while Lila tackled the PTA, because I wasn't going to let another day go by without addressing this Brooklyn bullshit.

Each day that passed only added to my determination to take this bitch down. The lowlife scum that put my sister in that fucking basement with her pointless rhetoric. She had no idea who she was pissing off. She had no idea who she was messing with. And she had no idea what would happen to myself and my sister if we didn't stop her. I didn't have a choice, and neither did Lila. We had to shut this girl up, otherwise our lives were on the line.

My relentless dreams of tumbling her into my bed made me wake up angrier and more determined. The rock hard erections I had to relieve in the shower every morning while Margeaux slept only added fuel to my fire. I didn't know what kind of witchery she had worked on me, but I was geared for battle.

I'd take her down, one way or another.

I couldn't give a shit less if my mom ever won another election, but I sure as hell wasn't going to stand around and let Lila get taken down. That was my sister, and my younger sister to boot. It was my responsibility to protect her. To shield her from Mother's wrath. It was my job to make sure she made it out of this shit alive, no matter the cost to myself. And if that meant shutting up some redheaded know-it-all who didn't

come from anything important, then so be it. I'd also decided against telling my sister that Margeaux was to blame for her night in the basement. All it would do was upset her, and we needed to point our energy in the direction of one person at a time.

I might not have been able to protect her from being dragged down into the dark, but I could protect her from finding out her best friend had been the cause.

I had read Brooklyn's article carefully, probably about twenty times that first night, smoking cigarette after cigarette until even my practiced lungs burned and my breath rasped. I had fact-checked every piece, and damned if it hadn't all checked out. There wasn't even a stray comma to be seen. As much as I hated to admit it, this little redhead had done her research and produced an article even I—through my cloud of fury—could respect.

And it made me hate her even more.

I didn't have to wait long to get into my talk with the scholarship board. In fact, I didn't have to wait at all. And whether that was a byproduct of my name, or whether Mother called them to let them know to expect me, I enjoyed strolling through that place with my head held high. And while my talk with the scholarship board had gone about as expected. While there perhaps wasn't a clause that specifically stated the recipient couldn't badmouth the Carlisle family, they did hand over the exact contracts this Brooklyn girl had to sign in order to receive the grant, and Mother wasted no time in checking it over. Less than an hour after my meeting with the scholarship board, she sent me a text about a very specific section. One that might actually get us out of this mess. And the section stated something about 'character that upholds the Carlisle name.'

My mother may be evil, but she was nothing if not thorough. So now, all I had to do was find the bitch and scare her.

I prowled campus looking for her, starting at the newspaper office. It was busy, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Which I thought was a bit odd, since she was a journalism major. Oh, well, I had an entire campus I could look through. And if I had to stop by her office a second—or even third—time, then so be it. However, as I walked through campus, my phone rang. And I saw my sister was calling me.

I picked up the phone. “Hey.”

Lila didn’t waste any time. “It’s done. Moms are out.”

“Good. Scholarship board had good news for us as well. Had to get Mother in on it, though. So, I need this to work.”

“Good. Later.” She hung up. We were both too worked up for pleasantries.

I headed over to the football field, wondering if maybe my prey was working on another little protest over there, when I spotted a shining head of red hair.

*Gotcha.*

I locked in on her as I walked down the hill. I kept my eyes on her, weaving in and out of students that continued to congregate. With a smirk on my face and my hands slipped deeply into my suit pants pockets, I drew closer, readying myself for war. But, as I got closer, I saw she was with someone. A tall, dashing man with an idiotic smile I’d recognize anywhere.

“Merritt Hearst?” I murmured to myself.

Good Lord, that douchebag lacrosse bro had himself practically draped over Brooklyn. And while she looked less than pleased about it, they were... holding hands? I felt a growl working its way up the back of my throat. I felt my eyes narrow as my bones shook with fury. For some reason, the sight of Merritt and Brooklyn making goo-goo eyes at each other like fucking idiots made my heartbeat ratchet up and my fists clench. He ran a hand down her back, and it took all of my strength not to charge over and chuck him against the fence around the field. I saw him take out a bag of Big-League Chew and hand her some. The hell was this, third grade? I didn’t even know they made that stuff anymore. Why didn’t he just chew regular tobacco like an actual man and grow a set?

*What a clown.*

I forced myself to take a deep breath. I forced this weird sensation bubbling in my gut to abate for the time being. I had to focus. I had to plan. There was a smarter way to play this, and I was all about the long game. So, I slowed my canter to a saunter and started my way for the happy couple.\

*Keep your cool, Jude.*

When I was right behind the two little love birds, I purred, “Hey, baby.” Brooklyn almost leaped out of her skin at the sound of my voice—*hmmm, a little jumpy are we, Rosie?*—and the two whipped around to face me. I reached out and stroked her cheek with the back of my hand. “Good to see you again after last night.”

“Jude, what the fuck?” Brooklyn said as she slapped my hand away.

“You two know each other?” Merritt looked between the two of us, uncertain. He may be a big man on the lacrosse field, but there was no question who the alpha dog was here.

“Yeah, man.” I slung one arm around Brooklyn. “We’re together. Didn’t you know?” My voice was pleasant, but my eyes held a warning. He took a step back and put up his hands.

“I didn’t know, dude, I swear.” I stifled a laugh. The dude wasn’t even looking at her.

Brooklyn finally reacted. “Don’t listen to him, Merritt. Of course we’re not together. I can’t stand him.”

I chuckled. “She’s so cute, right? Though, I’m hoping that little hand-hold I saw over here was a simple, innocent, friendly sort of thing. Right?”

He looked at her and then back to me, unsure of what to do. She tried to struggle out of my grasp, but I held her firm with one hand while the other traced her body.

“Don’t be like that, baby,” I said, skimming a finger under the waistband of her skirt and nestling my face into her neck. “You know we have something special.”

Merritt took another few steps back.



“Merritt, for fuck’s sake, don’t be stupid. He’s engaged to Margeaux,” Brooklyn said, her voice tight. With frustration or arousal, I couldn’t help but wonder. And when she tried pushing me away again, I only doubled down on my efforts, holding her so close to me it almost made me want to meld with her body.

Just like I did in every single fucking dream for the past week or so.

Then, I heard my sister’s voice speak up. Right on time, and we hadn’t even planned this shit. “Eh, Margeaux knows that men weren’t made to be monogamous.” I smiled against Brooklyn’s neck as my sister continued. “Every guy needs a sidepiece. Even if my brother has chosen a trashy, townie sidepiece.”

Lila took Merritt’s arm. “Care if I come cheer for you?” She fluttered dark eyelashes at him, and he was lost. He looked over at Brooklyn, unsure of where to go from here. And with every passing glance, I felt the man stepping away from Brooklyn and towards my sister while this girl slowly stopped wiggling away from my grip.

*Maybe she wants me as much as I want her, the lustful little bunny.*

Then, Merritt finally caved. “I’m not really sure what’s going on here, but I’m not into it. It’s been fun, but we’re over.”

Brooklyn moved toward him, but I planted her next to me. “Wait! Are you kidding me? You actually believe these idiots!?”

I pressed my lips to her ear. “I’d be careful what you say, Little Rosie. Since you’re required to have ‘character that upholds the Carlisle name.’”

Her voice lowered to a hiss. “Then I’m right on point with my actions, you carnivorous little snoot.”

Lila tugged on Merritt’s arm. “Come on, let’s go watch you clobber some people, hmmm?”

And with that, he turned and headed into the game. Taking my sister with him so I could have some alone time with this little... monstrosity.

I grinned. "Shall we stay and watch your only chance at a rich man walk away?" I said kindly to Brooklyn, who had stilled at Merritt's words.

Then, she turned to me and yelled, pushing so hard against me she almost knocked me off my feet. Which was kind of hot. "You are such a fucking *bastard!*"

I laughed, taking her with me as I stumbled. "What do you weigh, 115 soaking wet? No chance you're getting away, Rosie girl. And speaking of wet, I'd bet you're a little bit wet right now. Should we go check?" I grabbed her by both arms, but she fought me every step of the way. So, when I knew we were out of the curious eye of college students, I bent down and tossed her over my shoulder. I smacked her ass every time she kicked up, causing her to squeal, and the sound sent shivers down my spine. I carried her into the tree line that bordered campus, shrouding us away from the rest of the world. And when we were far enough away that no one could see us, I pressed her back against a tree as her legs dangled, knowing damn good and well she'd wrap them around me in no time.

I pinned her with a glare. "I want you to listen very, very carefully to me now. While you were busy making eyes with douche bro over there—who has left you without a single look back, I might add—my sister and I were busy. Your PTA mom group has dropped you like a hot potato, and you and I both know that they were your only legitimate members. The Green Group is high 95 percent of the time, and everyone knows it. A protest with just them as supporters makes you look silly and weak and will catch the attention of no one, you see."

When she started to speak, I pressed one hand against her mouth. Clamping down and silencing her as her eyes widened.

"Not yet. The man is still speaking." I watched her bright green eyes flash with fury at that and continued. "There goes your protest group, for now, anyways. As for the rest of it,

keep this in mind. The Carlisle Scholarship *does, in fact*, stipulate that we can cease support of a student who does not reflect our values, or on the basis of any character issue deemed to be not in keeping with the Carlisle name as decided by the board. So if you decide to write any more little articles about my mother, there's a good chance you'll find yourself without a single penny in your college fund. I don't know you that well, but I would guess there's no one out there willing or able to fund you at one of the Northeast's most expensive universities. Just keep all of that in mind while you're off to do your little crusade."

I removed my hand from her mouth and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Now, you may speak."

As soon as my hand pressed against the tree, she spit in my face, "Fuck you, you arrogant, shitless bastard! If you think your threats are going to stop me, think again. I'm going to come at you with every single thing I've got. Fuck the scholarship, fuck your family, and fuck *you!*"

As she shouted, I was distracted by her heaving cleavage, as red and freckled as her face. I was rock hard in my jeans to the point of it being painful, and I knew she felt it. I was pressed much too close to her for her not to feel it. Suddenly, it was too much to resist. I had her pinned against the tree, and I could tell the exact moment she noticed it wasn't a candy bar in my pocket pressing against her, what with how flushed her cheeks grew.

"You... you—" She gasped, struggling for words, and that was it. Those flustered little words were all it took for me to cave.

I kissed her. Hard. All the fury, the adrenaline, and the challenge of her pounded through my veins and came together to make me the horniest I had ever been in my life. For one moment, she was still against me—her body stiffening and readying itself to reject me. Then, I felt it soften. And like magic, her legs locked around me as her tongue slip into my mouth. Her hands—pressed against my chest defensively a moment ago—softened, and then wrapped around my neck.

I felt her legs squeeze me, pulling me closer, and closer. And even closer still. I slipped a hand beneath her top and cupped one breast, tracing my finger over her nipple. She groaned against my lips as she melted into me. I pushed her back against the tree and moved my hand south, beneath the hem of her skirt and tracing that secret place through her lace underwear, which was already wet. I slipped one finger beneath the hem of her panties and felt her wet lower lips calling to me. And as she moaned down the back of my throat, I dipped into her and pulsed it steadily.

In, out.

In, out.

Her hands moved to the button of my jeans. “Now?” She gasped, tearing at the zipper. “I’m ready.”

I wasted no time in getting my cock out before she placed her hands against my chest to stop me. “Protection?”

I pulled my hand away with one last, lingering stroke and pulled out the condom I kept in my back pocket at all times. I wasted no time in ripping that damn thing open before rolling it down my girth, feeling her watching my every move. My eyes met hers as I situated myself at her entrance. I felt her heat guiding me toward the place I’d wanted to be for days now. And with one hard thrust, I finally felt her tight walls around me.

Before my mouth muffled the little scream she let out just for me.

I had never felt like this before. The unity, the warmth, and the passion that floated between us left me breathless. My eyes squeezed shut as I ground my hips against hers. I felt her nails raking down my arms before her head fell back against the tree. I kissed down her neck. I nibbled at her pulse point, pulling more salacious sounds from her that I knew would haunt my wildest dreams. We moved together, rocking and groaning and losing ourselves in each other. And if you had held a gun to my head, I don’t think I could have stopped.

She panted for the breath I afforded her. I pressed her tightly against that tree, my nails tearing into the bark for leverage. The wet sounds our bodies produced made me salivate for more as my hands palmed her clothed tits. I felt her walls collapsing. I felt my hips stuttering. I grunted down the back of her throat as her tongue slid across the roof of my mouth, filling my balls with more to give her. And as her body shook against mine—her pussy milking me for all I had—I buried myself in her one last time as I panted for her breath.

“Oh, God. Jude. Fuck,” she moaned.

I growled at the sound of my name falling from her pouty lips. I felt her face drop against my collarbone, and I’d never felt so powerful in all my fucking life. I felt my cock filling the condom, and I imagined myself filling her. Marking her as mine. Marking her with my inner scent so every man who dared to hold her hand knew exactly who he was messing with.

We finished together—something I’d never even shared with Margeaux—and the heady feeling spun the world around my body on its axis.

As I collapsed against the tree, holding Brooklyn in place, I found myself doing something I’d never done before. I softly kissed her forehead. I pressed my cheek against her fuzzy hair, allowing the shadows of the woods to cloak us in their darkness. That had been the orgasm to end all orgasms. I mean, what Margeaux and I did was nothing compared to what I had just shared with this girl.

But, a push against my chest knocked me away, sending me stumbling as my condom-covered cock fell limply between my legs.

I scoffed. “The hell are you doing?”

Brooklyn yanked her skirt down. “You think this changes something? Yeah, you caught me with my guard down, and we fucked. That doesn’t mean a damn thing. I’m going home, and you’re going back to your fiancée.”

Before I could say a word with my lust-clouded haze, she stalked out of the trees, fidgeting with her clothes as she went. If she had bothered to stay, I could have told her about the leaves and twigs in her hair. Oh, well. Someone eventually would.

Watching her go, I rolled the condom off, cast it off to the side, pulled up my pants, and lit a cigarette. I sat back against the tree, exhausted from my efforts as I drew in drag after drag. I still felt her, though. I still smelled her on my body. That woman was infuriating, but damn it she was good at what she did. What kind of girl stormed off after sex like that, though? Especially when she was that good? Didn't she want to gloat, or make some sort of comment that she finally took the all-powerful Jude Carlisle to his knees? I considered myself practiced in this area, and in *every* aspect, she stood out from the crowd. Her words stuck in my brain, though. A phrase that kept turning itself around as I finished my first cigarette and quickly lit another.

Had I thought that would change something?

The weird thing was, a part of me wished it had.



## LILA

Taking that bitch down almost made dealing with Merritt's puppy dog eyes and inane chatter worth it.

Almost, but not quite.

I hated lacrosse and had always hated Merritt, and that didn't change as I pretended to watch his stupid game. Not only was he weak, but he was easy to manipulate and had been since we were kids. Although that worked in my favor today, I still couldn't help but feel disgusted at how easy it had been to tear him away from Little Miss Priss back there.

Finally, the game ended and I had made an excuse to avoid going out with Merritt and his teammates afterward. I wasn't eager to be in the same building as my mother, but I was ready for a drink, and it was not a wine kind of night.

After my time in the basement, even my bedroom was giving me a claustrophobic feeling, so I mixed up a cocktail shaker of Tom Collins with an extra serving of gin and headed out to the garden.

I didn't usually spend a lot of time in the garden, but it was the perfect evening for it. I stretched out on a bench tucked into an alcove of shrubs and poured myself a healthy dose. I sipped and thought about my day. Before long, I heard the back door creak open and the rustling of the shed. One of the workers, most likely, taking care of the evening chores. I leaned further back, eager to avoid any kind of human interaction. I was a little off the path here, but not much. If



they needed to come over here, I would tell them to work around me and get out my way quickly.

I needed this spot tonight.

I watched the worker come down the path, buckling a tool belt around her waist. Something about her seemed the slightest bit familiar. I cocked my head and took another drink. I had just about decided that she looked familiar because, duh, she worked in my house. But, when I saw her pull her cap off to flip her head forward to scratch at the base of her neck, a capful of bright red hair spilled out. And I sat bolt upright.

*No. Fucking. Way.*

She scooped that bright, distinctive, stupid-ass hair back up and tucked it away in her cap, skimming one finger around the edge to check for stray pieces before she continued on the path. And with every step, I kept my eyes on her. I followed her, step by step, wondering if she'd look up and realize who was following her. She wasn't an idiot, though. I knew she'd feel me staring at her. And after only making it a few steps, she turned and noticed me on our little stroll.

Which made her drop the sack she was carrying.

“Holy shit!” she exclaimed, and I knew for sure that this was her. Her face turned white as snow. I read her guilt and fear of being recognized from here. I said nothing and simply stared at her, curious to see what would happen next. “I mean, my apologies, ma’am. Please forgive the disturbance.”

She ducked her head in a ridiculous show of subservience as I watched coolly.

I nodded, trying to hide my recognition of her. “Not to worry,” I said as I sat down on a nearby bench. “I’ll just get out of your way.”

“Oh... no, I mean you really don’t have to do that, ma’am, I can come back—” she floundered. She was definitely freaked about my possibly recognizing her, the weasel, because I knew their orders were to work around Jude and me no matter what we wanted.

“No problem,” I said, keeping my face expressionless. I headed up the path, desperate to look back but forcing myself not to give anything away and was rewarded at the door. The thick plate glass gave a delightfully clear image of her white, gaping face staring at my back as I opened the door and stepped back inside.

However, as soon as I had shut the door behind me, I strode quickly across the house to where she wouldn't be able to overhear, even if she had been stupid enough to follow me inside, and pulled up a contact on my phone.

“Margeaux?” I asked when she answered. “We have to talk.”



## JUDE

Ever since our encounter in the woods, I hadn't been able to get Brooklyn off my mind. If I'd thought before that fucking her would get her out of my system and out of my head, I had been completely wrong. It was worse now. The dreams were every night, sometimes more than once, and none of the things that usually gave me pleasure were working. And anytime I saw Margeaux, the thought of sleeping with her gave me hardcore nausea.

Even cigarettes had lost their pleasure.

I had to see her again. I had to figure out why our connection was so strong. Shit, if it was just chemistry, then that was even better. I would let my dick act as a dowsing rod and lead me right to her to have her again and again, as many times as I could until this fire in my veins was put out.

