



THE
RED
FILES



L E E W I N T E R

CHAPTER 1

I'LL SHOW YOU MY GOATS

Los Angeles, Saturday

LAUREN KING ROLLED OVER, COUGHED miserably, and buried her face in her pillow. She swallowed hard and winced. Her swollen tongue tasted like glitter, feathers, and faux fur.

Nothing like waking up to a full-blown head cold with a side of pink boa.

Her cell phone gave a faint beep from somewhere on her hardwood floor. She groaned and twisted only to get a face full of her own hair, which reeked of assorted socialites' perfumes and industrial-strength hair sprays. Not surprising. All that air-kissing invariably had a downside. Not quite the worst part of her job, but way up there.

Her phone beeped again. And then again. Lauren frowned.

She turned to look at her clock radio—some incessantly cheerful red thing—and squinted until the numbers came into view—7:33 a.m.

She scowled. Only people with a death wish would harass an entertainment reporter before ten on a weekend. Everyone knew it. It was one of those immutable commandments of journalism for god's sake.

With a sour grunt, she contemplated turning her cell off and catching more shut-eye. That thought lasted approximately three seconds before curiosity won out. She sighed and leaned out of bed to grope around for the beeping phone.

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She felt its shape bulging inside her jeans. She pulled the denim onto the bed, yanked the cell out of the pocket, and flung her jeans back to the floor again.

Seventeen new messages? Okay, no one in her game was that popular before breakfast unless a sex tape had leaked. And her own lengthy bedroom dry spell meant at least it couldn't be hers.

Her eyes focused on the first of her texts. It contained only one word. *Goats?*

Goats? She blinked. Had some A-lister with a zoological fetish been caught doing the unthinkable? Well, it probably wouldn't be the first time.

She peered at the screen. Oh. The text was from one of her five brothers. All were beefy, strapping mechanics—just like their dad—who worked at King & Sons Car Repairs in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. And all were experts in the art of teasing their kid sister, no matter how far away she was. She scrolled to the next message.

*Goats, King? Oh and thanks for the scoop.
Whatever do you do for an encore?*

Lauren narrowed her eyes. She didn't have to even look to know the author of that goading text. Her mind swirled. *What scoop? And what's with the goats?*

She clicked through to the *Daily Sentinel's* website on her smartphone as she struggled to recall the previous night's finer points. Her blurry recollection only confirmed that she shouldn't have mixed cold meds with alcohol.

A vision of Estella Flores-Vicario swam into her mind. The ambitious, former maid had married one of her clients—who just happened to be Hollywood's second most insanely wealthy and elusive film producer.

Estella was also entirely mad.

Catch her on a good day, as Lauren had three weeks ago when she'd exclusively profiled her for her VIP events

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and parties pages, and she was your best friend, declaring “You must write my biography, darling; only you I trust.”

The fact that she’d uttered this phrase to dozens of journalists over the years pretty much took the novelty out of the offer. Still, she was generally harmless in an eccentric, “Look, darling, I store my high heels in my spare fridge!” sort of way.

Catch her on a bad day, though... Lauren’s head throbbed at her vague memories of Estella on a tear the previous night. Something about a glass-shattering crash, an orange silky confection of hissing socialite shooting by on her ass and swearing at Lauren in several languages as she slid through a foamy sea of pink punch and startled VIPs.

Lauren gasped. *Right*. So that was absolutely *not* her fault. At least she hoped not.

Her phone’s screen finally loaded up the familiar *Daily Sentinel’s* entertainment webpage.

Beneath her colleague and arch rival’s popular column, Ayers and Graces, was a prominent video clip headlined “Divas of the Ball Square Off!”

Underneath that screamer was the breakout teaser.

“I’ll show you my goats,” declares our own Daily Sentinel entertainment reporter Lauren King in a bizarre smackdown with producer’s eccentric wife. Catherine Ayers was on the scene and dishes all the dirt for readers. Click here to watch that punchbowl fly...

Heart thudding, she clicked Play. Four minutes, forty-two seconds, and one goat mystery solved later, she had a sick feeling in her churning guts that had nothing to do with whatever she had imbibed the previous night. She slid her gaze down to the hits counter on the video.

884.

She stabbed refresh.

927.

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Crap. She had to fix this. She reached for a white T-shirt in her laundry heap on the floor and punched refresh again.

982.

Goddamnit. She ripped off her tank top, threw on the T-shirt, pulled her jeans over her white boy-shorts, and ran for the door. She paused only to hop from foot to foot as she slid on an old pair of boots. She winced as one bare heel rubbed against an unforgiving seam.

Figures, she scowled to herself and grabbed her car keys.

* * *

The roar of her 1970 Chevrolet Chevelle filled Lauren's ears as she relaxed against the leather seat. The sky-blue classic machine vibrated its impressive 480 horsepower through her bones.

She glanced in her rearview mirror and watched as her tiny white apartment building on North Mansfield Ave. grew smaller. It had only two redeeming features—a garage for her beloved car and a rent she could just afford while still leaving enough for food, second-hand designer gowns for work, and occasional barhopping and karaoke nights.

Her gaze caught her wild, shoulder-length, brown, bed hair in the mirror, and she realized she hadn't even brushed it in her furious scramble to get to work. Lauren raked her fingers through it then reached over to the passenger seat, grabbed a cap, and rammed it on her head.

Another glance in the rearview mirror. Her green eyes blinked back at her.

Well, maybe it was marginally better. She slid on her sunglasses. Anyway it wasn't like she'd bump into any colleagues at this time of day to give her grief. Right now the paper's vast open-plan editorial floor would only be populated by a skeleton crew of online news updaters. Most of the print news staff wouldn't even think of

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crawling in until a much more reasonable hour. That gave her a handy window in which to threaten a certain asshole videographer. Without witnesses. She'd just politely explain how he'd be walking real funny unless he agreed to take it down.

She changed up to third gear and gave the gas pedal a stomp. It was a minor miracle being able to get out of second given the usual LA gridlock, but it was early enough on the weekend that the pretty young things and powerful old things were still too busy with each other to be going anywhere.

She sat up straighter, and her T-shirt rode up her pale stomach. She glanced down and winced at the reminder. She should probably get out in the sun once in a while and maybe squeeze in an extra jog or two. Hard to believe she once had the toned build of a hotshot college softball pitcher. But it was so easy to let things slide in a party town—especially one filled with schmoozers all trying to get her liquored up and malleable enough to mention them in her pages.

When she'd first started the VIP parties beat, she'd learned the hard way to stay on top of her health. Her job entailed a hell of a lot more enforced booze and exotic canapé consumption than was good for any human being.