I looked for her on campus but didn't see her. Maybe she had taken our warning, or maybe she was biding her time. But she was nowhere to be seen, and I didn't like that. Things had been quiet at home, so I was assuming everything was handled for now.

I wanted to see her, though.

*I need to see her.*

It wasn't long before I finally decided that I had to keep looking until I had exhausted all avenues of where she might be. Then, an idea hit me. Why the hell was I looking for some girl? I knew how to make them come to me, all I had to do was get her attention. And I knew something that was loud

enough to do the trick. I called the president of the Carlisle Scholarship Board and asked for a little favor, and of course the call worked. So, all I had to do was sit back and bide my time in a little coffee shop in campus I'd become fond of.

And after finishing my espresso, I headed for the library. Headed for the room that I knew had been rented out. I saw the sign on the door that already been put up for me, saying 'Mandatory Scholarship Counseling', and I grinned as I slipped inside.

The bait had been set. The calls, placed. So, all I had do to was sit down, kick back, and wait for her to come to me.

*Perfection.*



## BROOKLYN

It had been three days since my encounter with Lila in the garden. Each day that went by, I relaxed a little more. I was starting to convince myself that she hadn't seen me pull out my hair, that she hadn't recognized me at all.

But the doubts were loud in my head. If she *had* noticed me, why had she stayed so cool? She hadn't seemed to react at all to me when I walked up, and by the smell of her, she'd had a lot of hard liquor. I'd been the idiot, stammering and dropping things, and could I have been more obvious I was terrified of running into her. I would just have to hope she would assume all the employees were terrified of her, which wasn't a stretch.

It wasn't only thoughts of Lila that had been bothering me, though. I'd had high hopes for Merritt and myself. He had seemed so sweet and genuine amidst a sea of rich, entitled jerks. But, after that stupid little show Jude and his idiotic sister put on, he hadn't called or messaged since I'd last seen him. Part of me was hurt, but part of me was glad. Merritt had shown his true colors and I had been right to avoid dating Bryers students. A trend I'd see through until graduation, and beyond.

*No more Bryers boys for me. I need a man in my life.*

I was doing a pretty good job of getting back to my normal self when my phone rang. And usually, when I didn't recognize the number, it wasn't a good thing. This number I did recognize, though, and it never held any good news. The

scholarship committee was calling me, and I wondered if this was it.

I wondered if this was the phone call I'd been dreading since my run-in with Judge.

"This is Brooklyn," I said as I picked up.

"Ms. James, my name is Carter Hedgerow. I'm the president of the Carlisle Scholarship Board."

*I am so screwed.* "How can I help you, Mr. Hedgerow?"

I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly as dry as a desert. But, the tone of his voice was cool, which abated my worries a bit.

"We have caught wind of some extracurricular activities you have undertaken that may impact your scholarship."

*Mayday! Mayday! Five-alarm fire! We're going down here, guys!*

My breath caught in my throat. I hadn't even done anything since Lila and Jude had threatened me. Well... except have the hottest sex of my life with Jude. Is that why they had ratted already? Did Jude simply take what he wanted before turning me over and ruining my life? I mean, it made sense. I'm not sure why I expected that asshole to keep his mouth shut. Still, I made myself focus since this President-man-person was still talking on the phone.

"...we would like to have you attend a counseling meeting with a member of our board. Pending the results of our meeting, we will make a final determination on how to move forward." I nodded dumbly into the phone, but he continued despite my silence.

"Ms. James, there is one more thing I need to make clear to you: please be aware that the member of our board who will be counseling you during this meeting will have the final say on the board's decision, whether that be to continue working with you or to part ways permanently. This decision is final and unappealable. Please respect the authority of this member and realize that your fate rests entirely in his hands. It is within our rights at this time to terminate your scholarship based on



recent events. This is the last chance being given to you. Do not make the mistake of taking it for granted.”

“I understand,” I said eagerly.

*So there is hope.*

I would do whatever it took to convince this person. If there was a chance I could get out of this mess with my scholarship intact, I was taking it. No matter what I had to do.

The man continued. “I hope you do. I’ve taken a look at your transcripts and portfolio. You are a very bright young lady, and the board believes you will go on to do great things. We hope to maintain our mutual relationship moving forward.”

I thanked him, hung up, and hurried toward the library. They wanted to meet me right now, and I knew I couldn’t keep them waiting a second longer. I had no time at all to prepare for the meeting to make my case, but I couldn’t let that get to me. After all, that was probably why they had planned it this way, so I couldn’t prepare a proper response. Hell, I wasn’t even dressed right for the occasion. I glanced down at my form-fitting yoga pants and baby tee. Hopefully, the member would understand. He was sure to be some rich, stodgy old dude, and that could either work in my favor, or not. It depended on how much guilt and sympathy I could make him feel for my situation.

*Nothing to it but do it.*

So, even with the sinking feeling in the pit of my gut, I held my head high and hurried toward the library to meet my fate. Along with my heart pounding in my ears.



## JUDE

Hedgerow was calling, so I answered my phone. “Yes?”

“She’s on her way, Mr. Carlisle.”

I ended the call and slipped my phone into my pocket with a predatory smile. Time to set the scene before my little rabbit entered her trap. I’d already had the library kick everyone out and close early for the day, citing emergency maintenance. And as I watched the last of everyone scatter from the shelves of books lined from floor to ceiling, I reached into my pocket and fiddled the key to the conference room I was in.

She could be upset with me all she wanted, but I didn’t make Hedgerow lie to her or anything. Her actions were deplorable, given the circumstances and the family she was bucking against. I mean, really, did she think she’d get off just because she—well—got off on my cock? I grinned wildly as I inched my way back into the conference room. I closed the door, waiting until the last of the library lights turned off. And after I knew the place had been vacated, I left the door cracked open with the light on. It would stand out in the darkness from everything else, making it easier for my Little Rosie to find her way into the wolf’s trap.

And once she was inside, the door only opened with the key on my pocket. As soon as she pulled that door shut behind her, it would lock from the outside and she’d be helpless without me.

Maybe then, she’d understand the symbiotic relationship we had with one another.

I stalked back to the table and chairs and eased myself down onto the uncomfortable microfiber. I grimaced at the feeling of it as I crossed my leg over my knee. I mean, when Mother told me she wanted to ‘revamp’ the library as a donation to the school, I figured she’d step things up a notch. Get nicer bookshelves or donate more books to fill them. At the very least, get some comfortable seating in this damned place. But, all she did was fix it back up to its ‘original splendor’ before slapping our name across it and calling it a success.

*That’s the kind of shit Brooklyn spoke about in her article.*

I pushed the thought away as a shiver ran down my spine. If Mother even suspected I was thinking something like that, I’d be in that damn basement for weeks. I was on the side of my family, and that was that. I’d indulge my little fantasies with my Rosie, marry Margeaux to please our families, and keep her as my little side piece until I was done with her. Keep my friends close, but my enemies closer, and Brooklyn was definitely an enemy of this family. But, if I played my cards right in a little bit, I’d get to keep her as well as get her to shut her mouth.

Even if I did have to shove my dick in it to get her to stop talking.

I drew in a deep breath as silence filled the expanse around me. I folded my hands in my lap, staring at the door as I trained my ears onto the sounds around me. Wherever Brooklyn was, it wasn’t about to matter, because the second she stepped into this room and closed the door behind her she’d understand exactly who held her future in their hands. Whether she expected Mother, or Hedgerow himself, or some other rich man from on high—none of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was the shock that rolled over her face before I pounced her, forcing her to moan the same name she spat at in disgust during daylight hours.

I’d make sure she’d never forget me, even if she did forget her place in life.

And now, all I had to do was wait.



## BROOKLYN

I rushed into the library, so focused on my meeting that I didn't notice at first that all the lights were off, and that not a person was to be seen. I ran up the stairs to the third floor, following the numbers until I found the door with the sign I was looking for: Mandatory Scholarship Counseling.

Yet still, my panic overrode the other things my brain was registering in an attempt to save my scholarship.

At first, it seemed like no one was inside. I didn't let it stop me, though. Whoever stood behind that door held my future in their hands, and I couldn't let my future implode because of some horny little asshole that wanted to control me as much as possible. I was a powerful woman. An intelligent woman, just like Hedgerow said. All I had to do was convince the person behind this door of the same thing, no matter what Jude said to them. So, as I drew in a deep breath I held my head high and pushed the door open to peek inside.

I was sure I was in the right place, but why was it so dark in here?

Then, a low voice I didn't recognize spoke. "Ah, Ms. James, you've arrived. Please, come in and have a seat."

I jumped at the reverberant sound. It echoed off the corners of the empty room, but I was still wary of the fact that there weren't any lights on. And what was when I finally had my wits about me to look around the library. I gazed off the balcony and saw no one inside. I wrinkled my brow at all the

lights that had been shut off. Why did it look like the library was closed?

*Something isn't right.*

But, as my eyes faced forward again, I finally detected a silhouette of someone sitting at the opposite end of the room. They seemed to be facing away from me, and I felt my heart stop in my chest. I couldn't move my legs. I couldn't detect a sound around me. Had this library been cleared out because we needed that much privacy? It didn't shock me with the Carlisle name hanging over my head, but I knew things like this were never good.

Especially when it came to the Carlises.

The bass voice spoke again. "Either come in and make your case, or leave my decision to my notes."

*Be strong. You need this scholarship.* "Yes, sir."

I stepped inside the darkened room, and while I wasn't prompted to close the door it felt appropriate for the moment for me to close it. So, I did. I heard it latch pretty heavily and it made me jump again, to which the man across the room chuckled.

And for some reason, the sound felt more familiar.

"I—uh, I apologize if I'm late. I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me today. If I had a bit more notice, I would have dressed more appropriately and prepared—"

I noticed the man across the room wasn't even moving. He hadn't turned to face me, nor did he do anything to interrupt me. It seemed odd, and I felt a cool sensation or warning work its way through my gut. I mean, why were the lights so dim in here? Why hadn't the counselor turned around?

*Get out.*

I started to back up toward the door as my flight senses took over. I took a small, ginger step toward the door behind me as the man spun around slowly. I saw the whites of his eyes and my gut clenched. I reached behind me, settling my

hand against the doorknob. But, when I tried to open the door, it wouldn't budge.

*Am I locked in?*

I swallowed hard. "Can I... can I turn on the lights, sir? It's pretty dark. I think being able to see each other would be pertinent for this kind of meeting."

I watched the figure nod. "Turn on the lights, if that will make you more comfortable."

I exhaled a sigh of relief and moved my hand over to the wall. And when I raked my hand up, it flicked on the switch by the door. The instant that light flooded the room, however, any relief I felt a moment ago was drained away and replaced by horror. I knew that voice sounded familiar. I knew the whites of those eyes looked similar to eyes I'd stared at before. My eyes raked over him as an evil smirk appeared on his face, and I wondered what kind of sick game this fuckwad was about to play with me now.

"Jude?" I asked, trying to get my bearings. "What the hell was going on here?"

He motioned with his hand. "Ms. James, please sit. It seems we have a great deal to discuss," he said as his smirk bloomed into grin.

I refused to take another step. "What are you doing here? I'm supposed to be meeting someone from the scholarship committee."

The silence and emptiness from the library painted a very different picture, though. One I hadn't seen through my panic as I rushed to get to this meeting. And then, it hit me, just as he spoke.

*I'm in the right place.* "You're in the right place, Little Rosie."

I snarled. "No. Mr. Hedgerow said the fate of my scholarship resides fully in the decision of the member I was to be meeting wi—."



Jude cut me off, his grin widening. “Well then, you better get to work convincing *my* member that you deserve to remain a part of the Carlisle Scholarship Foundation.”

I watched him stand before he pressed one hand to his crotch, and I felt my face blanch. Was he kidding me? Was this absolute conniving little bastard dangling my scholarship over my head for a bit more sex?

“Why don’t you call people like a normal person, then?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Would you have picked up?”

“No.”

“Then, that’s why.”

As he continued massaging his cock in front of me through his pants, I felt a sure of hot lust pour through my body. For a split second, I was reminded of our time in the woods. I was reminded of that amazing orgasm that poured over my body and weakened me to my core. No man had ever made me feel that way before, and part of me was disgusted that such an absolute twat could make me feel that way.

I snickered. “That’s what this is all about? Getting into my pants again? Fuck you, you perv.”

I turned to the door and pulled it open. *Tried* to pull it open, anyway. And just that quickly, I’d forgotten that I had already tried that. Tried to get out. Tried to open the door. Tried to find my way out of this mess. And yet again, the door reminded me that it was locked from the outside. His chuckle rose from behind me as I turned around slowly. The pieces fell into place as my eyes met his, watching as excitement rushed behind him. He had planned this, every single bit of it. He lured me in here with the sole purpose of giving me this ultimatum, and I didn’t see a way out of it.

*Do I want a way out of it?*

I pushed the thought away. “Give me the key.”

He shrugged innocently. “What key?”

I took a step toward him. “Jude, enough of this! Let me out of here! This is not a game! This is my life you’re messing with. My body. My future. Does none of that matter to you?”

Of course, it didn’t. The only thing that mattered to him was his own life. His own accomplishments. His own possessions. He started walking toward me and I felt myself back up, turning about the room so as to keep my distance from this maniac. I was both scared of him and furious at myself for being scared, because I was never scared. I prided myself at staring fear in the face and laughing at it. But, the more Jude advanced toward me, eyes locked on mine, the more I felt my knees trembling.

*Is it fear, though?*

When he was close enough to touch me, cornering me like a wild animal, I knew I was done for. I knew he’d take what he wanted for a second time before leaving me in the dust like I’d left him. But instead, he surprised me. As I looked up into his face, feeling his hot breath pulsing softly against my skin, he reached behind himself and pulled up a chair.

“I’m sorry for scaring you, Brooklyn,” he said before sitting down in a chair. “And I’m sorry for teasing you.”

He pulled out another chair next to him, but all I did was look at it. My eyes whipped back to his face as my body refused to sit in front of him, and I watched the left corner of his lips pulled up in a half-smirk while a lock of thick dark hair fell across his forehead.

“Little Rosie, I just want to talk to you, that’s all. Please, take a seat.”

I blinked. “Wait. Are you telling me you lured me in here under the pretense of my scholarship being revoked just to talk to me?”

He shrugged plainly. “Actually... no. Your scholarship *is* under review. I just made sure it would be me you were meeting instead of someone else.”

I was shocked at how awkward the movement looked on him. Jude, the man who was always comfortable no matter

where he was, seemed to be putting on a big act that I still felt myself falling for. Unless it wasn't an act, and this was a genuine side to him he was simply uncomfortable bringing out.

He motioned his hand toward the seat in front of him. "I just want to talk to you. Please, Brooklyn, sit."

My name. He actually used my real name. And I hated how much I loved it in the sound of his voice. Maybe it was because this was the first time I had heard him use my real name. Or, maybe it was because he suddenly seemed weirdly vulnerable. But, for whatever reason, I sat.

I pushed myself against the back of the chair. "Are we locked in here?"

He nodded. "Yes. Until I make a call, neither of us is getting out of here."

I sighed. "What then? What do you want from me that'll get me out of being locked in this room with someone who is nothing but a bully?"

His eyes held mine. "I just wanted to talk about... what happened. In the woods."

I couldn't help admiring that even as uncomfortable as he seemed, he still was locked into my eyes. He was very good at putting up a front, and for a split second the idea of that basement popped back into my head.

*What have you gone through to be so good at fronts, Jude?*

Still, I had a face to keep on, too. "What, you've never slept with someone once? Never had a one-night stand?" I rolled my eyes. "You may not have noticed me over the years, but I'm not blind. I've seen you work your way through girls on and off campus."

"Off campus?" He raised one eyebrow. "You following me, Rosie?"

I flushed. Shit, I had over-revealed my hand. Couldn't have him connecting me as his housekeeper, especially not at this moment, when my entire scholarship rested in the balance.

“I just mean... around town,” I finished lamely, but he seemed to accept it.

“You’re right, I’ve had my share of one-night stands. But nothing like what we experienced. Never a connection like that. And say what you want, but I saw you. I was there, up close and personal. And I’m pretty damn sure it was the same way for you.”

I shifted in my seat, unsure what to say, because no way in hell was I about to admit it had been the hottest sex I had ever had in my life. I’m pretty sure I’d never come within whistling distance of what an orgasm was before that moment. With him, it had been a totally new feeling. A new experience. Like...

“Like flying,” he said, and my eyes widened. He had read my mind. “Shut up,” he said in response to my shocked face, but he sounded almost sheepish and definitely vulnerable.

Then, he sighed. “You’re not going to lose your scholarship, Red.” He stood and closed the distance between us, until he was hovering over me. “You’re keeping your end of the deal so far; there’s no reason to take it away. I just had to see you. I haven’t been able to get you off my mind.”

I expected him to whip his cock out and say ‘just kidding’. I expected him to crouch down and chuckle before tossing me over his shoulder again. And when he did crouch down, I braced myself for a fight. But, instead of commanding my body, he reached out one hand and brushed my cheek. And shockingly enough, his voice turned soft.

“I was wondering if you were feeling the same way, Little Rosie.”

My whole body felt like it was on fire at his proximity. “Nope,” I said, my voice raspy. “Haven’t thought of you at all.”

He chuckled. “Really? So you wouldn’t feel anything if I did this then?”

He ran his hands up my sides, slipping them beneath my top and skimming across my breasts.

I swallowed hard. “Nothing at all.”

“Or this?” He tugged me up from my chair and held me against him, his arm wrapped around my waist. He held me against his body and ground his crotch against me, the heat and strength of it taking my breath away. Then, he slipped a hand under the waistband of my yoga pants, fingering the top edge of my thong.

My voice fell to a whisper. “Not a thing.”

I expected more. I wanted more. Every single part of me cried out for his touch again. But, all at once, his hands were off me and he was backing away. “Okay, then. Guess that’s all cleared up.”

He turned to walk away, but only made it a step before I reached out for him and wrapped my hand around his wrist.

“Get your ass back over here, jerkwad.”

I whipped him around, but the force was so great I stumbled on my own feet. I reached out for him, part of me knowing damn good and well he’d let me plummet to the floor before laughing at me and calling me ‘pathetic’. But instead, he jutted his arms out and he caught me. He caught me in his strong grasp and I clung to him, pressing myself against him like some wanton fool as I craned my neck back to gaze into his eyes.

Then, he didn’t stop moving until my back fell against the nearest wall.