While most casual social butterflies might attend one or two events a week, she regularly had to hit about six to ten, some weeks as many as fifteen when she included all the charity breakfasts, brunches, and A-list luncheons.

This was not what she'd left Iowa for, of course. She had big plans, and a political beat was the Holy Grail for her. This mind-numbing tap dance through Tinseltown was just a minor detour, she reminded herself grimly.

At first, she'd balked at the job, but she'd pretty much drained her savings when all the other doors were slammed in her face. And if getting a foot in the door of newspapers in LA meant strapping on five-inch heels and hoping the

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news boss would be too distracted by her cleavage to declare her non-existent socialite résumé acceptable, so be it.

News Managing Editor Frank Beltram had, however, seemed indifferent to both her décolletage and her fuck-me heels. And he didn't give a rat's ass about her University of Iowa journalism degree or lofty GPA or that award-winning series she'd written on rural teachers for the *Cedar Rapids Register*.

"Can you count?" he'd asked her instead.

At her astonished expression, he pinned her with a deadly serious look. "'Cause that's exactly one half of this job. Don't be fooled by the fancy title. We're being too kind calling this 'entertainment reporting'. It's parties, plain and simple. Who, what, where, and how many attended a shindig. Get good at doing estimates because publicists will lie their skeezy asses off and tell you they had a thousand VIPs packing a room that you know only holds, say, six hundred max. You have to know shit like that, right?"

Lauren had nodded.

"You also need to know how to spell. 'Cause that's the other half of the job."

Lauren forced herself not to roll her eyes.

"You think I'm telling you how to chew gum; that journalists should all know how to spell?" Frank fixed her with a knowing look.

"I've fired two writers on the entertainment beat in a year who kept spelling names wrong. It makes us look like illiterate idiots. If in doubt, you ask these prize pricks and prancing poodles themselves, got it? Don't rely on their crew.

"You think that sounds easy? Well remember you may have to march up to some half-drunk, wannabe big shot with an ego bigger than his pimped out truck who will be

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insulted you don't know who he is and will threaten to end your career with one phone call. He may even be right.

"So you have to work out a way to ask in such a way to make him feel grateful you checked, even if it's in front of his friends or bosses or that smoking-hot actress who used to be in porn that he's trying so hard to lay.

"So, King, that's the job. Spelling and counting. All the rest is window dressing. But if you screw it up, and I get publicists blasting me down the line for getting their oh-so-shit-hot, famous client's details wrong, I'll be a most unhappy boss."

Lauren blinked at him and wondered what the hell she'd gotten herself into.

Frank studied her and gave a short bark of laughter. "I see those wheels turning, kid," he said and twirled a finger in the direction of her head. "Yeah, yeah. You think you're better than this. Truth is your earnest little résumé doesn't amount to jack in the real world.

"I know this job isn't rocket science, but it counts as journalism if you squint real hard. And, like all journalism, it needs to be done right. Okay? Got it?"

Lauren gave him a tight nod.

Frank regarded her thoughtfully, and his face brightened.

"All right, King, you're in. You start on Friday night. I'll pair you up with Ayers for a week. That's our columnist who does all the high-end, big-ticket events—mainly the stuffed shirts and superstars. She knows everything and everyone, so pay attention to what she says. She has half this town shit-scared about what she'll write next, especially since she's always bang-on accurate and never minces her words."

"So she's the gossip columnist?" Lauren asked.

Frank snorted. "A word of advice, kid? *Never* call her a gossip columnist to her face. That's my little occupational health and safety warning for you. Will not end well if you do. Now as for your job—you'll be expected to attend

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everything, from crap events to grand openings, and crank out enough content to fill all of our celebrity-spotting back pages, plus keep the online team happy, too, with entertainment fillers. Right—any questions? No? Good. Just remember—do *not* fuck up the names.”

And so she'd become a glorified parties reporter, with a business card that looked considerably more glamorous than the job itself. She was now adept at getting quotes—and double checking names—from various stars while taking note of who was on whose arm, what they were wearing, and who was new to this vapid circuit of the damned. Then she'd efficiently move on to the next party-ball-launch-fundraiser-gala-premiere and rinse and repeat.

At the end of the night, she'd drag her exhausted body home, peel off her dress, file her story by email while sitting in her underwear in bed, and then barely crawl under the covers before she was asleep.

It had been a year, and Lauren was done with it. She'd been slipping hard-hitting story ideas to Frank for over a month. The news boss hadn't bitten on any of them yet, but it was only a matter of time 'til he folded. It was just about persistence. At least she hoped so.

But now there was this debacle involving Estella giving her an earful. How the hell could she convince her boss she could handle the big stuff when she couldn't even handle the most basic reporting gig without making a spectacle of herself and being ranted at on video by the craziest socialite of them all?

And if this thing went viral... She shuddered.

Lauren drummed her fingers on the wide steering wheel. She could see her workplace. The seven-story, grand beaux arts building was much more impressive than the product it put out. While the *Daily Sentinel* broke its fair share of solid, quality stories, the change in publisher six months before she joined was starting to show in the

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content. After all, why be earnest and dedicated when you can be slick and gossipy and generate clicks on the site?

Lauren pulled into her workplace and was about to turn into her reserved parking spot when she saw a familiar silver Saab straddling the line beside it. It wasn't enough to prevent most cars squeezing in, but then her vehicle's broad line wasn't typical of most cars—as the maddening owner of the Saab well knew.

Goddamn, Ayers. Her rival was intent on ruining her day in every way, it seemed. With an irritated glare, she pulled back out onto the street and found a parking spot.

She marched inside the building and spotted her favorite drinking buddy, Maxine aka Max, manning the ground floor. Lauren liked the no-nonsense security guard a lot. They mixed in a hell of a lot of similar circles when off duty. Well, okay, same clubs, same sports bars, and they had a shared secret shame for eighties music.

“Hey,” Lauren greeted her as she shoved her sunglasses on her head.

“Lauren? Hey, girl, why are you here so early? And on a Saturday? You doing Ayers's hours now?” Max's broad face split into a grin as she stepped out from behind the security desk.

Lauren offered her best faux glare to her friend who looked like her regimen of donuts and beer was paying ample dividends.

“There's just something I need taken off the website, and you know Wolfman never answers his damn cell. I won't be in long.”

Max's grin widened, and she folded her arms as she rocked back on her thick-soled boots. The brown uniform tightened across her powerful fleshy biceps. She gave a low guffaw.

“Oh god! You've seen it.” Lauren groaned.

Max smirked, plucked a cell phone out of her breast pocket, and swivelled it to face Lauren. “Not bad—1830

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hits. You could even make the TV news tonight at this rate. Or *TMZ*? Who knows!" She chuckled and squeezed the phone back into her pocket.

God no.

"You know, everyone's seen it," Max continued. "Funniest thing I've seen all year. Oh hey, did you push Estella into the punch puddle or did she slip? I couldn't tell, and I've watched it, like, ten times."

Lauren sighed. "Don't ask me what happened. I was high on cold meds and \$300-a-bottle champagne." She headed for the tempered glass security barriers behind Max.

The guard's face turned all business. She put up a meaty hand and frowned. "Hon, your pass?"

Lauren paused, shocked she'd forgotten it, and slapped her jeans pocket to be sure. "Crap—sorry, I think it's in my car." She looked at Max hopefully.

The other woman gave her a faintly censorious headshake. "You know I would if I could. Rules are rules."

"Okay, yeah," Lauren said. "I'll run back and grab it."

"It's my job, hon. Not even for you," Max added apologetically.

"Yeah," Lauren agreed. "Sorry. That's fine. Seriously. Back in a sec."

She left the foyer and jogged back to her car. She skidded to a stop when she spotted a familiar rectangular piece of paper and envelope stuck under her wiper. She swore furiously. She'd been gone, what, five minutes tops?

She unlocked her door, grabbed her missing office pass, and snatched the parking ticket from the windshield.

Two minutes later, she flashed her pass and stomped past Max.

"I'm going to kill Ayers," Lauren muttered and waved the parking ticket in the air like battle orders.

"Fair enough." Max nodded in solidarity. "But don't leave a stain. More paperwork for me."

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Lauren shook her head and strode toward the elevator. She thumped the Up button. Just as the polished steel doors opened and Lauren stepped in, Max said, “Oh, hey, hon, before ya go—What’s with the goats?”

Lauren narrowed her eyes. The doors closed.

* * *

Lauren stalked furiously into editorial on the second floor. It felt like a morgue now, but on deadline, it was a sight to behold.

Copy boys—well, teenagers—would run around with printouts or coffees, drop them on desks of department heads, and then scamper off at the next bellow of “Copy” to get new orders.

Lauren had done her time as a copy kid back at the *Liberty Gazette* in Iowa. It could be backbreaking work hauling stacks of freshly printed papers up from the presses to the editorial floor. Ink would cover her hands and clothes in black smears and the stairs had made her extremely fit.

The *Daily Sentinel* at least had an elevator.

As she was heading for the videographer’s office, Lauren spied her gossip-writing and car-crowding nemesis sitting regally at her desk as her manicured fingers flew across her keyboard.

The Caustic Queen, Catherine Ayers, was all prickles and smug attitude. Lauren, still fuming, made a sudden detour.

Ayers was in her early forties, a decade older than Lauren. Her cool, gray eyes took in everything, and she famously did not suffer fools. She screamed old money with her cultured tones and compact, immaculately dressed frame—all of which belied a granite-hard, icy disposition.

She’d been known to make seasoned newspapermen crumple with a single cutting, well-aimed insult. And, given that *all* her insults were well aimed, that was a lot of

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crumpling newsmen. So no one—from editors down—dared to take her on. Although that probably also had something to do with her immense reputation earned long before she was reduced to being a lowly celebrity gossip writer.

Lauren didn't give a crap about any of that. Or the fact that the fancy Armani suit flattering her curves probably cost more than Lauren earned in six months. She stomped over to Ayers's desk and flapped her parking ticket under her nose.

Before she could get a word out, Ayers glanced up and offered a slow, feline smile.

"Well, well—Lauren King, goat botherer and socialite destroyer, darkening my desk on a Saturday. One of the signs of the apocalypse, I'm sure," she drawled.

Lauren glared at her. "Thanks for this." She slapped the parking ticket on the desk and shoved her fists in her pockets. "If you could stay between the lines, I wouldn't have to park on the street and get a ticket. Again! You can pay it! I sure as hell won't."

Ayers picked it up lazily between an elegant forefinger and thumb and looked at it with sharp, amused eyes. Her lips twitched. Then she carefully put it down again.

"I see your paranoia is back, King. You should consult a psychiatrist about these fantasies involving my supposed vendetta against you."

"It's hardly delusional that you keep crowding my parking space!"

Ayers quirked an eyebrow. "*Delusional?* That's a big word. Are you getting tutoring, dear?"

"Were you like this as a kid with a coloring book?" Lauren snapped, ignoring the jibe. "The lines you're supposed to stay between were merely fun suggestions?"

"I wasn't aware you would be in today," Ayers stated oh so reasonably. "So how was I to know to leave space for that ridiculous urban tank you drive?"

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She leaned back and gazed at Lauren, taking in her rumbled outfit for the first time.

“My my, King, it’s like old times,” she said, her eyes glittering. “Or end times. Remember that first ball you ever attended? When I was training you? And you turned up dressed as, what would we call that outfit? On-trend pallbearer?”

“Let’s...*not*,” Lauren ground out. “Shit, between your overlord mentoring approach and territorial expansion in the parking lot, you missed your calling. I’m sure there’s a small third-world country somewhere that needs a new despot. Hell, I’ll even write you a reference.”

“They certainly breed them soft in the Midwest if you couldn’t handle my gentle instructions for a single week.”

Lauren snorted. “Gentle? Riiiiight. And Stalin was just misunderstood. The point is you should park within the lines *every* day whether I’m scheduled or not. It’s about being a decent human being, which I realize isn’t exactly playing to your strengths, but I live in hope. Now stop stalling and take care of my ticket.”

She pushed it across the desk toward Ayers. They both stared at it for a beat.

“Well, I’ll file it with the rest,” Ayers said serenely and positioned it over a thin metal spike which held half a dozen identical pieces of white paper. She slammed the ticket on it. Ayers gave a shit-eating smirk as Lauren’s mouth fell open.

“Now, will that be all, King? Or do you have an audio commentary to add to our paper’s most popular clip of the day?”

Lauren narrowed her eyes.

Ayers leaned forward conspiratorially and lowered her voice. “I have to say, wasn’t it lucky that Jason Wolf was there when it happened? Because my understanding is he actually had one foot out the door to go to the next event. He almost didn’t capture that priceless footage at all.

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Fortunately, an informed bystander happened to notice Estella winding up for her trademark fireworks and tipped him off.”

Lauren sucked in a breath. “Informed byst... Are you saying you actually fetched him to make sure he filmed it?” She glared. “That was an absolute asshole move.”

Ayers offered a maddeningly indifferent expression.

“For god’s sake—we work for the same paper!” Lauren continued. “It’s disloyal!”