He ripped my shirt off and tossed it on the ground. I took off his, and it joined mine in a heap. I traced my hands across his ridiculously ripped chest, feeling his six-pack, his biceps, his *pecs*. Holy shit. His lips crashed against mine, but only for a second. Just long enough for me to whimper for him to come back as he pulled away. He scooped me into his strong arms and carried me to the table in the middle of the room, dropping me onto it. And as I propped myself up onto my elbows, I watched him pull off my yoga pants and underwear in one fell swoop. He ran a hand down my stomach and cupped one hand where my underwear used to be. Against my bare pussy, and it

made me gasp. My head fell back as his palm softly massaged me. I felt myself growing wet for him just from the heat and proximity of his hand. I was ready to go. I was ready to feel him again. So, I sat up quickly and reached for his waistband, trying to get him out of his pants as well.

“Slow down, Little Rosie. Let me enjoy you.”

He grabbed my arm and pressed a kiss to my wrist. An action so soft and so sweet I thought for certain I was dreaming.

“I want to savor every inch of you,” he whispered against my skin.

He grabbed my arms and held them up as my back sank against the table. He pinned them above my head, kissing a line down my neck to my chest and my stomach. *Holy fuck*. I had never had a boyfriend willing to go down on me, so I was incredibly unprepared for the feeling of his tongue, skillfully bringing me right to the edge before he slowed down.

“No, no, please. I never—I—please,” I groaned.

He paused. “You never what?”

I swallowed hard, staring up at the ceiling. “I’ve never felt this before.”

“What? A tongue between your legs?”

His words hit a part of me I’d never exposed to anyone before. The truth of the matter was I hadn’t been with anyone since the two guys I dated in high school. One of them took my virginity on a dare, and the other dated me solely for the purpose of embarrassing me at my own damn senior prom. Sex, and all that it came with, wasn’t only foreign to me, but almost sickening. And yet, somehow, Jude Carlisle of all people found a way to make me want it again.

I hated, yet adored, him for that. But, I wasn’t ready to answer any other questions he had swirling around in his head.

I sat up quickly, grabbing hold of his thick black hair. “Take me. Now.”

He grinned up at me, his voice silky smooth. “I want you to beg.”

Then, he kissed the inside of my thigh as he slowly moved higher.

“Fuck you,” I breathed.

But then, he stood with a malicious grin on his face as he backed away.

“Okay. I get it. You don’t want—.”

My mind ran away from me. “Jude, *please*.”

He smiled wildly. “Please what?”

My legs started trembling. “Please, fuck me. Fuck me right now.”

“As you wish.”

He yanked down his jeans and entered me in one smooth stroke, and we moved together as wonderfully as I remembered in my dreams. Faster and faster he pumped, until the only sounds we could hear over our groaning were the sounds of wet skin slapping wet skin. It felt like bliss. Absolute heaven, like a slice of paradise the angels had sent just for me. *This* was what people were always talking about, what people were willing to give up everything for. Because with him filling me, here was no world other than this.

No better pleasure than this.

Our bodies rocked as the table creaked. My moans filled the room while his growls filled the crook of my neck. I felt him bite down against my skin and it unleashed an animal within me that bucked and writhed and gasped with every movement he made. He palmed my body as my nails raked down his back. I felt like prey, being taken by the predator that had been stalking me all this time.

And I adored it.

“Come for me,” he commanded.

I gasped for air. “So close. So close. Jude, please. Jude!”

“Come for me, Little Rosie!”

My back arched and my breasts pressed against his chest. I felt him quivering within me as my walls milked his dick for everything it had. I felt him spilling within me, pumping thread after thread of hot arousal against my walls until he had me fully marked. I'd never let a man do anything near that to me. I'd never let a man fill me like this before. And yet, it felt natural with him. With Jude.

With the person who belonged to the family I was supposed to be exposing.

When he dropped down on top of me after we finished together, the slickness of our bodies only made me want him more. I felt his sweat dripping against my skin and his musk filled my nostrils, causing my walls to flutter around his still-thickened girth. I closed my eyes and let the world tilt around me. I soaked up the joyous feeling of his muscles against my curves before I felt something press against my forehead.

And after a moment, when I finally had the strength to open my eyes, I was met with a smile. His smile.

*His eyes are beautiful.*

Jude kissed the tip of my nose. “Hey, you want to grab a drink?”

I laughed. “So what, now we're friends or something?”

He pulled out from between my legs. “I don't know. I don't know what to do about you. All these years we've apparently crossed paths, and honestly, I wish I could go back to that.” He pushed his hair back from his forehead as he stood on wobbly legs. “But now I've met you... you're haunting me. I can't get you out of my head. I dream about you. I crave you... your body, and how you make me feel.”

I pushed myself upright. “No need to get all sappy, weirdo. I'll go get a drink with you. But you're buying.”

He chuckled as I hopped off the desk, feeling full of clean energy, motivation, and happiness. I began to pull on my clothes while he stuffed his cock away, and part of me was disappointed there wouldn't be a round two.



I mean, we did have the library to ourselves.

After everything with Merritt, though, I had been sure that no other guy here would keep my interest. Even as I had interacted with Jude, I had been sure to keep him in a separate sphere. But there was something about him that wouldn't let me pull away for good. Something in his eyes, or the way he became vulnerable around me, that kept dragging me back in even after I'd sworn Hell upon him. When I had started down this path with a goal of bringing the Carlises down, all I had seen was a rich boy always doing exactly what Mommy said.

But, every moment I spent with him like this, I got a new perspective on who he really was.

He pulled the key from his pants pocket. "I guess that'll work. But, we'll make sure to keep this off your scholarship application, yeah?"

I finished putting my clothes back on. "Yeah, probably for the best."

He dangled the key in front of me. "Let's roll, Rosie."

And after snatching it from his grip, I made my way for the door. All the while, feeling his eyes case over me.

A sensation that made me feel more beautiful than I wanted to admit.



## JUDE

Brooklyn and I stayed out all night. Driving around in some shitty car I would've never paid attention to otherwise after picking up a bottle of whiskey she had at her place—because there was no way we could walk into a bar in this town without Margeaux or Lila finding out—we spent the night talking. She dropped me off right as the first rays of the sun began to rise. And I didn't know what kind of witchcraft that girl had, but I fell asleep smiling.

When I got out of bed that morning, it was the most well-rested I had ever felt in my life. No dreams, no nightmares, no desperation to grab for a cigarette as soon as I opened my eyes. I stretched and thought about what we could do together today. What we might be able to get into. And while I didn't understand the type of hold this girl had on me, I knew I had to be in her presence today. I had to taste her, touch her, and smell her. I had to see her.

And I wanted nothing else in my life.

I had never felt like this before. Not with anyone. I had been with dozens of different women, and none of them held a candle to what Brooklyn did to me. And these women were the cream of the crop: beautiful, smart, appealing women. I mean, shit, I slept with a pop star when she was filming a music video at our campus, snorting cocaine off my iron-flat abs. That was nothing, *nothing* compared to this.

I wanted more, too.

She had me questioning everything I knew. Everything I had learned about women and how they reacted to me, she went against. There wasn't anything about her that I didn't find lovely, and there wasn't a damn feature on her body that I didn't find to be the sexiest I'd ever come across. From the light freckles scattered across her shoulders to the beauty mark she had just south of her pouty lower lip, there wasn't a part of her my tongue didn't want to touch. And it was exciting. Her fire, her passion, her absolute inability to back down from a challenge was like nothing I had ever experienced. Every person I had ever grown up with prided themselves on being detached, cool above all else. Brooklyn was so emotional it was almost scary. She cared about everything, and she didn't care who knew it.

I craved more of that.

I sat up in bed and swung my naked legs over the side. With my hair a disheveled mess and my morning breath wreaking of stale whiskey, I reached for my bedside table. As I sat on the edge of my California king-sized, four-poster bed, I slid the article out of my nightstand and folded the paper over until I stared at nothing but her words. My eyes traced her byline. My fingertips danced across her words. And as I looked at it with an unjudgmental eye, I understood why people were drawn to her words. To her candor. To her writing.

Looking at it outside of the lens of my name and my family, the article was striking. Why should my mother get away with making money off selling out a public resource of the town? Wasn't that kind of fucked up? With any other politician, wouldn't I have seen it as deplorable? A disgusting practice? So, why did I view it differently now that the politician was my mother?

*The basement.*

Here was the thing, though: I knew how evil, self-serving, and fucking malicious my mother was. I knew that if my sister and I didn't stand with her, we'd suffer the wrath of the Devil Herself. Even the shiver that worked its way down my spine knew that. But, did I want to allow that to be inflicted on the

whole fucking country? I shook my head. This was a lot to think about first thing in the morning without any coffee, and there was nothing I could do about it right now.



## LILA

I had just gotten off a call from snotty Hedgerow, and he so graciously informed me that my brother was meeting with Miss Priss at the library. And at first, I was impressed. He was really making sure this issue was taken care of. So, I decided to drop by to make sure that he didn't need any kind of backup. After all, we always had each other's back, like with this redheaded defunct asshole and that airheaded lacrosse player I couldn't get to stop hunting me down on campus.

But, when I got to the library, I hadn't expected it to be so deserted.

I hadn't expected the library to be locked, either, so getting it opened by some dumbass employee made me later than I had expected. So, I picked up the pace. I wanted to get up there to that room before we lost this girl for good because I wanted to look her dead in her eyes and let her know what the fuck would really happen if she continued to trifle with our family. I almost hadn't gone up at all, though, thinking if he'd needed help it was too late now. That I had wasted too much time finding someone to open the damn library in the first place. But then I figured, what the hell. Might as well check the situation out.

Walking down the hall to the conference room, I could hear the girl, and it made me smile. He really had her weeping by the sounds of it, thinking she would lose her scholarship. I mean, the sounds practically made my mouth salivate. Maybe my brother didn't need any help, after all. It sounded like he

has her in tears, almost. And I knew I couldn't do any better than that.

Then I had gotten closer.

I wasn't a prude, so it wasn't like seeing two people fucking shocked my innocent little heart. Please. But *Jude* doing it with this girl? Of *all* girls? I had been *locked in the fucking basement* because of this bitch, and here he was, pile-driving his cock into her!

It made me sick to my stomach.

After convincing myself that I really wasn't hallucinating, I ducked off to the side of the windows into the conference room where they couldn't see me. And as I stood there, I considered the fact that maybe he was still playing some kind of game. Another game I couldn't play because, well, I had tits and a vagina. I stood there and listened as they wrapped things up. As they sighed with relief. As they hopped off the table and started putting their clothes back on. And I figured when they walked out, I'd be standing there grinning, giving my brother the back-up he needed in case he needed someone to corroborate their story. Then, I heard something I never thought I'd hear.

I heard him ask that bitch to go out for a drink with him.

*What the actual fuck?*

Hearing enough at that point, I'd slipped out before they could see me. And as I walked to my car, I tried to put my betrayal and anger to the side and consider the bigger picture. Jude was fucking Brooklyn. Brooklyn was trying to bring my family down. She was a Carlisle scholarship recipient. And she worked in our house. I was also pretty sure Jude didn't know that very last fact, either. Which played in my favor greatly. No matter which way I looked at this situation, though, I kept coming to one conclusion: the girl was obviously obsessed with my family. She had slithered her way into our lives, spreading tentacles of hate and sabotage everywhere she could reach.



And I knew that if I didn't step in now, she would tear my family down to its foundation.

Possibly even get me locked in that basement for the rest of my fucking life.

This situation was even worse than I had thought, though, despite the new plan I was working inside my head. The planning Margeux and I had done so far was small potatoes. High school shit. Silly pranks and small scares. Petty mean girl bullshit. And it was clear to me that those things weren't going to do the trick here at all. So, in an effort to stay clear-minded, I stayed away from alcohol that night. I sat up at my desk until dawn, thinking and putting ideas together as I scribbled them down onto paper I knew I'd burn in my bedroom fireplace after the fact. And when I finally heard Jude creep into his room next door right as the sun began to rise, I put one hand across my notes on my desk in case he popped in to talk.

But then I heard him crash out.

Of course he wasn't popping in to talk to me right now. He had literally spent the night with our mutual enemy, betraying *both* our family and me. It made me sick to my stomach. I wanted to know where he had been, but I knew that was a question I was sure he didn't want to answer. Either that or I was truly not on his mind at all when he first came up the stairs. Just his twin sister, who stood to lose everything. Why bother worrying about me, right?

Jude always was the selfish one in the family.

The men of the world were all the same. They found a hot piece of ass and it was off into the sunset, leaving behind a trail of mess and tears and heartache that they would never bother trying to understand. It boiled my blood, hearing him go to bed without so much as peeking in on me. But, that fury only made me redouble my efforts as well as my motivation. And, with a flash of inspiration, I knew what I had to do. As I felt the sun coming up while I sat at my desk, I scribbled a few final notes, hid the pages under a book, and crashed out to get a few hours of sleep.

Because tomorrow, it would be go-time.

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When I woke up, the bright light of day weakened my resolve a bit. Was I really going to do this to my own brother? I mean, what if he really did have feelings for the townie slut? But then, I heard something next door that I had never once heard before. Not in all the years I'd been alive.

Jude was whistling.

I heard the sounds of him getting ready in the morning, and after sharing a wall for two decades, none of the sounds were familiar. Usually, I would hear the snick of his lighter as he lit a cigarette, or smell a little pot coming through the door if he'd had a particularly rough night. The grouchy, groaning sounds of him bitching about the day or fighting with Margeaux. But whistling? Even humming to himself?

*Oh, no.*

My heart hardened. I could forgive his betrayal when this was all over, because he apparently felt something for this girl. But for her to take my brother—my cold-hearted, disinterested, hateful brother—and soften his heart toward her just to take revenge on my family? She was going down.

So, I picked up my phone and invited a few people over. Because today was the day.

Today was the day Brooklyn What's-Her-Face would be done for good.



## BROOKLYN

It was a beautiful Saturday morning and everything smelled delightful. I threw open my window as I got dressed for work, turning up the speaker to play my favorite girl-power playlist. By all rights, I should have been exhausted.

After managing about three hours of sleep after dropping Jude off and spent an hour of that last night just lying in bed, thinking about our evening. And yet, I wasn't tired at all. If anything, I felt more rejuvenated than I'd ever felt in my entire life. Who knew the Boy Wonder Twin could be so much fun?

However, despite my lack of sleep, I felt refreshed and energized and ready to tackle life in a way I hadn't since my parents were alive.

There was only one little thing dragging my spirits down, and that was the fact that Jude still didn't know I worked in his house. I knew I should have told him last night. My gut told me I needed to speak up about it. But, everything had felt so new and shiny... and flirty. The last thing I felt like doing was bringing things down, or ruining things altogether. Plus, what if he had gotten angry? Or even felt betrayed? That could've ruined my entire scholarship, which meant ruining my career I was working so hard to try and obtain.

So instead, I'd put it aside and decided to just enjoy our night together.

That left a pretty big problem for today, though. I would be in his house, working a full shift. He might never have recognized me before, but after sleeping together twice and

spending so many hours together yesterday, my flimsy cap and housekeeper persona would not be enough to grant full invisibility like it used to do. For a moment, I entertained the idea of just calling out and letting it be Future Brooklyn's problem. The idea was tempting.

But, I knew that wasn't a good idea.

There were two pretty compelling reasons why I couldn't do that. For starters, the most solid was that my rent was coming due, and missing a full shift meant allowing my budget to take a serious hit. The second reason—maybe flimsier but very real—was that I just wasn't that person. It was simply not in my nature to hide or back down from a problem. I needed to face it head-on and deal with the consequences as they came, because if I didn't go in today then I was scheduled again tomorrow. Which didn't help me with my initial problem. It only postponed the inevitable truth for a day or so. Maybe I would be able to avoid Jude today and I could talk to him tonight. I mean, there was absolutely no way I would be able to talk to him while I was there. Working. At his house. And if I disappeared for even five minutes to entertain a conversation, I knew Janey would be on my ass like white on rice.

*Nothing to it, but to do it.*

I would just have to hope for the best. And even if Jude saw me and realized I worked in his house, surely, he would be able to understand that the manor was one of the few places to work in our little town. My pride tingled when I thought about it. How embarrassing to have to tell the guy you're kind of sort of something with that you were essentially his family's maid.

My face heated just at the horrifying thought.

Look, I wasn't an idiot. I knew Jude was engaged. He and I were certainly not dating. We were, I guess, fuck buddies? Something. I didn't know. All I knew was that there was more to this rich jerk than I had ever realized, and sex with him was something I wasn't about to give up anytime soon if I could help it.

Still, there was a lot to consider.

Honestly, the thought of him knowing about my working for him and putting together the fact I had been cleaning his room for him for years, made me really question the need to tell him at all. I would see how today went, because if there was any chance I could fly under his radar without him ever finding out that I was a Carlisle Manor employee while he and I did... whatever it was we were doing, then I would take it.

Come hell or high water, I'd take it.

---

All was quiet at the manor when I arrived, and perfectly on time I might add. Janey sniffed as I walked in, looking me up and down to see if there was something she could ding me for. Sometimes I wondered if she got a bonus for pay deductions, given how eager she always seemed to be to dock pay for something.

Today, though, she found nothing.

I tucked my hair up into my cap and tied on my apron, readying myself to get to work. The early morning shift had taken care of the rooms already, which was a huge relief because cleaning the other rooms upstairs was excruciating work. I also heard both Lila and Jude moving around in their rooms, so staying on the main floor towards the back of the house was the best place for me to be. I kept my head down and finished my tasks as quickly as possible before finally feeling able to breathe when I was able to go outside to the garden.

But, I felt like I was being watched.

I went to the shed first like I always do, pausing outside of it. I furrowed my brow as I gazed down at the lock, watching as it swung there in its open state. That was weird. The padlock on the outside of the door was never open unless I opened it, since I was always the first one out into the garden. Unless it was a landscaping day for the crew that came around

every month. What was weirder was that the lock was even placed to look like it was locked. But, it wasn't.

*Maybe someone opened it up and got distracted.*

Whatever. I didn't have time to stand there and debate things. I slipped the lock away from the door and I pulled open the shed door to step inside. All the while looking down at my list of tasks to see what tools I would need today.

And for a moment, I felt safe. Away from the prying eyes of the family and secured behind thick wooden walls that held all of my tears, my frustrations, and my secrets.