“A good journalist has an eye out for a story wherever it may be,” Ayers said with a purr and laced her fingers together on the desk. “And I cannot self-censor just because you and I, regrettably, work for the same organization. You surely aren’t advocating censorship, are you, King?”

“Everyone knows Estella is crazy!” Lauren threw her hands up. “So why be cruel? Why mock her by putting that out there?”

“I wasn’t aware Estella was the one being mocked. You and your curious goat fetish on the other hand...”

“I have a head cold! For god’s sake, is everyone mental? I said, ‘I’ll show you my notes!’ *Notes!* Why would I show her my goats?”

“Mine is not to wonder why. If you want to show her your goats, that’s between you and Estella. Oh and...” She paused and hit a button on her computer, then gleamed. “2,026 *Sentinel* online viewers—and counting.”

“You’re un-fucking-believable.”

“Thank you,” Ayers said, unruffled, with a faint smile. She gestured at her computer. “Now if you don’t mind, some of us have work to finish.”

Lauren ground her teeth together, but before she could turn to leave, Ayers’s gaze flitted to the top of her head for the first time. Her eyes widened as she read what was on the tattered cap.

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“Just pay the damn ticket. I have to go,” Lauren said hastily, realizing she had just supplied the other woman enough ammunition to be mocked for another year.

“Of course you do. I’m sure Cletus wants his hat back.” Ayers’s lips curled.

Lauren tried not to flush as she remembered the name on her cap—Clet Koshatka Farm Equipment. It had been a gift from a farm supplier friend of her dad’s. It was also covered in about fifty different types of paint splotches.

“It is my morning off,” Lauren defended weakly.

“All evidence to the contrary,” Ayers retorted and drummed her long fingers on her desk. “Now, if that’s all? Could you go waste someone else’s time?”

“Yeah, sure. I wouldn’t want to keep you from all your hard-hitting *news* stories.”

As she strode away, she could feel Ayers’s molten glare scorching the back of her head. She tried to tell herself she didn’t feel remotely bad even if it was a low blow to hit Ayers’s notorious, never-discussed weak spot.

Well, okay, so maybe she did feel a *tiny* bit bad.

Lauren was halfway to the videographer’s desk, still figuring out her tactics for convincing Jason “Wolfman” Wolf to remove the video, when she saw a familiar figure watching her impassively from the far side of the newsroom, arms folded.

She faltered mid step. What on earth was Frank doing in today?

“My office,” he gruffly called across to her.

Lauren followed her boss into the glass-walled room. His suit, navy, a bit too tight, was not worn often. He settled into his old black leather chair and frowned at her when she made to sit opposite.

“Door,” he corrected.

Well that was strange. The editorial floor was still so empty there could have been tumbleweeds bouncing across the desks. She turned to close the door and then

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perched on the visitor's chair nervously as she glanced around the room.

She was only rarely in here—for her day-to-day work, she reported to the Entertainment Managing Editor. But every now and then, Frank would call her in to tell her about some last-minute big VIP event that had a news angle, such as a disgraced politician attending, and she was usually out of his office again within twenty seconds.

Framed, yellowing newspaper front pages from over the years greeted her; a couple of them bore Frank's byline from his reporting days. A few awards-cum-paperweights gathered dust atop his overstuffed filing cabinet. The room smelled of Frank—which was to say masculine, sweaty, and faintly alcohol soaked. For a man in his early fifties, he could easily pass for a sixty-year-old.

The indentation on his left ring finger, where a wedding band had sat for years until about a month ago, was still there. Not that he ever mentioned his private life. Lauren lifted her gaze back to his face.

"Damned publisher has called the management team in for a meeting today," he began with a scowl and shifted in his seat. His cheap polyester suit emitted a squeak.

"Apparently print and online need to 'integrate better and establish more effective shared models.'" His fingers swam up to form derisive air quotes.

"Well that sounds, um..."

He stopped and stared at Lauren, his face saying he couldn't care less what she thought. She clanged her mouth shut and wondered whether her firing would be imminent. After all, a viral video involving a crazy socialite haranguing a reporter for supposed "lies, lies, lies" was hardly a good look.

"Since you're here, we should talk about that story of yours," Frank began. He cleared his throat and seemed uncomfortable.

Oh hell, she was getting fired.

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“Look I can explain,” Lauren began in a rush. “Estella didn’t like that I reported she stores her best heels in her bedroom fridge to keep the dust out. Even though she showed me the fridge—and it was, like, full to the brim with heels.

“I saw it with my own eyes, Frank. I took notes. I *have* my notes. But she went nuts and said I was making up stuff to make her look stupid, and that she might be new to America, but she knows what a fridge is for, and I was a ‘cow’ for suggesting she didn’t. I think she half believed her own crap by the end of her rant.”

Frank’s what-the-hell look made her stutter to an awkward stop.

“You think I give a flying fuck about Estella and her shoes?” Frank peered at her. “That crazy bitch could stick them up her ass and parade about and call it performance art for all I care. I meant the story you pitched me two weeks ago. The parking enforcement officer corruption at the end of your street. I’ve been thinking about it. There might be something strong in that. Something we can use.”

Lauren felt her face split into a wide smile.

“You liked my story?” she asked. She rearranged her features into all business. “I can get to work on it right away. And, don’t worry; I can do it between VIP events, so it won’t affect anything. I’ve been ready to jump with this for months. I have extensive notes, too.”

Frank looked down at his desk and shifted uneasily. His suit squeaked again. “Look, ah, King, it’s like this—I’m giving it to Doug. Doug Daley. It’ll be his story now. He has the experience. He’s seasoned. Safe hands. Won’t screw it up.”

A silence fell between them before Frank’s blue-eyed gaze slowly lifted and intersected Lauren’s. She saw the stubbornness, the jaw clenching. Her heart dropped.

“You’re giving my story away? To Doug Daley!”

“It is his beat—local politics. You know that, King.”

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“Then Doug should have found it! I worked my ass off tracking this down! I watched the kickbacks being paid for weeks on my days off. I *saw* them collecting the bribes from those store managers to not ticket their customers’ cars. This isn’t fair!”

“Fair?” Frank repeated. “You expected journalism to be fair? I *know* it ain’t fair, King. *I know*. This sucks more than a West Hollywood rent boy. But I have to think about the good of the paper, and that comes before the hurt feelings of my wet-behind-the-ears kid reporter who hasn’t written a hard-news story on a metro daily in her life.”

“But Frank...”