## LILA

From the window inside the house on the second floor, I watched Brooklyn as she made her way through the garden. I grinned to myself as I watched her pause at the door, but for a brief moment I thought she'd turn around. That opened lock was supposed to lure her in out of curiosity. But, there was a small chance it would make her turn around and go get someone.

The head of the landscaping crew was the only other person to have a key to that back shed, and while I still didn't know why Janey trusted this bitch with a key to that place, all that mattered was that she did. All that mattered was that Brooklyn made it a habit of working in the garden every single day after her regular chores were done.

How did I know this?

Let's just say Janey had to answer every question I had for her, lest she lose her job.

I held my breath as Brooklyn looked around. Come on, idiot. All I needed was for her to step into the shed. And when she finally did, I smiled wickedly to myself. Perfect. Just as I needed things to unfold. I turned my back to the window and I clapped my hands together, rubbing them as I headed toward the staircase to go up to my room...

It was time for Phase 2.

And if I played my cards right, it would be the only other phase of this plan I needed.



## BROOKLYN

It probably wouldn't surprise anyone to find out that the Carlisle's shed was Mac Daddy. I mean, a cream of the crop kind of shed. The damn thing was three times the size of my rented apartment, and it was stacked—floor to ceiling—with everything someone would need to manicure and keep up a garden. And it was organized. Very, very organized.

Everything was labeled, everything had its place, and there were insufferable consequences if things weren't put back where they needed to be. Walking into the massive shed was always like walking into a museum. There was always something new to behold, something interesting to try out, or something placed there that I'd never seen before. I always gave myself a second to marvel everything on the walls before I searched for what I needed.

Then, I got to work.

Everyone who worked in the garden did a really good job of keeping everything clean, almost to a level you might call OCD. Janey did spot checks in here as well, so we made sure to dust and wipe down the tools regularly. Yeah, what a stupid ass waste of time that was, given the cleanliness of everything already. But, those were the rules, and I made sure to follow them to a tee.

I was still squinting down at my list as I reached for the light switch, so when a strong hand clamped on my wrist, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Shh, shh, shh.” The hand pulled me in closer by my wrist. I hadn’t gotten the light turned on, so I couldn’t see who it was. And when I started to scream, the other hand pressed tightly against my lips.

“Hush now. Can’t have everyone running to see what’s going on.”

I struggled against the hold of whoever it was, especially since I didn’t recognize the voice. I could tell it was a man. Not Jude, which was simultaneously a relief *and* much scarier. Who the hell was this, and what did he want? I kicked back as hard as I could but missed and smacked my foot against the table instead, knocking a tray of pots to the ground.

“That’s enough now,” the voice said sternly.

Whoever it was, he was dragging me back to the far wall of the shed. I dug my heels in, but they only slid back across the smooth, clean stone floor. I started to kick out at the shelves and tables, hoping to knock things over and make enough noise for someone to come looking. But, with a sinking heart, I remembered that the landscaping staff never came around on Saturdays. The full-time landscapers and gardeners were here during normal business hours Monday to Friday, which meant this strange man and me were the only two out there. I was the only one outside on evenings and weekends doing menial tasks and day-to-day upkeep. Janey had seen me come out and given me a fat list of chores, so she likely wouldn’t come out to check on my progress for at least an hour, maybe more.

*Fuck.*

I felt hot breath in my ear as he grunted, fighting to hold me still as he carried me back to the far wall. He had hot breath and a smell that was familiar. Fresh cut grass and the sweet scent of... was that Big League Chew?

I stopped struggling. “Merritt?”

“Yes, of course it’s me, you crazy human being! Now, for fuck’s sake, will you just cool your jets some?”

We reached the back wall of the shed and he put me down with my back against the wall and stood in front of me. His height and broad shoulders blocked out the view of the rest of the shed as I gazed up into his eyes with a wild stare. There was a window back here with us, and even though it was curtained, it was easier to see him now.

And my heart stopped beating wildly in my chest.

Merritt sighed. "I'm going to move my hand away from your mouth, but stay cool, okay? I'm not going to hurt you."

I nodded, and he slowly removed his hand.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I snapped. "Are you kidding me? How did you even get in here? And why?"

He wrinkled his forehead. "Calm down, Brooklyn, damn! Tae told me you'd be working in the garden today. I just want to talk to you."

I scoffed. "Talk to me? Why didn't you just call me like a normal person?"

I was still shaking, but now it was from a combination of fury and fear. Something still didn't feel right, and none of this added up. What in the world was he doing at the Carlisle residence? Surely, he wasn't still putzing around with Lila. She would've already eaten him alive.

Merritt took a step back. "I was nervous, okay? You can be like, super intimidating. I was afraid if I talked to you anywhere in public, you'd freak out on me."

He looked over his shoulder again and it gave me pause. Who was he looking for? Why did he look so nervous? Because I really didn't believe the fact that it was me who made him this nervous.

I snickered. "Uh... that still doesn't answer why you wouldn't just call me, man." I realized he was still pressing me to the wall and squirmed. "Also, think you could ease up your grip there? You're freaking me out."

"Oh, sorry." He eased his grip, but barely. I was still totally cornered with my back to the wall. My heartbeat ratcheted up

again. What exactly was going on here?

“So, what?” I asked.

He was looking over his shoulder again, but turned back to me when he heard my voice.

“Huh?”

I shook my head. “Merritt! What the hell? You said you wanted to talk to me. You went to all of this trouble. What did you want to talk about?”

He blinked. “Oh, yeah. Uh, right. So, I felt really bad about like, how all that went down with us at the game, and I guess I just, I uh...”

He darted one last look over his shoulder, and then I heard it. The sound of the door being pushed open. Bright sunlight spilled across the shed, but all I could see was that. Merritt was almost a foot taller than me, with the broad shoulders and thick build of an athlete. I while knew the door had been opened, I couldn't tell who had opened it. So, I started to struggle again, because if it was Janey I was truly and royally fucked.

And out of nowhere, Merritt's mouth descended quickly against my own.

He pressed himself fully against me, squishing me back into the wall so hard it felt like my bones were being crushed. I was completely flattened, unable to even lift my leg to give him the knee to the crotch that he so lovingly deserved. I only had one option left. And while it wouldn't end well for him, I hoped it ended well for me.

I bit the shit out of his tongue, as hard as I could, and held onto it for dear life.

“Ah! What the fuck!?” he yelled, but seemed to catch himself quickly and added a “Baby, you like that?”

I drew in a breath to yell, but his hand clamped over my mouth once more. What the hell *was* this?

He ground against me, shifting his hips in a way that seemed incredibly overdramatic. Why was he trying to make it

so obvious to whoever had just walked in that we were hooking up? Did he think this would keep me from getting in trouble if it was Janey? Because he was dead wrong about that.

I heard a dry voice at the door that I recognized. “This is what you wanted me to come out to see, Li? A couple employees going at it?”

The light flicked on, bathing the room in a cold, white glow in total contrast to the warm sunlight. Merritt affected a surprised jump and turned around, still blocking my view.

“Jude!” I tried to yell, pushing back harder. “Help!” Unfortunately, with Merritt’s beefy hand over my mouth, it came out more like “Mmf! Mlp!”

“Shit. Sorry, bro,” Merritt said.

“Bro? Who...” Jude’s voice was getting closer. “Merritt?”

Then, I heard that bitch’s voice. “See, Jude? We’ve caught our little rabbit up to no good once again. I figured you should definitely see this. Since we’ve both been so... *committed* to bringing her down.”

Had I imagined that slight inflection on the word *committed*?

Lila snickered. “She seems to have taken it up a notch this time, though.”

Jude scoffed. “What are you talking about? Is that—” Jude got even closer, and Merritt took his hand quickly off my mouth. “Brooklyn?” I saw his face pale as he looked from me to Merritt and back again. Behind him, Lila stood, holding up a camera that was currently recording according to the red light and one big-ass smirk. “I don’t understand.”

I shook my head quickly. “Jude, no, this isn’t what it looks —.”

Merritt cut me off. “I’m sorry you had to find out this way, man. I tried to avoid her, but she’s like, obsessed with you guys. She wanted me to help her take you down. I know I

should have told her no, but to be honest, her crazy is pretty hot. I couldn't resist."

"You... what?" Jude said, looking bewildered.

I finally slipped away from Merritt. "No, Jude, he's lying. He just came in here and forced himself on me. I don't even know what he's talking about!"

I tried to step forward, but Merritt stepped toward me again, wrapping his arm around me and planting me in place.

Jude paused. "Why are you wearing an apron? And a cap?" Jude looked between the two of us again, and something dawned. "Oh, my God. Do you *work* here?"

I sighed. "Yes, okay, I do work for your family. I meant to tell you last night, but it just felt so embarrassing and so *weird*. But there's not that many other places around here to work and I—"

I was babbling now, desperate to make him understand. To make him stop looking at me that way.

Merritt shook his head as he stepped away from me. "Tsk, tsk, Brooklyn. The truth is already out. No need to keep lying. Just come clean now."

I looked at him with wild eyes. "I-I am coming clean."

I wrapped my arms around myself, ashamed at how my teeth had started to chatter, and tears filled my eyes. This was too much—Merritt forcing himself on me, Jude's look of betrayal, Lila gleefully holding up a camera. For the first time in my life, I was seized with the urge to run instead of to fight back. I had always been a fight girl when it came to fight or flight, but not now. I felt shaken down to my very core.

I stumbled over my words. "I've worked here, but-but-but —" I couldn't force the words out through my lips, which suddenly felt ice-cold.

"But-but-but," Lila mocked in a high voice.

Merritt held up his hands. "Listen, dude. I *am* sorry. I didn't think she'd take it this far. Like when she told me that



she'd gotten a job here just to spy on you and your family." Merritt shook his head solemnly. "That shit's wild."

I shrieked. "I *didn't* get a job here just to spy on you. That's nuts!"

Merritt whirled around no me. "Stop lying! God, you aren't even worth the hot sex anymore. The craziness has got to stop." He reached into the pocket of my apron and withdrew a slim silver device I had never seen before. "If you're not working here just to spy on them, then why do you always walk around with a tape recorder running in your pocket?" His voice was triumphant as he held the device up to Jude, and then to the camera, making sure it got a good shot.

I furrowed my brow tightly. "That's not mine. I've never seen that thing before in my life."

He must have slipped it into my pocket while he was pushing me across the room or fake humping me. But why? What did Merritt stand to gain from this? I watched Jude's face darken dangerously as something clicked in place. And I knew this wouldn't end well for anyone involved.

"Grab her phone," he said shortly to Merritt, who obliged quickly and pulled it out of my pocket.

I leaped forward. "Stop! What are you doing?"

Merritt placed a hand across my chest, pinning me back to the wall. And when he looked over at me, he almost had sorrow in his eyes.

*Lila.*

Lila was making him do this.

"If what you are saying is the truth," Jude said, his voice colder than I had ever heard it, "then there won't be anything to find on your phone, then, will there? What's your passcode?"

I shook my head. "Please, Jude, no. Don't do this. I swear, I don't know why, but Merritt is ly—"

He hissed at me. "Shut up. Tell me the fucking passcode."

Lila's voice came out sweet as honey. "If you have nothing to hide, Brooklyn, then what does it matter?"

I said nothing and Brooklyn nodded to Merritt, who grabbed my wrist and twisted it painfully back behind my shoulder. I screamed in pain.

"Tell us the passcode," Jude said calmly.

"Fine!" I yelled. "Fine! It's 1-2-7-7." My parents' anniversary. I wondered vaguely if they could see me now, what they would make of all this. I heard my phone click open, and Merritt loosened his hold on my wrist.

"Why don't you check her audio recordings file first?" Lila suggested, with an acid smile at me. My heart sank. It didn't take long for him to find the file, and two seconds later, we all listened as Jude and Lila's own voices began to speak in crystal clear clarity.

*"Here's my idea. We go to the PTA group and offer a fat donation to the local public schools. I won't make it clear that it's a bribe, but they'll know that's what it is. It won't take much to have them pull their support."*

*"Good, but not far enough. I did a little digging last night, and guess who is a recipient of the prestigious Carlisle Full Ride Scholarship?"*

*"You've got to be fucking kidding me."*

*"Nope. I'm going to talk to the scholarship committee tomorrow to see if there's anything in the paperwork that would exclude her. Surely there will be something about upholding the name of the family who's paying for her to go to this school?"*

*"Great. You stay on that. I'll do my part, and between us, she'll have to shut up."*

*"Don't worry, Li. We'll get this handled."*

*"I can't go back into the basement."*

*"You won't. We'll get this fixed for Mother, and she'll leave you alone."*

Dead air for a moment, and then my phone clicked off.

“We were in my bedroom,” Jude said, his voice incredulous. “Still want to say you haven’t been spying? I suppose Merritt somehow hacked that onto your phone?”

My eyes watered. “Jude, please, I—”

“Enough,” Lila said. “You’ve done enough. Just get the fuck out of here. I’ll tell Janey she’ll need to find someone else to cover the rest of your shift.”

I reached out a hand for my phone. Jude looked at it like it was a bug. “Yeah, no. I think I’ll hold onto this for now and see what other shit you might have on here.”

I dropped my hand and walked out the shed, past Merritt, past Jude, and almost past Lila, who I didn’t see stick a leg out because I was too busy trying to catch Jude’s eye. I crashed to the floor, landing smack on my elbows. I rolled up as quickly as I could, ignoring the pain, their laughter, and the hatred I could feel burning into my back.

That was it. I’d had enough.

So, I ran without looking back.



## JUDE

I kept it together in the shed. I let that creep Merritt saunter by me after Lila asked him what he was waiting for and told him to get the fuck out too. My fingers itched to punch him in his smug face, but I fought it. I fought my urge and I let him go. Then, I walked upstairs to my room slowly. Controlled.

And then I closed my bedroom door behind me and clicked the lock.

With a roar, I swept everything off my desk onto the floor. I punched two holes in my wall, making my knuckles bleed. I ripped my mattress off the bed stand and threw it across my room. Tearing my curtains down, I pulled the blinds off the windows and hurled them out the window.

Exhausted, I slumped into my desk chair, surrounded by the destruction of my things and the blood I had left spotted across the room. Then, a member of the security team busted the door down. He entered and looked around before nodding to a guy behind him. “Let her know everything is under control.” As the guy started away, he added, “Tell them to send up the housekeepers as well.”

I lit a cigarette and leaned my head back. It would be a lie to say I felt better. I was drowning in rage, in betrayal—and for some stupid reason—in something that felt a lot like sadness.

As the housekeepers scrambled around me to set my room to rights, I put my face in my hands. I couldn’t believe how she had tricked me. It was so masterful, I could almost applaud

her. Her ‘hatred’ of me, the sex, somehow getting my guard down. All of it. It was more conniving than anything my sister or myself could have cooked up, and had I not actually enjoyed our time together I would have given her a standing ovation. And the fact she had worked here? I didn’t even want to know how long she had.

*Holy fuck, she was good.*

I opened my eyes and looked at the housekeepers buzzing around me. She could have been any one of these girls. In my room. Cleaning up my mess. Listening. Watching. Waiting to collect any scrap of information to use against my family. I kicked my desk with one last shout, making one of the housekeepers—a mousey brunette—jump and squeal.

When the blood had been scrubbed, the furniture fixed, and the holes in the wall covered for later patching, Lila stepped into my room holding two thick glass tumblers of scotch. She handed me one and sat on the edge of my bed. And for a while, neither of us said a word.

Then, my sister spoke. “This reaction seems a little bit extreme for a little worker bee.”

I said nothing, and she spoke again. “I told Janey to fire her. You don’t need to see her again after all that’s happened.”

I shook my head. “No. Tell her to keep that bitch on. Make her wait on us hand and foot. She shouldn’t get away from us that easily.”

“Done,” Lila said approvingly. “Anything you want to talk to me about?”

I put out my glass for another pour, and she obliged. “Nothing that matters now.”

“Okay,” she said. “Now what?”

I threw back the second glass with one gulp. “Now? Nothing. We have even *more* leverage. She needs this job, she needs her scholarship, and we tanked her protest group. What can she do now? It’s done.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her, just in case.”

“Torture her more, like,” I said, laughing without humor.

“Yes.”

I nodded curtly. “Good. She went to incredible lengths to take us down. She deserves it.”

Lila took a sip of her drink. “When I think of her creeping around here, listening, stealing, spying, and then going out onto our land, in our shed, to fuck her boyfriend? Telling him our secrets and getting off on it? Shit, who knows if they listened to our recordings while they did it. She’s crazy enough to make that seem possible.”

At her words, my anger—tempered by scotch and a violent outburst—flared back up. Had she laughed about me with Merritt? Had she told him the things I told her last night in the darkness and safety of her shitty little car? Of course, she had. That’s why they had been meeting in our shed today. The thought of it brought that image back. Of him pressing her back against the wall, grinding on her, his tongue in her mouth.

I squeezed the glass in my hand so hard it nearly broke, and I forced myself to set it down.

I looked at my sister. “I need to be alone right now. Get out.”

She didn’t need to be around me when I was like this. I could just as easily end up hurting her. Nonetheless, she rested one hand on my shoulder for a brief moment before she left. Showing me her strength and her courage and her love before leaving behind the bottle of scotch.

Damn it, I had a great sister.





## BROOKLYN

I drove home like a maniac, speeding, and fighting back a storm of tears. When I arrived home, I was so mixed up with grief, anger, and anger at *feeling grief*, that I almost threw up. Finally, I downed a shot of whiskey and took two showers. I still didn't feel clean, though, so I drew myself a bath, making the water so hot my skin was currently lobster red as I soaked.

As I poured myself another shot, my computer dinged. I had it sitting on my bathroom counter playing reruns of *The Office*. I needed the soothing sounds of a sitcom to keep me from totally losing my mind. I took a look at who was messaging me. Luckily, I had iMessage set up on my computer, or I would be totally off the grid thanks to the fuckwits at Carlisle Manor.

It was a message from Janey. I bolted upright and pulled my computer closer to me, careful not to drip water on it.

**You have not been fired. The Carlises have kindly overlooked your poor choices. Report to work at the usual time tomorrow. Do not be late.**

I slumped back into the bath, gobsmacked. How had I not been fired? They were still going to let me work there? Was I brave enough to go back to that place after today? I would have given anything to quit that job, to respond back to Janey right now with a 'fuck you. Do my job yourself' text. But the truth was, I couldn't make it here without that job. And this late in the semester, nobody on or off campus would be hiring.

All of the other townie and scholarship kids would have snatched those jobs up months ago.

And I had little to no savings.

Being a college student, even with a full-ride scholarship, was not cheap. Hampshire was a high-end town. Even my shitty roach-trap studio was expensive, and it had taken me ages to find it. I still had a year and a half left here. I couldn't afford to rage-quit my job, even if it would have made my life about a million times better.

I was just stepping out of the bath and wrapping myself in my robe when a hammer of knocks sounded on my front door. I froze. Could it be Jude?

I ran to the door and looked through the peephole. I sighed and opened the door.

"Where the hell have you been? I've been calling and calling and—" Tae burst through the door, but her tirade faltered when she saw me. "What happened?"

"What do you mean? Nothing. I'm fine. I just— I just lost my phone, that's all." I couldn't meet her eyes.

"Stop. Are you okay? What is going on? Is it Merritt?"

Her concern loosened the valve in me that I had held so tightly closed since I had left the shed, and the tears began to pour.

"Oh my God, I have never seen you cry. Holy shit. I don't even know what to do!" Tae danced around for a moment, uncomfortable and unsure. "Come here, come here." She pulled me into a tight hug, squeezing the breath out of me. "It's okay. I'm here. Let it all out."

I shook against her as I cried, and everything just poured out. The protest, the article, sleeping with Jude, Merritt, the video, the shed. I could feel her shock and horror like it was being released into the air as I talked.

"And now, after everything, I've realized that I guess I had feelings for Jude. I hated him, but he surprised me. And now I've lost him for good. You should have seen the way he

looked at me, Tae. Like I was the most repulsive insect on the planet,” I finished, wiping away my tears.

Tae pulled me to my couch and sat me down. She took my face in her hands. “This is way above my paygrade. What the hell have you gotten yourself into?” she said, surprising a laugh out of me. “Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to run out and grab us wine, chocolate, and pizza. I’ll come back, we’ll talk some more, and then we’ll watch the stupidest horror movies we can think of and cheer for all the men to die in it. Okay?”

I laughed and nodded.

“Will you be okay here for twenty minutes while I do my supplies run?”

I nodded again.

She kissed me on the forehead and swept out. And when she came back, we did exactly what she’d said.

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When I woke up Sunday morning, I couldn’t say I really felt better, but I did feel like myself again. I felt emptied out, like all of the crying and the stress had been dumped out of my system, and the binge-watching, drinking, and junk food with my best friend had brought me back to a place where I was me again.

I got dressed, taking the extra time to blow dry my hair and do my makeup, as if I were crafting a shield. Yes, today was going to be tough. Probably worse than tough. But I was Brooklyn James. I was strong. And I did not run.

Tae had left at 2:00 a.m., citing her ‘absolute inability to sleep with a sub-thousand thread count’ as she kissed me and disappeared. Being with her had given me the strength I needed to get through today. At least, that’s what I told myself as I stood in front of my door, trying to force myself to leave for work. But, all I ended up doing was taking deep breaths while staring at the back of my door.

“Come on, you can do this,” I murmured to myself.

Finally—somewhere in the pit of my gut—I found the courage I needed. I reached for the doorknob, ripped the door open, and locked it behind me. Okay. All right. I had made it into the hallway. Now, all I had to do was make it down to my car.

Which took much longer than I needed it to.

I wasn't much for affirmations, but today was a different story. When I got into my car, I pulled my rearview mirror down and looked myself squarely in the eyes. I needed this. I needed someone to help me. And if I was going to be the person to help myself, then I needed to do a damn good job of it.

“You are Brooklyn James. You are strong. You can eat the Wonder Twins and Janey for breakfast.”

And with a heavy sigh, I cranked up the engine to my car and got on the road.

I had a day to conquer.

My resolve shrank a little when I entered the kitchen, where Janey was waiting. We had never liked each other, not even the littlest bit, but the look in her eyes today was something totally new. I finally recognized it to be a complete lack of respect. Yeah, I could be late. Sometimes I looked sloppy. I could be crass. But I was a hard worker. I didn't let people down. And I didn't back away from a challenge. Those characteristics earned me respect, in my workplace and in my classes. But, facing Janey and seeing her like that? It shook me, no lie.

“There's been a change in your schedule,” Janey said, tightlipped as I tied on my apron. But, I left the cap behind. No need to worry about that anymore, as the worst had already happened.

“Yes, ma'am?”

“You're not in the garden anymore. Mrs. Carlisle would like to keep you inside, considering your...” She pursed her thin lips. “Lack of discretion. You'll be in the bedroom wing

of the young Carlisle's today. It's trophy day, so report to young Miss Carlisle first."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, keeping my tone humble.

Janey squinted at me to see if I was being sarcastic but couldn't find any proof. So, after she dismissed me with a nonchalant wave of her hand, I gathered the tub of polishing supplies, knowing one thing for certain: if Janey ever had any say on my employment here, I would be fired in an instant. And that did not bode well for me, because once Lila got sick of playing cat and mouse—and I was sure she was the one responsible for my new tasks in the house being close to her—I was out of here.

And not one person in this house would care one bit.

I did not trudge to Lila's room, though. I refused to look the way I felt in front of this family. I walked with my head held high and a neutral expression on my face. Well, I held my head as high as I could considering the freaking polishing tub weighed about a ton.

*Here goes nothing.*

I rapped sharply on her door. "Housekeeping."

"*Entrez,*" she said, and I rolled my eyes. Cool, speak French, you've been to Paris before, whatever. I entered the room and clocked Lila laying across her bed on her stomach, facing her trophy wall with a glossy fashion magazine open in front of her.

"Ah, here is our spy," she said, propping her head on one elbow as her dark hair spilled across the magazine.

"Ma'am." I ducked my head and went to the trophy case.

"I would like you to polish in here today," she said.

"Of course, ma'am." Yeah, I had figured as much. Sometimes, when it was nice out, I would take her trophies out onto her balcony, where I could polish in peace while enjoying the sun. I had had a feeling that this would not be the case today. 'Young Miss Carlisle' would want me under her thumb, where she could watch me squirm.

I wouldn't give her the pleasure, though.

I set down the tub and began to organize my materials: laying the drop sheet across her carpet, pulling on my latex gloves, and setting out the various polishing materials I'd need to get the job done. The joy of this task was that so many of her trophies were different materials, and each material had its own method needed. She had trophies made of wood, pewter, silver, plastic, stainless steel, resin, crystal, and marble. And I had been told on day one of this task that if I ruined any of these irreplaceable items, I could throw myself out. So, this was a task I always handled with the utmost care, and preferably in total silence so I could concentrate.

Today, however, that was clearly not going to happen.

What I'd have to do instead was focus as much on the task as hard as I could while I worked. That would keep me from making a mistake and help me to ignore Lila's barbs.

"Little Miss Priss." Lila sat up and scooted to the end of her bed. She dropped her elbows onto her crossed knees and looked at me. "Ms. Brooklyn James. What a mess you have made for yourself."

I didn't answer. Instead, I focused on my work. I started with the wood trophies since they were the easiest. And for those, I just needed furniture polish and a soft cloth. I lifted the first one and got to work. But, that didn't stop Lila from trying to get into my head.

"I have to say, for one poor, raggedy little townie, you have really kicked up quite the ruckus around here," Lila continued, her eyes still on me. "You should have seen what Jude did to his room yesterday after you left."

My eyes darted to her before I could stop myself. What had Jude done? I saw her triumphant look and cursed myself. She had won that point. I turned back to my task. There were only three wooden trophies, so I finished them quickly and set them aside.

Lila giggled. "I have to know. Did you really think you would get away with it?"

I moved on to her marble trophies. For these, I'd need warm water, and that was the exact excuse I needed to get up and turn my back to this slimy little—.

“Excuse me, ma'am.” I got up quickly and ducked into her restroom, my eyes tight on the floor, and filled a bowl with warm water. The thing about marble was it could stain, so no polishes, and any mark needed to be carefully and attentively wiped off. I reentered her room and knelt on the floor, careful not to slosh the water. Then, I picked up her first marble trophy.

*Little Miss Hampshire, 1st Place*, it read.

But, Lila interrupted my focus. “Maid. I asked you a question.”

I bit back a sigh. “My apologies, ma'am. What did you ask me?”

“I *said* that I wanted to know if you thought you would get away with it.”

“With what, ma'am?”

She exhaled in frustration. “With everything! Don't be intentionally dense! You are a lot of things, but you are not stupid, Brooklyn.”

“My apologies, but I still am not sure what you mean, miss.” I set aside the marble trophies. Time to start on the crystal. These drove me nuts. You could wipe forever and still find a smudge. I squirted some soap into the warm water and gave it a swirl.

Lila swung her legs to the ground and walked toward me. “Hm, I don't know. How about spying on my family while taking their money. Protesting against my mother based on information you received while *working in her house*, and fucking my brother just to hurt and humiliate him? Does that answer your question?”

I finished the trophy I was working on and put it down carefully before turning to her.

“Ms. Carlisle, I am certainly guilty of working against your mother. I do not believe she has the best intentions for this town at heart, and I did what I could to expose that. I understand that doing so made me seem hypocritical, as I do work in her home, and my paychecks are ultimately signed off by her. But please know one thing: I care about your brother. He and I shared moments together that were more real than anything I have ever known. I screwed that up by not being honest with him, and I’m going to have to deal with the consequences of that. But I promise you that I meant neither Jude nor you any ill will whatsoever.”

She gaped at me, and no lie, it felt pretty satisfying to silence her. I turned back, keeping my posture nonchalant and humble so I wouldn’t ignite another comment, and continued with my work. Onto the resin trophies. These just needed warm soapy water. I took a cloth and dipped them in my mixture and began to wipe them down. After a minute of silence, Lila let out an exasperated sigh and stomped out of her room.

At the sound of the door closing behind her, my shoulders sagged in relief. I had made it through. That was only one battle, and certainly not the whole war, but it was something. I finished polishing the rest of her trophies, not rushing through them, but definitely not taking my time either. I was hoping to get them done and get out of her room before she decided she was ready for the next battle.

I had all of the trophies shining and spotless and back up on their shelves, and still no sign of Lila. I dumped the water out in the sink, rinsed it, and packed back up the polishing tub. Settling it on my hip, I took one last glance around the room to make sure everything was in order. There, proudly sitting on top of her desk, was the video camera from yesterday. I took an unwitting step forward. I could destroy it right now. But then I shook my head. That wasn’t who I was, and I wasn’t about to become the kind of sneak who destroyed items I was entrusted to care for, no matter who they belonged to.

I stepped out into the hallway and came face-to-face with Jude. Had he been waiting right outside her door? For me or



for Lila? We were close enough that I could reach out and touch him if I wanted. If I was able...

His face was dark and closed, not an inch of welcome there. He smelled so good, and my body responded immediately, automatically to his scent and his proximity.

“Jude,” I whispered. “I—”

He cut me off as he looked me dead in the eye and upturned a bottle of Coke that was in his hands. I watched as he poured the entire sixteen ounces onto the previously pristine white carpet.

“Better get that cleaned up,” he said when the last drop had fallen from the bottle to the floor.

I put my head down, nodded, and walked past him. It was still early, yet it was already clear it was going to be one hell of a day.



## JUDE

I was sick. Sick with disappointment, with frustration, and with something that felt weirdly like heartache. Saturday night had passed in a blur, and I woke up Sunday with a head full of cotton from the scotch and cigarettes. Margeaux called early, wanting to get together. But, I didn't want shit-all to do with her.

"I'm not really in today, sorry," I said flatly.

"Just come to brunch, Judiekins. I can't go to Sunday brunch alone!"

"Take Lila."

"No. I want my fiancé. Get your ass up!"

I scoffed. "Listen, Margeaux, I'm wiped. I spent the last few days handling the problem we talked about. Which, by the way, has been fully taken care of and is no longer an issue."

"Jude!" She squealed so loudly I pulled the phone away from my ear with a grimace. "I knew you could do it. Fine, you take today to yourself. You've certainly earned it."

She continued to babble, her voice grating on my nerves. How had I not realized how much I absolutely hated this woman, and her voice, and every *other thing* about her? When she finally clicked off, I fell back against my pillows with a deep breath of relief. But, I was still lying in bed when I heard her voice. And when the sound of her soft tones filled my ears, I crumpled the edge of my pillow in my fist.

"Housekeeping."

So she was brave enough to show her face here in this house after yesterday. I honestly figured she would have quit the second she found out we weren't going to fire her. I had to give it to her as well, she had balls. And not only that, but she'd shown up in Lila's room this early, who she would have to know was ready to make her life miserable.

I wondered if Brooklyn had suggested she take that job, or if Lila had requested her personally.

When Brooklyn entered Lila's room, I could still hear a voice, but it was more muffled. I wasn't proud of what I did next, but I wasn't in the best place. I grabbed a bottle of Coke, got out of bed, and sat with my back to our adjoining wall, making the sound much clearer.

I heard the steady scrape of Lila's numerous trophies being pulled down, my sister's voice baiting her. Her silence.

I had to admit, begrudgingly, I was impressed. With everything, she wasn't rising to Lila's bait. She had shown up and walked right into the lion's den.

Then they started talking about me.

*"...fucking my brother just to hurt and humiliate him? Does that answer your question?"*

I held my breath, wanting to hear exactly what she had to say to that.

Her speech to Lila was heartfelt and to the point. It was good enough that even my sister, who was rarely impressed by anything, might actually have taken it to heart. I listened to every word, curious despite myself to hear what she had to say in her defense. Then she started talking about me. Hearing her describe how she felt when we were together was validating, because everything she said, I had felt as well.

My mind raced as I twisted the Coke bottle open and closed. I barely registered the sound of Lila leaving her room, admitting defeat in a way that was very unlike her. The room got quiet then, and I knew Brooklyn would be cleaning, probably glad the danger had let her be.

For now, at least.

Like a magnet, I was drawn to her. I couldn't stop myself from standing up, leaving my room, and standing outside of Lila's door. She was in there alone, right now. I could go in, talk to her, try and understand. Maybe there was another side of this. Maybe she meant what she said. I put one hand on the doorknob, and then it opened from the inside.

And the feel of her heat against my body rooted me to the floor.

Brooklyn came out, and we were face-to-face. Close enough to touch. It took all I had not to grab her, crush her to me. Press my lips against hers. But at the same time, seeing her now, all I could think about was her pushed up against the wall, writhing against Merritt's body. *Merritt* of all people, that spineless piece of shit.

My heart hardened, and before I even thought it through, I poured out every last drop from my Coke bottle onto the floor and told her to clean it up. I got no satisfaction from it, either. Especially when all she did was look like I'd kicked her puppy as she moved her eyes to the floor and walked away.

I cursed and chucked the bottle on the floor, and then I slunk back into my room like a coward.



## BROOKLYN

I had successfully made it through my full shift. All eight hours spent within spitting distance of Jude and Lila's rooms. I managed to get every speck of Coke out of the carpet, buffed Lila's trophies until they gleamed, and tackled a number of other projects on their hallway. I'd cleaned Jude's room top to bottom, yet saw no signs of the destruction he had apparently wreaked the day before. And as soon as I'd entered, he had left the room, slamming the door behind him.

And I hadn't seen him until I left.

I had untied my apron and hung it back up and said goodbye to Janey—who didn't respond except for a cold sniff—when I realized I couldn't just drive away without trying to talk to him. Yesterday had been an ambush. Lila and Merritt had led the conversation. I hadn't seen Lila since she'd left her room earlier, and I figured now was as good of a time as any to try and track Jude down. I took a second now to peek out and see if Lila's car was in the drive. It wasn't. Maybe I could get through to Jude if I took the chance to talk to him now. I looked around. Janey was nowhere to be seen. Just in case, I opened and shut the kitchen door and then crept back up the stairs towards Jude's room.

When I got to his door, I felt nothing but hesitation. I was totally unsure this was the right decision. But I had to do something, and this was worth a try. So, I took a deep breath and knocked.

“Yeah.” His voice sounded far away. I swung the door open, slipped in, and then closed it quickly behind me. The fewer people who knew I was in here right now, the better.

“Can I talk to you?”

He turned around quickly when I spoke. He’d been leaning out the window, smoking a cigarette. “What are you doing in here?” he asked, his voice sharp.

“I just wanted to talk to you. I wanted to tell you the truth.”

“I’m pretty sure I know the truth, thanks.” He turned back to the window and took a deep drag.

“If you wouldn’t mind just listening, just for a moment, I would really appreciate it,” I said. He said nothing and didn’t move a muscle, and I took that as permission to continue. “Jude, there’s one thing I need to make absolutely clear: I have worked here for years, long before I ever wrote a word about your mother. I never decided to come here to spy on you. And as I worked here, I did begin to pick up on things your mother was doing. I *did* decide to do something about it. After you and your sister took notice of me, I did record you when I heard you talking about me. But just that once.” I took a deep breath. He hadn’t moved an inch.

“But, Jude? I swear on everything I hold near and dear to me that I haven’t seen Merritt since that day you and I got together that first time. You know, at the lacrosse game? He was holding me down in that shed. He was scaring me. And before you came in, I was trying to scream for help. Jude, it was *your* name I was trying to scream. You were the one I was calling for. But Merritt’s hand was clamped so tightly against my face and I could hardly breathe, much less get your name above a subtle whisper. And I don’t know why Merritt did what he did, how he got the tape recorder in my pocket, or what he gained from any of that, but that part... it was all a lie.”

I stood waiting. Jude didn’t say anything, made no sign he had heard. Finally, he turned to face me. And his voice was cold as ice.



“So, just to make sure I have this straight: you’re saying that the douche you previously dated hooked up with you, but you weren’t together anymore. That the people you had been recording caught you recording them, but you weren’t trying to record them anymore.” He laughed a dark laugh. “Do you hear how crazy you sound?”

I started to protest, but he raised a hand and cut me off. “Here’s your other mistake, dollface. Why exactly do you think I give a shit about all of this?” He stalked toward me, his eyes dark as night. “Baby, you were a good lay. I’ll give you that much. But that’s all you were. You and I aren’t *dating*. We don’t *owe* each other anything. In case you hadn’t noticed, I happen to be engaged. I appreciate the fuck, and yeah, we’ve got some bitchin’ chemistry, but you’re making a fool of yourself coming up here and trying to explain your feelings to me.”

His words pierced my chest, but instead of feeling the sadness, all I felt was anger and found the challenge in his words.

I snickered. “Yeah? So we never meant anything, huh?”