“Decision’s final, King. I’m sorry. If it helps, it’s not a bad yarn—it’s got legs. Don’t think I don’t know that. But I have the new publisher breathing down my neck with all these meetings about our profitability and our ‘message placement in the market’ and all that bull, and I can’t risk anything going ass up right now. Especially when I’m under the glass as it is, and here I have a solid yarn sitting in my lap like this one, one that could blow up into something big.”

“It’s only sitting in your lap because *I* gave it to you,” Lauren said indignantly. “And giving it to Doug...he’ll be...” She was going to say “a smug asshole” but stopped. Frank quite liked his occasional drinking buddy. “Impossible,” she finished.

“Yeah, well, that’s the way it is,” Frank agreed with a listless shrug and at least had the decency not to look happy about it. “Welcome to real-world journalism. Life ain’t all pink frilly cocktails and gala parties. But, if you like, I’ll make Doug include a tagline for you at the end.”

Lauren stared at him. He did *not* just insult her intelligence by educating her that her beat was actually lightweight crap? Like she didn’t live and breathe several layers of offensively shallow craptitude every night? For god’s sake.

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And a *tagline*? In tiny seven-point? Saying *Additional reporting by Lauren King* like some insulting pat on the head? Not even a joint byline?

She gaped at him. “You’ve gotta be kidding!”

“No? Okay, well then, your choice. Now, I ’spose that’s everything. We’re done.” He gave her a dismissive wave and, without looking up, added, “One more thing. Get that crap video off our website. I won’t have one of my reporters looking like a clown even for the hits. And get it down before Harrington Jr. spots it and wants it on every news outlet in the state.” Frank glanced at his wall clock. “You’ve got ten minutes before he turns up for the meeting. If that ass Wolf puts up a fight because it’s trending or whatever crap he goes on about, tell him to take it up with me.”

He began to flick through his papers, effectively dismissing her. Lauren climbed to her feet, her cheeks flushed with anger. She took two steps toward the door, indignation now in full burn.

“Oh—and King...” Frank said and then paused as if confused.

Lauren barely turned, not trusting herself, and waited, hand on the door handle, clenching it tightly.

“What in the *hell* are you wearing?”

CHAPTER 2

THAT WAY THERE BE DRAGONS

Saturday morning

LAUREN WAS TIRED OF STARING at her bedroom ceiling. She'd been brooding for hours now. Well, two weeks if you wanted to get technical. Now it was D-day, and time to face whatever had been done to the story. *Her* story.

She'd started thinking of the grandstanding, credit-swallowing hack as Smug Daley. It seemed everywhere she'd turned in the office in the past two weeks, he could be found regaling someone with the genius of *his* corrupt parking officer story.

Just yesterday she'd seen him spouting his magnificence to a purse-lipped Ayers as she silently stirred her coffee in the office kitchen. She looked as if she'd rather be anywhere else.

It was the last straw. The bastard hadn't even had the good grace to look sheepish when he caught Lauren's outraged expression. He just smirked and turned back to Ayers, only to find she'd already disappeared.

Lauren slid her bare feet to the worn, polished floorboards and grimaced as one met a balled-up sock and the other a gritty *something*. Hopefully just a dust bunny.

Note to self—clean some time before Christmas.

She headed to the bathroom. Once she'd finished her morning routine, she found herself staring into the rust-stained mirror. A wild-haired brunette with slightly puffy

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eyes stared back, and she couldn't resist poking out her tongue. It still looked relatively healthy.

There was that at least.

She headed for the kitchen. It wasn't a long trek—the entire apartment was small enough to swing a cat and give it a migraine when it hit every wall. She opened the fridge door. *Oh.*

Note to self—do shopping before scurvy sets in.

She sniffed at one blackened shape at the back and recoiled.

She rearranged her six beers, three bottled waters, and tub of margarine, searching hopefully until she came across a hard lump of cheese. Her fingers lingered over it, considering, before she rolled her eyes and moved on and then located a small protein bar that had come in a swag bag from a new active wear launch. She tried to remember when that had been. Eight months ago? Nine? She examined the wrapper dubiously. It'd do.

She grabbed it and a water and thunked them on her chipped white breakfast counter.

Right. Breakfast was served. She just needed her paper. Time to face D-day.

She hunted around for her flip-flops and trench coat to hide her sleepwear and then shuffled downstairs.

She skulked around a wall, avoiding anyone who might give her that judgy LA “Oh honey” fashion-disaster stare, and hunted the tiny front yard for her copy of the *Daily Sentinel*. She came up empty.

Goddammit.

Note to self—have the building's paper thief found and killed.

Swearing, she mounted the stairs, two at a time, ignoring the peeling white paint in the stairwell. It was best not to linger, anyway. The not-cleaned-since-Elvis-died smell would get a person every time.

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It was only when she reached the top of the second flight that she realized she hadn't taken her keys with her. Lauren cursed herself and tested her door. It didn't budge. A bit of good luck was too much to hope for, obviously. Now she had some major sucking up to do.

Lauren gingerly knocked on her neighbor's lime-green door and prayed Joshua was in a mood to be accommodating. The young wannabe accessories designer had a rather...fluctuating...set of emotions to go with his eternally creative soul. And he was no morning person.

"Whoever you are, you'd better be dying, filthy rich, or a Calvin Klein model," was announced through the wood before she heard the slide of a chain and the door swung open.

"Oh," he pouted. "None of the above. I suppose I don't have to ask why you're here."

He paused, distracted, and studied her outfit archly. "Really—how is it *you* write about the glitterati and yet have the style sensibility of a hillbilly bombed on moonshine? What *is* that outfit supposed to be anyway? Ode to a Floridian nanna?"

"The just-got-out-of-bed-looking-for-my-paper-but-some-bastard-stole-it look?"

Joshua harrumphed and turned, adjusting his silk crimson robe tighter against his lean, toned torso, and went in search of Lauren's spare key. She had locked herself out five times in the past three months. It was getting old for both of them.

He returned and dangled it at nose level. "It comes with a price this time, my dishevelled peach."

"Seriously?" Lauren reached for the key, only for it to be snatched away. "What do you want?"

"Isn't the blockbuster *Wolverine vs Predator* premiere soon?" he purred.

She rolled her eyes. Joshua's Hugh Jackman fanboy fetish was the worst-kept secret.

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“Why ask if you already know?” Lauren made another quick grab for her key, which he deftly evaded.

“You’ll be needing a plus one,” Joshua grinned. “Besides I hear the designer Monique Hertford’s going. I have a new Joshua Bennett Original handbag that will be perfect for you to accidentally-on-purpose thrust in her line of sight when you’re on the red carpet. And since Monique and I are both going through our BeDazzling phase, this could be my big break.”