He nodded curtly. “Yep. Thanks for the memories.”

He reached for his cigarette pack. But, I knocked it out of his hand and grabbed his wrist before he could protest. “So, if that’s true, then what if I did this?”

I backed him up until the back of his knees were against his bed. And all he did was shake his head.

“Do what you want. I don’t give a shit, Little Rosie.”

“How about this?” I put a hand to his chest and pushed him backward until he fell back onto his bed.

“Nothing,” he said.

I straddled his waist. “Shut up and kiss me then.”

And just like that, it was on.

He reached a hand up and twisted his fingers into my hair, pulling me close. Our kiss felt more like a battle than it did two people coming together. We were fighting each other,

fighting to breathe, fighting to dominate. He grabbed my shirt and ripped it. Literally, the buttons popped, and it tore. He brought his mouth to my breast and bit, sucked, and kissed. I was caught on a hair-thin line between pain and pleasure, losing myself in him. I scraped my nails down his back, digging my fingers in deep.

“Get on your knees,” he said. I turned around and got on my knees on top of his bed. He yanked my skirt up, pulled my underwear down, and thrust into me. This wasn’t like our previous times. This was all anger. This was all battle.

And we were at war.

He pulled my hair hard and I arched my back, taking him. Taking everything he wanted to give me. Because I knew he wanted it, just like I wanted him. He slammed into me, yanking my hair so hard tears sprang to my eyes, and I was getting close to my end. Close to unraveling. Close to allowing him to have parts of me I never gave to anyone.

So. Deliciously. Close.

“Fuck you,” I growled.

He spanked my ass. “And my, my, how eager you are to do it.”

I dropped my head, allowing my mouth to press into the back of my hand as my walls caved around his thickened girth. He snapped his hips against me, causing the excess of my ass to jiggle as I felt hot threads of *arousal* filling me to the brim. Pulsing against my walls. Dripping down the insides of my thighs as I shivered in his wake. He finished with a long, low groan and collapsed on top of me. And for a split second, I felt on top of the world pinned beneath his body.

*Please, just understand.*

After a moment, I relaxed across his bed, stretching my muscles and running my hands through my hair. My face was buried in his blanket, and it smelled so sweetly of him. I finally rolled onto my back and looked at him. But, when my eyes laid upon him, I found him already off the bed and getting dressed.

“Jude?” I asked softly.

When we made eye contact, he didn't say a word. He simply dipped down and scooped up my shirt before chucking it at me. “I don't know if you're thinking you can get a raise for extra services, but I'm pretty sure Janey won't roll with that.” He left his own shirt off now that his pants were back on and went to his window.

I clutched my shirt to my chest and looked at him in shock.

“What? Are you thinking we're going to cuddle? Think again, dollface.” He lit a cigarette and headed toward his bathroom. “I'm going to shower. I'd appreciate it if you were gone by the time I was done.” He shut the door with a decisive click, and my mortification was complete.

I hastily pulled my clothes on and fled. As I drove home, my head was full of thoughts. Who exactly was that guy? That was the guy I'd always thought Jude Carlisle was, but he had made me think he was someone different. Someone with more depth. Someone who I had underestimated all these years.

Had I been wrong about him?

Or rather, had I been right about him all along?



## JUDE

After Brooklyn left, I sank into a pit of shame and self-hatred so deep it blocked out the sun shining through the windows of my room. I fought the urge to destroy my room again, holding on to my control by a fingernail.

Why had I done that? Why had I pushed her away? And not just a push... I had thrown her into the next county. I couldn't pretend to not have seen the look on her face as I'd treated her like some kind of prostitute. And she had just given herself to me, like a sacrifice on the altar of my betrayal. I had judged her and found her wanting and treated her like she was a piece of gum on my shoe I'd been ready to scrape off and throw away. Hell, I had thrown the whole damn shoe away.

I slammed a fist on the surface of my desk. Enough of this shit. Enough wallowing and whining like a bitch. It was time to get some answers. If there was any truth to what she was saying, I owed it to both of us to find out.

Luckily, I had one clear place to start.

*The video Lila made.*

She hadn't returned since storming out of her room, which was a plus. I wouldn't have to explain why I wanted to see the video to her. I walked into her room, and there was the video camera, set right on her desk. Ballsy, to leave it out where Brooklyn could see it when she came in to clean and easily destroy it. Then again, she would lose her job, and I was sure Lila had already backed up the file. Maybe that was even why it was out, a trap Brooklyn had been too smart to fall for. I

picked it up and checked to see if the memory card was still in it, *yep*, and then took it back to my room.

I ejected the memory card and put it into my laptop, grateful I hadn't destroyed it during my blind rage yesterday. I pulled up the video and hit 'play,' unsure of what exactly I was looking for as it began. But, as I watched the scenes unfold, I snickered to myself.

*Talented bitch.*

I had to give it to my sister; she had a knack for filming. If I hadn't been there myself, I would have thought this was some sort of play. Fiction, designed to entertain. The angle was perfect, the lighting expertly managed to highlight our main players—Merritt and Brooklyn. She even had the foresight to leave me out of the shots. Although I suspected that was more likely because that would make it easier to release to the public without embarrassing the family than it was about saving my feelings.

Either way, I was grateful not to have to look at the stupefied expression I was sure I had been making while inside that fucking shed.

The first watch through, I didn't see anything definitive. The second was the same. I plugged in my headphones and maxed out the volume, wondering if they could pick up something. And while there was something, it was small.

When I had entered the shed, the first thing I had heard was a groan, followed by Merritt asking if she 'liked that,' although I hadn't recognized Merritt's voice at the time. Listening to that on my headphones, the groan sounded a lot more like a cry of pain.

I rewound and watched it again.

"Ah! ... Baby, you like that?"

Yeah, that was not the typical male sound of pleasure for sure. I made a note on my legal pad, then continued to watch. This was the point in the video where the light turned on. I paused and looked closely at the two of them. You couldn't see Brooklyn's face—Merritt was too tall—but I could see her

feet. I took a screenshot of the image and made it full screen, then zoomed in.

Between Merritt's legs were Brooklyn's legs. They were not standing or wrapped around him, or anything that would give his story truth. They actually looked like they were... trying to knee him in the balls. I continued the video and watched frame by frame. Definitely. That was definitely what it looked like. Still not quite definitive, but something else.

I jotted *legs?* down on my pad.

Here was another thing: now the sound was blasting through my high-end headset, right after Lila turned the light on, it sounded like Brooklyn tried to say something. There was some kind of muffled sounds coming from her. I listened ten times in a row but couldn't make anything specifically out.

The rest of my watch-through didn't give me anything helpful, except for the sight of Brooklyn's face, which twisted my heart. I closed down that feeling. I still didn't know if she was telling the truth. No sense in softening yet. But then, as I was about to pull out the memory card and return it to Lila's room, something occurred to me.

That video really had been well done. *Excellently* done. Almost as if it had been... choreographed.

I hurriedly re-watched it again. The lighting, the staging, where everyone had stood, it was all perfect. You didn't just happen to get lucky and catch that. Here's another thing, too: I knew my sister, and if she was going to do something, I knew she'd make damn sure every single detail was right. There would be no stone left unturned, nothing left to chance, because she would have considered every single detail ahead of time.

I watched one last time with all of this in mind, and I saw so much I hadn't caught yet. Specifically, I noticed how Merritt kept shooting looks at Lila throughout the altercation, almost as if he was looking for direction.

I got to the scene where Merritt told Brooklyn just to come clean. Her body language, defensive and curled in on itself,

seemed to speak to someone who had just been assaulted. While I hadn't known her that long, I had a hard time believing if I had caught her in the scene Merritt and Lila described, she wouldn't have been stronger. This person, this beat-down, quivering girl, was not the fierce fighter I had encountered, who had caught my attention over and over.

Something tugged at my heart again, and this time I had a harder time shutting it down. Especially when my beloved sister kicked out a foot and tripped Brooklyn on her way out of the shed. I winced, watching her land hard. Lila had managed that shot perfectly, even though she had tripped her. I shut the video down and returned the memory card and camera to my sister's room.

I needed a clear head to continue thinking this through, so I went downstairs.

In the living room, my mother and her assistant were speaking about their plans for the day. "You have a dinner meeting with the senator tonight, and then tomorrow morning is the prayer breakfast in Washington. We have you booked on a ten thirty flight this evening—"

"Hello, darling." Mother interrupted her assistant when I walked in.

"Just getting coffee," I said, grabbing the carafe and a mug and pouring myself a cup. I had turned to leave when something on the table between them caught my eye, something familiar. "What's that?" I said, pointing to it.

Mother glanced down at the slim silver device between the two of them at the table. "This? It's a tape recorder. I like to record all my meetings so that if anything slips through the cracks, I know in which direction to look." She shot a meaningful glance at the assistant.

I paused. "Where did you get it?"

The assistant answered, "We order them in bulk so that the congresswoman is never without one. There must be twenty lying around this house. If you need one, I'm sure that wouldn't be a problem."



I shook my head and left the room. Interesting. Everything was adding up to support Brooklyn's story. Maybe it was time to call her. If I went over tonight, maybe we had a chance.

Fine. I wouldn't fight it anymore. I'd grab my jacket from my room and go. Suddenly I was desperate to see her again, to apologize, to make it up to her. Would she let me in the front door? I had to find out.

I ran to my room and threw the door open... and found Margeaux waiting at my desk, arms folded tightly.

"Now's not a good time, Margeaux," I said tightly, grabbing my jacket and putting it on.

"It's never a good time with you, is it?" she said. "And once again, I don't give a shit what you think is a good time. We're engaged. I will see you when I please."

I sat at the edge of my bed and took a sip of coffee, not bothering to offer her anything in hopes she'd leave. Too much to ask, though. It always was with her.

Margeaux pointed to my laptop. "What exactly is all this?"

*Shit.*

On my computer screen, the still shot from the shed was still maximized. And right in front of it, my notepad.

"Just finishing up the shit with that girl," I said, feigning nonchalance to throw her off the scent.

She narrowed her eyes. "I am not an idiot, Jude. I have a pretty good idea of what's going on here." She stood and paced the length of my room. "I have been very lenient with you, and I believe it has given you the wrong idea of how we work, how our marriage will work."

I rolled my eyes as she continued.

"I know you slept with that townie slut," she hissed. How could she know that? I kept my face blank. "If you're wondering how I know, then you are more stupid than you seem, *Judiekins*. You are what my father likes to call a 'wild card.' You cannot be trusted. So, I have you followed."

She shrugged as if she had just stepped on an ant in the house, but my eyes widened.

“What the fuck?” I stood, spilling coffee onto the floor. For the first time in my life, I felt a splash of regret at making a mess, knowing it was likely going to be Brooklyn cleaning it up.

“Shut up and sit down.” All at once, Margeaux’s voice had none of the affected sweetness, the simper, the silly bimbo intonation I was so used to. This wasn’t even the emotional fury I knew to expect every so often that preceded a fuck. This voice—this cold, calculating ‘you are nothing’ voice—was my mother’s.

I felt myself shrink unconsciously in response.

Margeaux grinned. “Of course I have you followed, you pathetic little rich boy. I have allowed you indiscretions, as long as they were discreet, and neither you nor the slut you’re fucking gets any grand ideas. Now this...” She pulled a manila envelope from her bag and dropped it on the desk. I opened it and flipped through the images. Me and Brooklyn in the forest, fucking. Me and Brooklyn in the library, leaning close, eyes on each other. Then, fucking again. The two of us in her car, passing a bottle of whiskey. Smiling.

I rubbed a finger across the last one. I didn’t even recognize myself in that image.

Margeaux’s voice pierced my trance. “Take a good last look, because this whole thing is over.”

I tossed the pictures onto my bed. “No, actually, it’s not, Margeaux. I think it’s time we take a look at ourselves. I’m done with this bullshit of our little fake relationsh—”

She pressed a finger to my lips. “Before you finish that statement, I want to make one thing perfectly clear. Are you listening? Because this is important.”

I glared at her as her finger slipped down the pulse point on my neck. “If you dare walk away from me, if you ever fuck that bitch again, I will ruin her.”

The cool tone of her voice froze me in my tracks. I watched as she grabbed the picture of us fucking on the desk in the library, the Mandatory Scholarship Counseling sign mockingly clear. “I wonder what the board would think of this picture? Or the Dean of Students? Or, hmm, her counselor in the journalism college? I’d wager they would drop her ass like a hot potato. Now you? You would be fine. Mommy would make a nice fat donation to the school, and all would be well. But little Brooklyn, on the other hand, would be on her ass in the cold. One word from me, and your mother will make sure she’s fired from this job as well. And her dreams of a career in journalism? Well...” Margeaux chuckled. “Daddy owns one of the largest media syndicates in this country, my love, and he wouldn’t even question it if I wanted her blacklisted from the industry.”

I took a step back from her, a feeling of rising horror, of walls closing in around me, rising in my gut.

“And I would not stop there. Not only would I make sure that she never got into another journalism program in this country, or that even some *BumFuck Times* newspaper in Nowhere, Arkansas, would hire her. She wouldn’t be able to get a job writing a drink list as a coffee shop employee. My reach on my own is small. Combine it with your family’s reach and mine? There would be nowhere for ‘Little Rosie’ to hide. She’d never finish college, never get a job, and end up begging on the street right here in Hampshire, maybe living out of her shitty car. And if I could get that taken away from her too, I would. *Just because I can.*”

She clapped her hands together and I found myself speechless.

“So, Jude, this is what I propose: leave the girl be. She can keep her job here, her scholarship, her apartment, and go on to work in a newspaper somewhere. Hell, I’ll even put in a good word for her with Daddy if she graduates from Bryers with no more issues with you. In return, what I want from you is simple. No more ‘not now, Margeaux,’ no more ‘I’m not in the mood, Margeaux.’ No more Lila buying me gifts from you. I want you to be *in* this. I want commitment. You are my fiancé,

and I want you to start acting like a loving fiancé should. I want free reign in your life, because, after all, darling, we're a team now. Don't you see? My successes will be your successes and vice versa." She grabbed me by my collar and pulled me close. "It's time for you to grow up and be the man I know you can be. I have been patient, but that time is done. Are we clear?"

I looked over her shoulder. She had me trapped. "Yes."

"Yes? Is that how one speaks to one's beloved fiancée?" She lifted one eyebrow dangerously.

"Yes, dear," I said, my voice flat.

"And what will happen if you don't hold up your end of the bargain?" Her voice was lilting, eyes sparkling; she was having so much fun with this.

"You will destroy Brooklyn's life."

She giggled, her voice returning to what I knew as 'normal'. "That's right. And while I really wouldn't mind seeing her become a drugged-out prostitute downtown, trading sex for a fix, we can avoid that, can't we?"

"Yes."

She raised her eyebrow again.

"Yes, dear."

Margeaux ran her hands down my sides, feeling my chest and cupping my crotch. But when I didn't respond at all, she sighed.

"Fine, I'll let that slide for today. Let you lick your wounds. But tomorrow, I will expect you to fill your fiancé duties. I have a very healthy libido. And besides, we're both young, beautiful people. Why should we waste away and become loveless prunes?" She laughed gaily and swung her purse onto her shoulder. "Were you going somewhere, darling?"

I pulled my jacket off and dropped it onto the floor. "No." I swallowed. "Not anymore."

“Lovely. I’ll see you tomorrow then. And you can keep those photos. I have plenty.” She smacked a kiss on my unfeeling lips and swept out the door.

And like that, my prison was complete. I could see the metaphorical bars of my cell close in around me, sealing me for a life sentence in hell.



## LILA

I got home late Sunday night and tried to talk to Jude. He was standing at his window, smoking cigarette after cigarette, like some sort of robot or a factory worker. Action without thought. Repeated endlessly.

“Jude?” I asked. “You okay?”

He didn’t turn from the window. “Fine.”

“Can I join you?” I took a hesitant step toward the window. Something about his body language was more closed off than I had ever seen it.

“Not tonight.”

So I left, closing the door quietly behind me. Back in my own room, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of something that felt a lot like regret. And I didn’t like it. As Mother always taught us, feelings were pesky little demons that sought to do nothing but destroy. Business had no use for them, and that’s how empires toppled. Because emotions were things people could exploit and hold over someone’s head until they cried out for mercy.

Yet, they were still there. Taunting me with their presence.

Margeaux had texted me to tell me she had wrapped things up with Jude. To tell me that the girl wouldn’t be a problem for any of us anymore. Even Mother had communicated with us today that she was pleased, and that never happened. Mother was swift to punish, quick to chastise, and swift to command once something went her way. And even she took the time to

congratulate me on a job well done. We had followed her directions in presenting ourselves as healthy and functioning adults when out in the world, and nothing had come of the article or protest on campus. Life was back to normal, as it should be.

So why did I feel so uneasy as I headed back to my room?





## BROOKLYN

Monday morning dawned bright and beautiful. I had to be at the Carlisle Manor by 4:00 a.m., and honestly, it was a disgusting time to have to be out in the world. Yesterday, I had driven to the Manor feeling apprehensive, afraid, and unsure. Today, I had decided that I no longer gave a shit. My bag of fucks was empty. Jude had treated me like some sort of prostitute, used me, and tossed me aside.

Never again would he get my sympathy.

Did I feel like he had been lying when he had said we had meant nothing? Sure, but what could I do about it? If he wanted to push me away, then fine. I didn't need him. I didn't need anyone. He was his own person and so was I. And I sure as hell wasn't going to continue fawning all over him if that's how he wanted to play this.

And really, I was at fault here. I let myself get mixed up with my rich classmates. I was the one that acted like I could belong, like I was one of them, when we all knew that I wasn't. They had played with me like a toy and tossed me into the garbage once they were finished with me because I allowed them to do it. Because I dared to step above my station in an attempt to reach for something I knew was never mind in the first place. And while they might have scraped a little of the shine off me, made me feel a little used and unwanted, I was not broken. They could not break me, and they were foolish to think they could.

But, when I arrived in the kitchen for my daily assignments, Janey dropped another bomb.