“Ugh, Josh, come on, I can’t think about this now. I just need a shower and to do my laundry and not think about work for five minutes. So gimme my key.”

“A night in the orbit of the dishy Aussie and my soon-to-be BFF designer to the stars—that’s the deal. Come on, I promise to be a dashing date. You know I will,” he said with a winning smile of perfect teeth he’d probably paid more for than her Chevy was worth.

There was a reason so many artistic types in LA were starving.

“I won’t even try to hit on anyone cute while your back is turned,” he continued, his brown eyes pleading. “And I’ll go secondhand threads shopping with you again to update your glad rags. You’re way overdue for a closet overhaul. So what do you say?”

“It’s still two months away—guest lists aren’t even firmed up ’til three weeks out,” Lauren reasoned. “I don’t get every VIP event invite; I don’t even know if I’ll be on that list.” She looked longingly at her key. “Come on, can we not make my getting into my apartment a hostage negotiation?”

She let a bit of steel in her voice, and he relented with a dramatic sigh.

“Fine.” He dropped the key in her hand. “But if I hear you took anyone else to that premiere, I will throw a spectacular tantrum.”

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He inspected her once more and tapped his bottom lip with his index finger. "While we're on the topic, if you ever want to update that frighteningly basic 'do, I know some friends who do hair for all the stars. The A-listers, the B-listers, the C-listers who blow the B-listers..."

"And by 'update' you mean go bottle blonde?" Lauren suggested. "Marilyn again? When will your fixation end?"

"Am I so predictable, dearheart?"

"Just you and everyone else in this town. No one appreciates the classics," she said, running her fingers through her brown strands. "For all you know, Cedar Rapids chic could be the next big thing."

"Such a lost cause." Joshua tsked sadly. He leaned against his doorframe and watched her unlock her door.

"All right, I tried. Lord knows I did," he added. "And seriously, sunshine, do remember me for that premiere. It's exactly the place for a poor, struggling accessories designer to make his mark. Say the word, and I'll be there with bells on. And that may or may not be merely a metaphor."

He smiled so hopefully that she found herself laughing as she closed the door.

* * *

Ichiba Sushi, 1 p.m.

Lauren stretched out her legs under the table at Mariella Slater's favorite sushi bar. She had agreed to this lunch catch-up a month ago, and if it had been anyone else, she'd have cried sick, stayed in bed, and pulled the covers over her head. But just not being in the mood didn't fly because Mariella wasn't just anyone. She was a publicist to LA's top celebrities, and one of the few people who'd been exceptionally kind to Lauren in her early days on the job in Los Angeles.

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Sure, it had been in Mariella's best interests to pocket a new journalist, and that's how their business relationship had started out. Of course they both knew that Mariella befriending Lauren meant she would be considerably more likely to cover the events and famous clients Mariella wanted shining in the spotlight.

But since the hard-headed publicist didn't bother showing most newcomers how the LA circuit worked, Lauren had always considered it flattering that Mariella thought she was worth the effort.

Mariella was a woman of a certain age, contemplating her first face-lift—"talk me out of it, be a dear"—and married to a gentle, if not eternally dazed, government office worker whom Mariella adored. They had no children, and Lauren secretly suspected the extroverted redhead got some sort of maternal satisfaction in following her growth.

After many long lunches and galas spent together, these days they were good friends with professional benefits.

Lauren found it useful to get the inside track on the up-and-coming stars and people to watch. Mariella's battered, black contact book was fatter than a phone book and bulged with business cards that plopped out like confetti when she flung it open too fast.

Little got past her about the underbelly and goings-on of her town, and there was no A-lister who didn't know her on a first-name basis.

"All set for the big gala next week?" Mariella asked as she breezed in, flung her chunky bag onto the seat next to Lauren's, and air-kissed her. Lauren leaned up reluctantly and subjected herself to the jolt of one of Elizabeth Taylor's less stinky signature perfumes. Her nostrils flared with displeasure.

"Which one?" she asked as she reached for the mineral water she'd been nursing. "Aren't they all big?"

"Which one?" Mariella replied in faux horror and slapped a hand over her heart. Red silk fluttered on her

immaculate, in-season dress. Lauren peered at it for a second and tried to identify the label but gave up. She still failed to pick the designer more often than she succeeded. Mariella waved her hand. "Mine of course."

Lauren looked at her blankly and tried to recall any recent invitation landing at work from Mariella. The publicist sighed and signalled for a waiter.

"Martini, extra dry, hold the olive," she declared, barely taking her eye off Lauren. "SmartPay USA's Californian launch? Any bells?"

Lauren shook her head, baffled.

"Oh come on, sweetie," Mariella sighed. "Two state governors will be there. Admittedly, one's from Nevada, but beggars can't be choosers. But our very own gov will be there, too. He's always good for a boozy quote or three when the drinks are flowing, which I know you reporters just love." She laughed and paused expectantly.

Lauren gazed back at her at a complete loss. "Um... Mari, I have no memory of this event. No press kit, nothing. Never even heard of SmartPay USA."

"Oh, you must know! The Nevada start-up company 'revolutionizing the way we do business'?" Mariella prodded. "And I'm not saying that because I'm paid to. Well, okay, not *just* saying it for that reason." She smiled, her wide scarlet lips turning up in amusement. "No? Nothing?"

Lauren frowned and shook her head.

Mariella sighed and ticked off a list with her fingers. "It's the way of the future, California signed on and added all its government workers to the scheme, groundbreaking, stupendous, best thing since sliced bread, yada yada. Come on, sweetie, how can this *possibly* be news to you?"

Lauren shrugged helplessly, feeling a little stupid.

"Well, I can see I'm failing miserably at promoting it," Mariella said with a dramatic huff. "Okay, hon, so the basics for you are that it'll be A-list, top-tier VIPs

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on deck—governors, assorted lower-rung politicians, plus fancy, glammed up wives and girlfriends.

“There’s a lot of buzz about this thing going national, maybe even global—and that’s not spin. Now, now, I see that look, but I mean it. There’ll be a who’s who of business writers there, too. I’ll just,” she paused and rooted around a purple leather carryall the size of a small television, “re-send you the full media kit.”

She tapped furiously on her iPhone, then looked up brightly.

“Done. So naturally I expect you and that adorably frosty arch nemesis of yours to be front and center, notebooks out, and no whining about it being ‘boring’ or, god forbid, ‘some finance crap from *Nevada*.’”

Lauren chuckled at the directive. Mariella loved to instruct journalists that they *had* to attend her events and implied that failure to do so would be some form of social travesty, if not journalistic suicide. The irony was that adding a business angle to the story made Lauren far more eager to be there, not less. She knew that made her a rarity in these parts. She was about to say as much when Mariella’s martini arrived.