“You will no longer enter the garden for any reason whatsoever. Those tasks have been removed from your job permanently. You will be the sole housekeeper in charge of the young Carlisle wing, on direct order from the congresswoman.” She smiled, but it held no warmth. “I do not know what you did to piss off Ms. Margeaux, but she seems determined that you will pay. This is on *her* direct orders, so you will do as you’re told. She said she wants to see you working for the twins, so that’s what you will do. Today, you will be setting up breakfast for her and Mr. Jude on his balcony, and she wants you to act as waitstaff. I believe you will be seeing a great deal of her and Mr. Jude from now on.” She handed me my apron, and a chill traveled through me. “There’s one more thing that is part of your daily routine now. Stand against the wall.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Do it. I’ve been told to check your pockets at the beginning and end of all your shifts. When your phone is returned to you, I will also confiscate it while you are on the premises. You are to be treated as if you have something to hide.”

I rolled my eyes and stood against the wall. She ran her hands down my arms and legs with malicious glee. “You seem to be taking a lot of pleasure in this, Janey.”

“Don’t you dare speak to me that way,” she snapped, reaching her hands into my pockets and shaking out my apron.

I snickered. “Why not? It seems pretty clear now that my employment no longer rests in your hands. You said it yourself, the Carlises want me here so they can make me suffer. So they clearly aren’t going to let you fire me. If you had the power to do that, you already would have. And I’m pretty sure there’s nothing you can do to me that’s worse than whatever Margeaux has in store for me. Ergo, I can finally talk to you however I want.” I smiled but jumped when she

pinched me sharply on my thigh as she checked the inside of my legs.

“Oops, sorry.” She smiled at me. “Say what you want, hold your head high, but I will have a great deal of fun watching this all unfold.” She handed me back my apron. “Go on, your chores await.”

So, the Carlises thought they had won. They thought they would watch me bend and scrape before them while they gloated. They wanted to see me scabble for pennies, making a living from the sweat off my back as I cleaned up after their messes, and they would laugh while watching. Well, they had underestimated me one too many times. I had one more trick up my sleeve, and I wouldn't let it go to waste. I had worked in this house for a very long time, and while I may not have set out to spy on them, I had learned plenty in my time here. Things that made the park seem like small potatoes.

So if this was how they wanted to play it, fine. I would bide my time, hide in the shadows, and—for now—they could gloat. They could watch me and feel as if they had won. I would let that happen willingly with a buried grin on my face.

Because if it was the last thing I ever did, I would take this family down.



## JUDE

I spent the night thinking, looking for a way out of this life spent with—I shuddered in horror—my mother incarnate. I had never realized how similar those two were, and now that I had, it was too late. I'd found one thing that I couldn't bear to lose. And in order to save it, I had to willingly let it go.

I watched as the sun come up through my window, the foggy air mingling with the smoke from my cigarette, and I came to a decision. Well, less of a decision and more of a crossroads.

What exactly had I found, anyway? None of the notes I had made, the clues that maybe Brooklyn had been set up, none of them were definitive. A few sounds that didn't quite add up, her legs looking strange, a video that was too good, and a voice recorder that was suspiciously similar. What did that really *mean* anyway?

Merritt could be into kinky sex and making weird sounds. Maybe Brooklyn liked him holding his hand over her mouth while they fucked, and that's why I'd heard some muffled sounds. She had been into some rough shit with me. That would explain her legs in the video as well. She could have been just trying to warn him someone had entered the shed and caught them and had done something drastic to get his attention. Like trying to knee him in the balls. It didn't surprise me Lila had done a good job of the video, like I had previously figured, because she did everything well. And as far as the voice recorder, well, if there were so many lying around the

house, wouldn't it make perfect sense that one of our housekeepers had pocketed one for her own use?

But, even as I listed all of this out in my head, my heart tried to fight the decision I was coming to. Not that it would have made a difference. I mean, wasn't it better to just believe the story that had been crafted? What did I stand to lose by just giving in and following that? Nothing. But if I chose to believe Brooklyn, I would spend my life wanting her—*craving* her—but unable to even touch her. Because Margeaux would ruin her life if I did, and I had no doubt that every threat Margeaux made was possible.

After all, I had seen her do it before.

The reach our families had was nothing to underestimate, and if I went rogue and against my mother's wishes, I would not have access to any of my family's money or power to help Brooklyn. So if I decided to pursue her, we would both be jobless, penniless, hated, and without a friend in the world. And what did we really have anyway? A few good fucks, a few talks, but nothing of any substance.

Then again, it was more than Margeaux and I would ever have for the rest of our lives.

I shut down my heart with a firm hand and leaned into the lie. Brooklyn and I didn't have anything. We barely knew each other. She had betrayed my trust and my family's trust. She was a spy, a liar, a cheat, and a thief.

I was a Carlisle, and the Carlises stood together.

Even if it meant being miserable for the rest of my life.

## FREE PREVIEW - OFF LIMITS

### Chapter One

#### *Libby*

Imagine being in love.

I mean deep, deep in love. The kind of love that songs and sappy movies are written about. The kind of love that makes your friends jealous, grossed out, and happy for you all at once.

Imagine having a person you can't wait to come home to at the end of a long day. A person who makes you laugh and smile and holds you when you cry. Now imagine they're gorgeous, successful, wealthy, and *incredible* in bed.

Now imagine that person leaving you, kicking you out of the apartment you thought you were sharing and then almost immediately shacking up with some bimbo from Milan.

Just for a non-specific example.

A person might be crushed after something like that. They might give up on life and happiness altogether.

But not me. Nope. Never.

I have too much to live for and too much to do to let some asshole who didn't know what he had stop me from achieving my dreams.

Or at least that's what I tell my mom when she asks how I'm doing. Going out on a limb, I don't think she really believes me.



But that's fine because what matters is what I do, and I definitely *don't* sit around moping, wishing he'd call me and tell me what went wrong. Closure is a wonderful thing (another nugget from my mother), but it's not always necessary. Sometimes you just move on and stop dwelling on things you can't change.

My mornings start early. My alarm goes off around seven, and I lay in bed, groaning and dreading the day. I'm not a morning person, and it usually takes me about two cups of coffee to really get going.

My brother got me one of those coffee makers on a timer for my birthday last year, so it doesn't take long before the smell of rich, dark roast coffee is wafting through my small apartment, waking me up just enough that I can drag myself out of bed and toward the kitchen.

The first cup of coffee is what I like to think of as laying the foundation. It gives me enough energy to get into the shower, to wash my hair and pick out an outfit for the day. It lets me get ready, taking myself from a sleepy goblin creature to a savvy, well dressed professional in under an hour.

On the outside, at least.

Usually by the time I need to head out the door, I'm drooping again, so that's where the second cup comes in, perking me up enough that driving to work isn't likely to end in disaster. My commute isn't too long, just a little over half an hour, but every drop of caffeine helps before ten in the morning.

Everyone who's ever worked a typical nine to five probably can relate to that, but the thing about my commute is it's beautiful. I currently live in Corbeil-Essonnes, a small suburb outside of Paris, France.

No matter how much I don't want to go to work, the sight of driving into the City of Lights never gets old, and that, combined with the coffee, of course, usually has me perky enough to be ready to take on the day by the time I get to the office.

I work for one of those big, international accounting firms. We handle clients all around the world in almost every industry (all confidential, of course). Huffington Smith prides itself on the variety of clients it deals with and the quality of its employees. I'm only in France temporarily, on a sort of secondment to help out the Paris office with setting some things up.

Most of the people I work with seem content to ignore me unless they have to deal with me directly, but I've met a few people.

Out of everyone in the office Lucien is the one who gives me the most attention. He seems amused by my Americanisms, and he's the one who always tries to get me to say American phrases so he can repeat them back in a truly terrible American accent, just for a laugh.

I'm sitting at my desk, typing up a report that is due at the end of the week, when I see him come sauntering into view.

There's a stereotype that people overseas are always gorgeous. I have plenty of friends who made jokes about me coming over here and finding myself a handsome Frenchman to bring back with me, and it was for good reason. There are a lot of really attractive people in France.

Lucien is definitely one of them. He's got that wavy dark hair that frames his face in the way that it falls into his eyes a couple times a day, and he has to shake it out of his face in one of those epic hair flips from a 90s movie.

His eyes are hazel, flecked with green and gold, and he has this smile that lights up his whole face. Not to mention amazing bone structure.

He's gorgeous, in short.

We get along well, usually ending up working on the same accounts so there have been late nights and early mornings for the both of us, and his good humor keeps me going sometimes when I just want to crawl back into my bed and say a sweet fuck you to public accounting.

“Libby!” he says, putting that accent on my name that makes it sound much more musical and pretty than it has any right to. “Happy Monday.”

“Is there anything happy about a Monday morning?” I ask him, looking up from my keyboard, grateful for the distraction.

“Depends on the Monday, I’d think,” he says. “And it’s almost lunch time, anyway, so that has to count for something.”

“Okay, you do have a point there.”

*I’m going to need my third cup of coffee sooner rather than later at the rate I’m going.*

“What are your lunch plans, sweet Libby?” he asks, head tipped to the side.

“Oh my god, Lucien. I have no idea yet. I didn’t even realize it was so close to lunch. I’ve just been sitting here plodding away on this report.”

“Breaks are important,” he reminds me. “I know in America it’s fashionable to work yourself to collapse in the name of the capitalist machine, but over here we like to take a more relaxed approach. Have lunch with me?”

I’m caught off guard by his question, too busy laughing at his (completely correct) condemnation of the American work ethic. We’re work friends, and we’ve been out for meals in a group, but never just ... together.

I can’t read what he’s thinking on his face, either. He just has a pleasant smile on, waiting for my answer.

I don’t have a reason not to go, so I shrug and smile. “Sure. Sounds great. Any place in particular you have in mind?”

“There’s a little place where I like to get lunch during the week,” he says. “I think you’ll like it. They sell hamburgers. No hot dogs, though.”

I roll my eyes at his teasing. “Hamburgers are German, Lucien.”

“Mm, yes, but the square of cheese food product named after your charming country is not.”

Once again, he has a point. That’s one of the things I like about Lucien. He has such a quick wit, and his teasing is never mean. It’s always kind of dogging on America, but honestly, the country deserves it, and I’m not so patriotic that I can’t laugh at some of the sillier stuff we’ve done.

And when it gets too annoying, I just put on a terrible French accent and tease him right back about croissants.

Moving to France to help my firm expand the Paris office temporarily was a big jump. The offer came at a time in my life where I didn’t have another plan, and I definitely needed the distraction. It felt like everything I was doing back at home was falling apart around me, just because one aspect of my life was crumbling, setting off a domino effect.

I never expected living overseas to be easy, but I did expect it to be a welcome change of pace, and so far, it’s been exactly that. I’ve met new people, made new friends, and sort of carved out a space for myself.

I have a bakery I visit every Sunday to get pasties, and I take a walk by the Seine whenever I have the time. There’s a little old French woman who rents out the shop under my apartment to sell beautiful, handmade scarves and hats, and I’ve chatted with her in my atrocious French after buying things to send home to my mom and sister.

One day, though, I’m going to have to go home, and I’m not looking forward to it at all.

But it’s too early in the day for existential dread, and when lunch time rolls around, I get up from my desk and meet Lucien by the elevator, ready to head out.

“It’s just a quick walk down the block,” he tells me, winding a scarf around his neck to ward off the chill in the air once we’re outside.

The crisp air helps wake me up, and I keep up with Lucien and his long legs while we head down the street.

As we walk, he chatters about a client he's working on, talking about their lack of organization and how he's had to email a woman in bookkeeping three times about the same thing with no useful response yet.

"At this point, I think I may as well just copy and paste my last email and send it again. I don't know what's so hard about 'I need these dates and numbers, please.' I even said please!"

I laugh, shaking my head at him. "You should just go there and ask her for them in person. I'm sure she wouldn't be able to turn down your puppy eyes."

"Excuse me, Elizabeth," he says, looking scandalized and using my full first name. "I have never done puppy eyes in my life."

"You did last week when you wanted me to split the last Danish with you," I remind him.

He pouts, and even that's attractive.

Before he can work up into a full sulk, we make it to the little cafe he's been leading us to. It's cute on the outside, like most places in the Paris area, all pale brick and dark wood with a bright blue awning covering the two seater tables right outside the window.

There are pastries on display, and my stomach growls, reminding me that two cups of coffee aren't the same thing as breakfast.

Lucien laughs and leads me inside.

The woman behind the counter immediately perks up and starts talking to Lucien in rapid fire French that I don't have a hope of keeping up with. I can speak and read the language well enough to do my job, but I'll never be as fluent as a native speaker.

While they talk, I content myself with looking around and reading the menu.

After a bit, Lucien introduces me to the woman, who it turns out is his cousin. She owns and operates this place with

her husband, and they make some of the best food in the world, he tells me.

I smile and shake her hand when it's offered and place my order for soup and a sandwich, promising to have a look at the pastries on the way out.

She seems content with that and says she'll bring everything over when it's ready.

Lucien and I find a table off to the side and sit to wait.

"This is a nice place," I tell him, looking around at the decor. "It's tasteful and understated, and it feels comfortable and homey."

"Olive would be happy to hear you say that. She and her husband have poured their lives into this place. I eat here almost every day for lunch."

I smile warmly at him, charmed by how good he is to his family. "I'm sure they appreciate it."

He shrugs. "It helps that her husband cooks so well."

Our food comes pretty quickly, and I practically inhale my roast beef sandwich and butternut squash soup. I can feel Lucien staring at me, so I look up. "If you're going to make a joke about American table manners, you can save it. I missed breakfast, and I'm starving, okay?"

He grins at me, shaking his head. "No, no. I wasn't going to tease you. I actually ... wanted to ask you something."

He seems nervous, which is definitely out of character for him. I frown, wondering what could have him so worked up. "Sure," I say. "Shoot."

"Well," he begins. "I don't think it's any secret that I am very fond of you. Ever since you joined our office, you've been very good company."

I smile at him, rolling my eyes. "That's just because you like to make fun of me."

"No, no," he insists. "I mean, that part is fun, of course, but it's not the reason. You are lovely. Funny, intelligent,

beautiful.”

I can already feel my face darkening in a blush when he calls me beautiful. I’ve never been very good at accepting compliments about my looks. My work, sure. Tell me all day that I kicked ass on dealing with a client or handling projects. Those are things I can control and things I put a lot of effort into. But my looks?

I’m average height at best, a little over with heels. I’m curvy, but mostly just because I don’t have the height to stretch any of it out. My hair is what my mom likes to call dishwater blond, which just means it’s blond but with more brown in it than she’d like to see. I have brown eyes, and a little nose with a dusting of freckles over it, no matter the season. The only real cute thing about my face as far as I can see is the dimple in my right cheek. Everything else is completely and totally ordinary.

There are a million French girls who look better than me on their worst day, and I know Lucien has seen and probably dated plenty of them.

“Thank you,” I say anyway because that’s how normal people respond when someone tells them they’re beautiful.

He grins at me. “You’re welcome. I mean it, you know. You’re amazing, and I like you a lot. So I was wondering if you’d like to accompany me to dinner sometime.”

I swallow hard, glad I don’t have any food in my mouth to choke on. “Like a date?”

“I was hoping so,” Lucien replies.

Honestly, I’m surprised. Not just because Lucien could have anyone, woman or man, that he wants, but ... okay, mostly because of that. I’m nothing special compared to him, and sure, we have fun teasing each other, but I didn’t think he was interested in me like that.

It’s flattering to be asked, definitely.

But here’s the thing about having your heart ripped out and stomped on until its laying on the ground broken into a million little jagged pieces: it makes it really hard to try again.

Lucien's a really nice guy. Gorgeous, funny, smart. He's everything any girl could want in a partner. But all I see when I look at him is a big, glowing sign that says DANGER in bright red letters.

He's waiting for an answer, so I muster up a smile. "That's really nice of you to ask me," I begin, and his smile falls.

"Ah, time to let me down easy, I take it?"

"Lucien, you're great, it's just that I don't really plan to stay here, you know? I have to go back to America soon, and I don't want to start something here and then have to figure out what to do when it's time for me to leave."

"Oh," he says, considering. "That's actually an excellent point. I'll confess I wasn't thinking about the future very much. I got caught up in the present."

"It's okay," I tell him. "I'm still really flattered that you asked."

"Just so I make sure I leave no stone unturned as it were, is there any chance you would be interested in casually dating?"

"I don't even know how to do that."

He nods. "And what if we take the dating out of the equation all together?"

"So you mean like being friends?" I ask him.

He smiles, and it's a slow, almost sensual thing. "In a matter of speaking. Friends with some perks."

Ah. Now I know what he means. I can't tell if I'm disappointed or thrilled that someone like him would want to have sex with me, but either way, it's probably a bad idea.

"We work together, Lucien. Don't you think that would make things a little awkward?"

"No. As you say, you'll be leaving soon enough."

I open my mouth to tell him that doesn't matter, but then close it again. Because it's actually a good point. Lucien's a friend here, but if I go back to the States and we never see



each other again, then what's the harm in having a little fun, right?

The old Libby would never have done something like this. She'd never have entertained the thought.

But the new Libby is lonely and a little hard up when it comes to sex, and Lucien's good looking and *interested*.

I take another bite of my sandwich, chewing slowly while I think it over. Lucien seems content to wait.

"Okay," I say finally. "Let's give it a shot."

He looks surprised that I agreed so quickly. "Really?"

I shrug. "Sure. What not? You're, let's be honest, really attractive, and probably good in bed, so ... " I shrug again, not sure how else to explain. Telling him that it's been months since someone other than me has touched myself is more than a little embarrassing. Also mentioning that at least forty percent of the reason I agreed is to see him with his clothes off just seems like a bad idea.

Especially when he's grinning broadly at me, looking really happy with my answer.

For a second I entertain the worry that he might get attached and make leaving difficult, but I dismiss it quickly. Lucien doesn't seem the type, and if experience is to be believed *I'm* the one with the attachment issues.

So it should all be fine.

Right?

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## Chapter Two

### ***Libby***

We finish up our lunch and Lucien pays for my pastries on the way out, inviting teasing from his cousin. We head back to the office and go our separate ways back to our desks, but it's

not five minutes after I sit down to start working again that I get a message from him.

*Do you want to come to mine tonight?*

I nearly choke on my coffee. Damn, he moves fast.

*Trying to make sure I don't have time to change my mind?*  
I send back.

*No, just interested in seeing how this will go. I wonder if you're as interesting in bed as you are at your desk. ;)*

Now I do choke on my coffee, and I need to cough and clear my throat before I can formulate a reply. He's forward and bold, and my cheeks are flushed.

*I don't think you're supposed to talk like that in the office,* I tell him, fingers flying across the keys. I look around me, just to make sure no one else is paying attention to me and the way I'm suddenly the color of a tomato.