She took a long sip and exhaled in exaggerated relief. “Oh thank god, I can’t tell you how much I needed that. I swear handling those irksome boy band *children* who think they have talent is the worst. Concentrated sacks of hormones. I’ve been run off my feet all morning for one client—an *impossible* youth whose name I shall not speak...”

Lauren shot her a sympathetic grin and let her vent. It’s probably why Mariella liked her so much. None of their lunch chats ever wound up as blind items on celebrity gossip sites. They both knew without saying that this rant, like all the others in the past year, was off the record.

“Anyway,” Mariella continued as she ran a glossy red talon up her glass stem. “I caught the pre-pubescent dweeb

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lighting up a joint in the hotel bathroom when I ducked out to corral the world's entertainment media in the outer room for his first press conference since The Incident.

"He didn't even have the balls to admit he was high as a kite when I went to get him, despite reeking like a hippie's glove box. He looked me straight in the eye and said it was his cologne. His *cologne*! The little monster doesn't even shave yet."

Lauren laughed. "Well, you could threaten to tell his mom on him."

"Oh don't think I didn't think of that, but she's the worst. Worse than him. For all I know, she supplied him with the weed. I swear, as long as he's famous, she wouldn't care if he was caught screwing a herd of goats."

"Goats?" Lauren regarded her suspiciously.

"Why yes," Mariella said with a twinkle in her eye. "I did so enjoy that video. Everyone in my office did. How nice of Ms. Ayers to post the tell-all story for us."

"Yes," Lauren said, scowling. "How very thoughtful."

Mariella chuckled. "Oh don't be so pouty, sweetie! You'll be laughing about this one in a few months. And never forget you're just starting out. The whole world is at your feet. A few minor scandals like this make you *more* interesting, not *less*. Keep this up, and I finally might be able to find someone willing to go on a second date with you."

"Not this again." Lauren groaned. "No more blind dates! Five and all nightmares!"

"Were they really so traumatic? That last one, Natashyia, she seemed to be..."

"She was hitting on the director at the next table before we even got to the main course. And I swear she stole my watch. It was there when the salads came, gone by the coffee. And that fake accent? French, my ass! No more. I mean it, Mari. Seriously, if you keep this matchmaking up, I'm thinking of joining a nunnery."

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“Well that’s one way to improve your dating pool,” Mariella agreed with a sage nod. “I hear *The Sound of Music* is very popular with you ladies who like the ladies.”

Lauren slowly banged her head on the table. “Oh god. You can shut up anytime now. Don’t make me regret telling you.”

“Fine. okay, but now that I have your attention, lock in May 11th.” She looked at Lauren intently, instantly all business.

“May 11th?” Lauren lifted her head.

Mariella tapped the table impatiently. “The SmartPay USA launch. Two governors? Make a note or something. I really cannot believe you didn’t get the invitation. You should have gotten it last week. There were even balloons with it, attached to my fabulously compelling press release you are claiming ignorance on.”

“Oh right,” Lauren said vaguely and screwed up her face. “You’d think I’d remember something coming with balloons.”

She paused as she remembered Frank’s pleasant but scatter-brained secretary, Florence, leaving the office with balloons last Thursday. She sighed and wanted to thud her head back to the table. The ditz was a menace to functioning brain cells. Probably hadn’t even noticed the press release attached to them and just thought she’d scored a cute freebie for her kids.

Mariella reached for the menu. “Hmm, I may have to improve my publicity gimmicks if that’s the response they get. Of course the ’70s are long gone, but back in the day certain predecessors of mine were known to include champagne and Quaaludes with their invites to ensure a full turnout of eager reporters.”

“No shit?”

“Yes indeed. Only in certain circles, to certain journalists known to indulge, you understand. Problem was the select attendees were too smashed to write up a coherent story.

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Kept including references to pink flamingos under the Sighted section.”

“Okay, now I know you’re making this up,” Lauren said suspiciously.

“Scout’s honor,” Mariella insisted with a grin. “Not that I would have made a terribly good Scout. All that DYBbing and DOBbing and truth telling? It flies in the face of my oath as a publicist. Oh good, they have my favorite today.”

She waved at the waiter and shifted her attention back to Lauren. “So, May 11th?”

Lauren checked the calendar on her phone. “No conflicts. You’ll have to bug Ayers yourself though. Just because we work in the same building, doesn’t mean we’re on actual polite speaking terms.”

Mariella offered her best dignified snort.

“You two. I swear in the event of the apocalypse, when the smoke finally clears, you’ll both still be locked in a death struggle, fingers clawing at each other’s throats.”

Lauren laughed. “As if. She’d hardly lower herself to touch a corn-fed Iowa girl, even if there was the upside of choking the life out of me.”

A waiter appeared at their table. Lauren put down the menu; she couldn’t face raw fish today when her story’s misappropriation was still giving her indigestion. “I’ll have the tempura shrimp roll.”

He nodded and flicked his gaze over her body.

“Fried carbs? How adventurous of you,” Mariella said, declaring what the man was no doubt thinking. She glanced at the waiter. “Salmon sashimi. One of us actually has to work at keeping her figure.”

The waiter turned tail; his pressed lips seemed to agree.

Obnoxious little...

A film of billowy yellow caught her eye, and Lauren glanced to the door.

Oh hell.

It got closer.

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“Darlings! I *thought* that was you. I said to myself ‘Sahaya, if that doesn’t look like my good friends Lauren King and Mariella Slater, then I do not know who is eating at Ichiba Sushi.’”

Good friends. Right.

One of Hollywood’s most loose-lipped publicists air-kissed them both and pulled up a chair. Sarah Owens—pronounced Sahaya Onyx for reasons known only to her—apparently did not require an invitation to join a private lunch.

“Mariella, dear, who are you wearing? I *must* have it!”

“You really want us both swanning about in matching Vera Wangs, sweetie?”

Vera Wang! Lauren mentally snapped her fingers. One of these days she’d actually remember a designer’s name.

“Well there is that,” Sarah continued. “Now did I hear you both discussing the frosty one? Her Highness of the *Daily Sentinel*?”

Lauren raised her eyebrows as the skeletally thin creature arranged herself artfully in the chair for what appeared to be a prolonged gossip session. And was the woman a damn lip-reader? It would explain how she knew so much of what was going on around town.

“Did you know,” Sarah began, “that my boss still refuses to have her name spoken within his earshot. He never forgave her for the series on kickbacks and lobbyists in Washington where she named him the worst offender. The story included this nasty little artwork with his face in the center of a bullseye.”

“Well to be fair,” Mariella interjected drolly, “he *was* the worst offender. His bribery expense account was higher than the GDP. Isn’t that why he moved to LA—he’d already bought out all of DC and needed fresh killing fields?”

“Pffft, but he didn’t need *everyone* knowing that. Especially those in his new hunting grounds. He still hates Ayers with a passion.”

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Sarah's eyes swung to Lauren. "She's always been an icicle, you know. Now she's just got a good reason to be bitter. Washington correspondent to gossip girl in one glorious, bloody swan dive."

She lowered her voice and added conspiratorially, "I heard they keep a police-tape body outline in her old office in Washington to remind everyone how big the splat can be when you screw up that badly. Like a warning to the next generation."

Lauren laughed. "Police tape?"

"Unlikely," Mariella said, amused, eyes lighting up as her sushi was placed before her. She reached for her fork as Lauren's sizzling fried fish was set down, too.

"Bodies get buried so fast in DC there's no time for shrines—even for those spectacularly vanquished like Ayers," Mariella continued and waved her fork at Sarah. "And as if she'd tolerate that. She'd have flown back to Washington and shriveled all their gonads with one icy glare."

She speared some sushi with her fork and jabbed the air in front of her. "I know it's not obvious looking at her now, but I remember when she was the most ferocious, ambitious journalist that town had seen in years. She was so completely fearless. She wrote this one column on entrenched sexism in Washington that blew the tops off everyone's heads. It was *perfect*. I have it framed on my wall. Of course, that went down about as well as you'd expect."

"So you don't think it's true about the shrine thing?" Sarah's face dropped. "How disappointing. And my source seemed so sure. What about you? You work with her." She turned to Lauren.

Lauren shook her head. "How would I know what goes on in Washington?" she asked. "Besides, despite all the rumors about her, I've only ever known Ayers as a gossip columnist, and she's a pretty wimpy one at that."

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Mariella shot her an askance look. “Don’t ever let her hear you call her wimpy.”

“Yeah, she’s so terrifying in her taffeta and Jimmy Choos. What’s she gonna do? Irritate me to death with her terrifying parking?”

Lauren took a hearty bite of fried shrimp and ignored the shocked look on Sarah’s face. Lauren almost snickered. Probably more fat and carbs on her plate than the woman had seen in a year.

“Ah, the youth of today,” Mariella sighed and examined her forkful of sushi. “Sticking their heads into dragon’s mouths.” She bit in and slowly chewed.

Sarah shook her head. “Well, it’s a shame that rumor isn’t true. I rather liked the visual. Alright then, how about this bit of goss, hot off the presses—the relatively new publisher of a certain newspaper,” she glanced at Lauren pointedly, “who only got the top job when his respected publisher father retired, was seen leaving a hotel with a trashy blonde on his arm who was not his high-profile movie star girlfriend...”

Lauren sighed inwardly. The proclivities of the Boy King Paul Harrington Jr. were becoming more obnoxious. If Frank’s grumbling was anything to go by, the 30-year-old was an entitled ass who thought his background in marketing made him some sort of gifted entrepreneur. He was anything but a gifted human being though.

She’d heard around the office that, after Ayers’s infamous career crash, she’d been recalled to LA by Harrington Jr., who’d just replaced his father as publisher. He then not only closed the paper’s Washington bureau as “a waste of time and money,” but insisted the political writer see out the rest of her contract as a celebrity gossip writer.

That now infamous shafting by the Boy King wasn’t the only one Ayers had endured. Water-cooler gossip had it that her phone stopped ringing overnight as her former

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contacts and well-placed friends were afraid of catching political typhoid by association.

The thing Lauren didn't get was the infamous ball-breaker hadn't even fought back. She'd had the dream job—a respected bureau chief in Washington, for god's sake—and was exactly where Lauren would give her eye teeth to be. But instead of defending herself, mounting a counterattack and fighting for her career and her reputation, she had simply rolled over into a prickly ball and taken it.

Now she sat at the *Daily Sentinel's* worst desk beside the office kitchen in her elegant Armani suits, pushing out biting columns about celebrities and counting down the days until her contract expired.

It was cowardice, weakness, or something worse. Lauren couldn't decide. She held her own counsel as Mariella and Sarah enthusiastically debated the merits of various rumors for a while until the gossipy interloper turned back to Lauren.

"Does she ever talk about it," Sarah asked in a hushed tone. "Ayers—her inglorious dumping from bureau chief?"

"A good question," Mariella said. "I wouldn't mind knowing the answer myself."

"Doesn't say a word," Lauren told the pair who'd leaned forward eagerly. "Reams out anyone who gets too nosy. But she pretty much keeps to herself, goes about her business, ignores us mere mortals in general, and annoys me in particular."

"Oh do tell," Sarah asked, scrunching up a napkin in excitement. "Whatever does the Caustic Queen do to you?"

"Um, hello, the Estella video?" Lauren grimaced. "We're on the same damned paper. She not only wrote it up but made sure there was humiliating footage!"

"Oh that was divine!" Sarah burst into peals of high-pitched laughter, drawing eyes from around the room. "Estella is one of my clients, and she is still hissing about

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it. Her dress was one of a kind, and apparently the punch stain was as stubborn as mule to get out. Oh and she wants to know if you really do have goats?”

Mariella joined in the laughter as Lauren glared with murderous intent.

“Hilarious.” Lauren shot them a look.

“If I know you, sweetie,” Mariella said, interrupting her darkening mood, “you won’t let her get away with that for long. Although, as your friend who values your good health, I strongly recommend that you do.”

Lauren leaned back in her chair. “Duly noted and ignored, Mari. But yeah, as it happens I have a few ideas. Can’t say too much right now but at the next big gala...”

Lauren hummed happily to herself at the thought but didn’t finish out loud.

“Sweetie, I love you dearly, but if you exact revenge at one of my events, I will kill you. Actually, scratch that—at least get me good free press,” Mariella amended. “And no arrests. It’s always a bad night when the acronym men in dark suits rush about waving their guns.”

“Acronym men?”

“Oh you know—FBI, CIA, DEA. DKNY. Take your pick.”

“Right. No guns in any dastardly schemes. Check.”

“That way there be dragons,” Mariella muttered.

“So fearless,” Sarah said in awe. She leaned across the table and patted Lauren’s hand sympathetically. “Don’t worry—I will write you a dazzling obituary and send it to all the national wires when she tires of playing with you and disposes of your body.”

Lauren and Mariella burst into laughter.

“Darlings,” Sarah pouted. “I was being completely serious!”

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