*Is that a yes, then?*

Somehow it doesn't surprise me that he's a persistent bastard. *Sure, fine. I'll see if I can squeeze you into my busy schedule.*

*I'll squeeze something into you if you do. ;)*

I close the chat window before I can lose any more of my cool to this absurd man and gulp at the rest of my coffee, which does nothing to soothe how hot my face is.

An assistant walks by and gives me a strange look, and I want to melt into the floor. Instead, I get back to work, definitely not letting my mind wander ahead a few hours where I'll presumably be naked with an equally naked Lucien.

Definitely not.

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Lucien texts me his address, and I go home after work to get ready. It's been ages since I've had a date, let alone a plan to meet up with someone just to have sex with them. I stand in

front of the bathroom mirror for a few minutes, looking at my body, trying to see whatever Lucien sees.

I'm average in every way to my own eyes, even if I do have nice tits and curvy hips. I don't really see how that's enough to make someone like Lucien be into me, but I don't really want to question it too hard. This is an opportunity, and I can't lose my nerve.

I hop in the shower and wash off thoroughly, taking the time to shave my legs and everywhere else.

It's a process, considering no one's seen me naked in months.

I wash my hair and moisturize, adding a little body shimmer and scented lotion. I don't want to look like I'm trying too hard, but I do want to seem like I made an effort.

I keep the makeup light, just enough to bring out my eyes and accent my lips. I imagine him smearing my lipstick all over my face with his dick, and my pussy gets wet immediately.

Okay, yeah. It's been a while, and I clearly have been needing to get laid. There's only so much a girl can do with a dildo and a vibrator before it gets old. Having the touch of another person always makes it better. At least for me.

Once I'm clean and dolled up, I go to my dresser. In the very bottom drawer, I keep all my lingerie. Back when I was still with my ex, I'd get dressed up for him every once in a while. I still have all kinds of pretty bras and panties, corsets and thongs, stockings and garters.

He'd had a thing for a girl who 'put in a little effort' as he called it, so I did my best for him.

Not that it helped.

But it feels sort of good to be contemplating wearing some of it for someone else. It feels like taking a step in the right direction toward getting over him and not looking back.

I pull out a black lacy bra that I know shows off my breasts nicely and pair it with a matching pair of panties. I skip the

stockings for now, not really wanting to fuss with them, but I pull out a pair of heels and add those to the ensemble.

Before I get dressed in clothes to drive over there, I admire myself in the mirror.

Like this, I can see how someone would want to bang me. I look pretty damn good. The black lace rests against the creamy pale of my skin, bringing out the brightness of it. The few freckles that dust my shoulders and chest stand out, and I turn this way and that, checking out my ass in the mirror.

The heels definitely help raise it up, and I give it a little smack, smiling when it jiggles a bit.

It helps ease my nerves, and I put on a plain t-shirt and some jeans, going for casual so Lucien will have to unwrap me to get his prize.

I throw a jacket and a scarf on and head out, trying to keep myself calm.

Of course Lucien's apartment is much nicer than mine. He lives right on the outskirts of the city, and you can almost see the lights of Paris from the street.

He's waiting for me by the door to the building when I walk up, and I raise an eyebrow at him.

"I saw your car," he explains, leaning in to kiss my cheek. "Come on up."

I follow him, heels clacking on the floor as we make the short trek down the hall and up a flight of stairs to his apartment.

It's bright and minimal, decorated with art and little else. The furniture is all black from what I can tell, and the floor gleams white marble with golden threads running through it.

I look around, mouth slightly open, and then look back at him, noting that, as always, he seems amused. "You afford this working at Huffington Smith?" I ask, skeptical.

He laughs. "Partly. Some of the rent is paid with my inheritance, I'll admit."

“Of course you have an inheritance,” I mutter. He’s so fucking perfect. Handsome, wealthy, charming.

Before I can start to question what I’m even doing there, he holds out a hand to me. “Come here.”

I take it, allowing him to pull me in closer.

“You smell good,” he murmurs, and then dips his head to steal my mouth in a kiss.

*Oh.*

It’s surprisingly good, and I’m not even sure why I’m surprised. His mouth is soft and warm, and he kisses me with just the right amount of pressure. It’s insistent, but not demanding, and he coaxes me into kissing him back. My arms go around him, and I make a soft, needy noise, grabbing at the back of his shirt as the kiss ramps up in intensity.

His tongue slides along my bottom lip, and I shiver, parting my lips for him, letting him push his tongue inside.

He lays claim to my mouth slowly and with talent, teasing my tongue with his own until they’re dancing together. It’s messy and we’re both breathing hard by the time we have to separate for air. I know my cheeks are flushed.

“Mm,” he says, licking his lips. “You’re delicious.”

The heat in his eyes makes me want him even more, so I haul him back in for another hot kiss, nipping at his lip.

He laughs softly, pulling back to look down at me with those pretty eyes. “Someone’s eager,” he teases. “I thought you weren’t sure about any of this.”

I roll my eyes at him. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Mm, you are, but I’m not sure I know what for. Maybe you just wanted to play a few rounds of checkers with a friend.”

Of course he has to be an asshole now, but that’s fine. I’m here and I have more confidence than I did going into it. The kissing helped. I step back from him, unwinding my scarf and taking off my jacket.

Aside from the heels my outfit isn't impressive, but Lucien keeps his eyes on me, waiting.

I'm going to make it worth his while.

I start with my shirt, lifting it over my head and tossing it on the couch. My hair fluffs out around my shoulders, and I smooth it down and keep my hands moving, sliding them over the mounds of my breasts before cupping them, squeezing them together. I let them fall and then bounce slightly in the lacy cups of the bra, my nipples getting hard against the fabric.

Lucien's eyes are locked onto me, taking in my chest and the cleavage on display and traveling down the flat planes of my stomach.

I let my hands walk further down, heading for the button and zipper on my jeans. They're loose enough that I don't have to take my shoes off first to get them off, thank goodness. There's no awkward shuffle either, and for once it's like the gods of sexy times are smiling on me, making it easy for me to slide my jeans down and step out of them, leaving me standing in my underwear and heels.

Lucien's eyes are wide as he takes it in, and I stand there, trying to be confident about it. I started this, came in with the intention of seducing him, and I'm going to see it through, goddammit.

"My god," he says, and then murmurs something under his breath in French that I don't catch.

He comes over and touches me, hands going from my arms down to my hips.

"Have you always been this tempting?" he asks. "Sitting there in the office with sexy lingerie under your clothes? Just waiting to snare an unsuspecting Frenchman in your net?"

I snort at the image. "Mm, sure," I reply. "Let's go with that."

"Let's go to my bedroom instead," he says, taking my hand and pulling me along before I can even respond.

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## Chapter Three

### *Libby*

At the end of it all, I don't stay. I get back in my car, shivering in the late night air, and go home.

I take off my makeup and my lingerie, and pull on my pajamas, feeling heavy when I sit on the bed. The sex was fun, but there's something about Lucien that just doesn't click with me. He's shiny. Pretty and perfect on the outside, and funny and fun to be around, but other than that, there's not much there. He doesn't seem fazed by much or passionate about anything either. Other than himself, I guess.

The sex was good. It was satisfying. I definitely came more than once, which is more than I've come in the last couple of months.

Afterwards, though, I felt cold. I waited to see if Lucien was going to want to kiss or touch or anything, but he started getting ready for bed, so I left.

Now, alone in my apartment, I feel a bit of regret.

I'm not sure what I'm looking for anymore. If someone asked me a year ago, I would have told them I just wanted my ex. I wanted him and everything he had to offer me.

Now I don't know.

Passion maybe. Compatibility. Someone who excites me. Someone who makes me want to get dressed up for them because I know it's just going to make things hotter.

I'm glad, looking back, that I turned Lucien down for a date. He's fine to sleep with casually, but there's nothing more there than that.

And that's fine. I can enjoy the fun while it lasts. Probably. It doesn't have to be a whole big thing.

The next morning, it kind of seems like a whole big thing.

I run into Lucien within ten minutes of being inside the building, and he grins at me, waggling his eyebrows. “Had a good night?” he asks. I roll my eyes.

“Do you ever stop being so proud of yourself?” I ask him, even though I already know the answer.

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t be?”

The look on his face makes it clear that he’s never going to entertain a world where he’s not amazing at everything he does, and I can’t even pretend like the sex wasn’t good, so I just sigh and keep walking.

As luck would have it, it’s a very long day. The managers are on our asses constantly about getting review points done, and I spend hours going over notes and numbers, trying to get things to line up. Lucien is just as busy. We have lunch separately, and there are no flirty and inappropriate for the work place messages from him at all.

I can’t tell if I’m disappointed or relieved.

Either way, the usual time I’d leave comes and goes, and the office starts to empty around me, leaving me, Lucien, and a couple of other stragglers still at our desks, banging out work like we’re being paid overtime. We’re not.

By the time I’ve reached something resembling a stopping point, it’s nearly nine p.m., and I’m starving.

I rub my tired eyes and drink the last dregs of my cold cup of coffee, shuddering at the chalky taste. When I look up again, Lucien’s there, leaning his hip against the desk.

“What would you say to dinner?” he asks.

There’s no teasing to him now, just tiredness, and he looks like he sincerely just wants to get dinner. My stomach growls loudly, giving away how much I want to eat, too.

“Sure. I could eat.” I nod.

He laughs. I shut down my computer and gather my stuff before following him out of the building.



His cousin's place is closed this late at night, so we get in his car and drive to another restaurant he's familiar with, just outside of Paris. Where the little cafe was cute and quiet, this place seems bold and bright, and absolutely full of people. Everyone I can see coming in or going out looks like they're way better dressed than either of the two of us, still in our business casual after a long day of work.

"Okay, if this is your idea of a quick bite to eat, I don't want to know what a fancy meal with you would look like," I say, staring out the car window at the swanky place. The name of it is in French, scrawled in script so elaborate and curly I can't even make it out.

Lucien just laughs and starts to get out of the car.

"Seriously," I say, trying to hurry after him. "I don't even know if I can afford this."

"I invited you," he assures me. "You don't have to worry, Lib."

His blasé attitude toward it all is annoying, and I fold my arms and raise an eyebrow at him, refusing to move from the spot until he takes me seriously.

That seems to get through to him that I don't find this as funny as he does, and he stops and gives me a confused look. "What? What's wrong?"

"Why are we here?" I demand. "I told you I didn't want to go on a date with you."

"This is not a date," he replies, seeming offended that I'd even suggest such a thing.

I look at the restaurant again and then back at him. "Right. Because this is definitely the kind of place you bring a fuck buddy to after nine on a Tuesday."

"So because you're just a friend that I'm sleeping with I can't take you to nice places?" he asks.

"I don't know. It depends on your intentions."

"My intentions are to feed you since we were both at work for twelve hours today and deserve something nice as a treat.

If I promise to expense it, will you come have dinner with me? As a friend?" He hurries to add that last bit, and I can feel my resolution wavering.

I have always wanted to eat at one of the nicer places in Paris. Some of them cost more than I make in a week, though, and it's harder to justify it when it's just me on my own and I know there's a noodle place that will deliver me spicy deliciousness for much, much cheaper.

But Lucien is right about us being able to expense it since we were working so late, and he's wearing an expression that can only be called puppy eyes, so I sigh and relent.

"Okay, fine. But I'm watching you. I'd better not see any date-like behavior while we're in there."

He rolls his eyes with a laugh. "On my honor. You can pull out your own chair and everything."

I roll my eyes at him and shut the car door with more force than necessary. It doesn't even phase him because of course it doesn't. He just laughs and makes his way around to walk with me toward the restaurant.

It's just as swanky on the inside as it is outside with a red carpet and a mahogany podium serving as the hostess stand. A gorgeous woman with bright red lipstick and a low cut black dress on is standing behind it, smiling at us as we walk up.

"Good evening," she says in heavily accented English. "Do you have a reservation?"

"Not tonight, no, but I was hoping we might get a table, anyway."

I look at Lucien like he's crazy, fully expecting the hostess to do the same and then show us out for having the gall to show up at a place like this with no reservation.

Instead, she just smiles wider and nods. "*Oui*, we have something that I hope will suit you, sir." She waves over someone else, and he smiles and leads us further in.

At this point I'm more confused than anything, so I just follow, not looking too hard at the pretty, glittering people who

sit at the tables we're passing, laughing and drinking. All of them probably have reservations.

We're led to a booth that doesn't look like it's the place they put people who dare to show up here unannounced. Lucien says it's perfect, and the waiter introduces himself as Phillipe and asks if he can get us anything to drink.

"Just water for me," I say firmly, daring Lucien to contradict me.

"Water for now," he agrees easily. "And then we'll have a look at the wine list."

"Very good, sir," Phillipe says and dashes off.

"I still have to drive home at the end of this, you know," I remind Lucien.

He waves a hand like that's unimportant. "I can get you home. Or you could come home with me." He waggles his eyebrows. If we were in a less classy establishment, I would have thrown something at his face.

"I know you don't have any shame," I tell him, "but can you please try to control yourself for a second? All I'm going to want to do after this is go home and take a hot shower."

I wait for a tantrum. For him to insist that he's taking me out to dinner so I owe him or some garbage like that. But it doesn't come. Instead, he just shrugs. "Fair enough. It has been a very long day."

Water and bread are brought to our table, and I start looking at the menu.

Of course it's one of those places where they don't put the prices near the items, so you can order whatever you want with blissful ignorance of how much you're spending.

I remind myself that technically our firm is paying for this, and they can definitely afford it.

The menu's in French, but I manage, deciding to go with a steak dish that sounds delicious and is probably less expensive than anything involving caviar or snails.

Lucien probably dines like this often, judging from how quickly he puts his menu down.

In the end, he ends up ordering a single glass of wine and a pasta dish, and I'm surprised at his restraint. I wonder if it's for my benefit.

"Will you miss it here when you have to go back home?" he asks me, sipping his wine while we wait for our food.

I smile. "Of course. Paris is like nowhere I've ever been before. Everything is so nice and fancy, and it's definitely different from where I live back in the States."

"Have you lived in the same place your whole life?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm from this little town in the south originally. My parents still live there. What about you?"

He starts telling me about his childhood home when someone walks by our table and then turns around and comes right back over.

"Libby? Libby Chastain?"

I glance up, surprised to hear someone with an American accent who knows my name, and even more surprised to find it's a very tall, very handsome man standing there looking down at me.

It's obvious that he's very fit in that expertly tailored suit he has on, and his blond hair and green eyes are eye catching in the best way. Just behind him is a woman dressed all in red, and she doesn't look pleased at the interruption.

"Um. Yes?" I say, head tipped to one side. There is something familiar about him, but I can't put my finger on it.

Then he grins, and it's cocky and just a little condescending, and I remember.

"Ian Black?" I ask.

His grin widens. "I didn't think you'd remember me," he admits.

I haven't seen him in probably a decade. He was my brother's friend in college, the two of them playing together on

the school's lacrosse team. Sometimes he'd come home with Darren for a weekend or a short holiday break, and my parents always took pity on him and the fact that his parents often traveled for work over the holidays, leaving him on his own.

They thought he was such a nice boy because he knew how to charm them, but Darren always confided in me that Ian was a complete player. Always had a different girlfriend or fuck buddy, and plenty of other girls waiting in the wings to step in when it was time for a new one.

Darren was always very insistent that I stay away from him, but Ian and I had shared a few talks and late-night pints of ice cream when he would stay at the house. Nothing more than that, of course.

I was just a high school kid to him, but I thought he was funny and incredibly handsome.

He's still handsome, standing there looking like he stepped off the page of some fashion magazine and decided to come have a late dinner.

"I remember," I say, smiling back. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm on vacation for a few weeks," he says. "Just seeing the sights, you know how it is."

"Sure," I reply, nodding like I have any idea how that is.

"What about you?"

"Oh, just work," I say. "I work for Huffington Smith, and they have an office in Paris."

His eyebrows go up, impressed. "Wow. You've come a long way from being Darren's kid sister sitting at the kitchen table in your SpongeBob pajamas."

Of course, he remembers that.

Lucien is looking back and forth between us with interest, but Ian's date looks less than pleased.

She folds her arms and gives me a look that would definitely have set me on fire if she had that power. I just look

away from her and back up to Ian.

I'd gone to a few of my brother's lacrosse games back in the day, and Ian was a capable player, for sure. I remember him; all athletic and skilled, and sixteen-year-old Libby had crushed hard.

But he was my brother's friend, a college boy with a bright future ahead of him, surely, and therefore off limits. I could only imagine what my parents would have said if they'd known he'd seen me in SpongeBob pajamas.

We're both a long way from that now, clearly, and I can't take my eyes off of him. All of that boyish charm he'd had at nineteen is still there in the sparkle in his eyes and the warmth of his smile.

And judging from the woman behind him who's now glaring at me, he still has no problem with the ladies.

"Well," I say. "I should let you get back to your date." I nod my head at her, and he turns around, almost looking surprised to see her standing there.

She gives him a sarcastic little wave, and he smiles at her. "Ah, Simone, don't look at me like that. She's an old friend I haven't seen in years."

"And she clearly has a date of her own," Simone snaps in a thick accent.

"Oh, don't mind me," Lucien says, grinning. "We're just co-workers." He winks at me, and I want to stab him with my fork.

Ian spares him a glance, but then his eyes travel back to me. "It was good to see you," he says, his voice warm and sincere. "Tell Darren we should catch up sometime."

"Sure," I reply with a smile, trying not to feel disappointed. Of course he wants to talk to Darren. They were friends, after all, and I was just his annoying little sister. "I'll do that. Have a good night."

I give Simone a sweet smile which she scoffs at as she turns to march over to their table.

Ian watches her go and then smiles at me one more time. “You too, Libby,” he says before following her.

When I look back to Lucien, he’s grinning widely and the urge to stab him makes itself known again.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I demand, reaching for my water glass and wishing I’d ordered something stronger.

“I don’t know what you mean. Old friend of yours?”

“Old friend of my brother’s,” I clarify. “I haven’t seen him in years.”

“I see,” he says, resting an elbow on the table and his chin in his hand. “You seem happy to see him now, though.”

“Lucien, can you not? For like five minutes, can you just not?”

He just laughs, and we manage to get through the rest of the meal without me strangling him.

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## **STAY IN TOUCH!**

Thank you for reading, Ruthless Saints! If you are ready for more, book two is coming VERY soon.

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