**JULIAN’S POV**

In the hushed stillness of the morning and the occasional sound of car horns I had gotten accustomed to, I was jolted awake by the blaring noise of my alarm clock.

“It seriously can’t be morning already,” I groaned.

Its shrill beeping echoed through the room, shattering the peace and quiet as I hurriedly reached out to silence it. I nestled back into the bed, seeking solace under the warm covers until I heard Liz’s voice.

“Rise and shine, sleepyhead,” Liz exclaimed in a singsong tone as she barged into my room. The loudness of her voice matched that of the alarm clock I turned off a few seconds ago.

“Go away, it’s not morning yet,” I mumbled as I sank deeper into the bed.

“It is morning lazyhead and you have a busy day ahead.”

“Just two more minutes Liz, please.”

“Okay, fine.”

I sighed in victory and was just about to drift off to sleepland when I felt the covers come off my body and a chilling cold took its place.

“Elizabeth!”

I screamed at my best friend who was staring right back at me, arms crossed with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“You’ll thank me later my darling.” She blew me a kiss as she walked away adding an extra sway to her every step.

“I love you Liz but you’re a pain in my ass!” I screamed after her.

Liz and I had been inseparable since we were kids and she always had a knack for shaking me out of my comfort zone. She had moved into our neighborhood with her family and on one sunny afternoon, fate brought us together at the playground.

I was trying to get on the swings for the first time but could not summon the courage to when I noticed her move towards me. She eagerly scampered to the swings, her tiny legs carrying her with unbridled excitement as she hopped on it. Fixating her gaze on me, she stretched out her hand and I grabbed it as I hopped onto the swings beside her.

With a burst of energy, she kicked her legs back and forth and the swings complied. I tried to follow suit but it stayed in the same position, rocking gently. Liz looked at me and we both started giggling, our laughter filling the air and hers blending harmoniously with mine. From that moment, a bond was formed.

Liz, with her wild spirit and untamed creativity, had left our small town at the age of 17 to pursue her passion for art in the bustling city of New York. She yearned to immerse herself in the vibrant art scene, to learn from the masters and showcase her own unique talent to the world.

I remember the day she left, her eyes sparkling with determination and tears as we promised to stay connected, no matter the distance, and to support each other's dreams. So when I called her crying in the middle of the night two years ago, after four years apart, that I needed to leave our town, she welcomed me into her one-bedroom apartment with open arms.

Liz had started working at an art establishment inspired by her passion and I found a job as a waiter at Delights restaurant. However, the pay wasn't enough to cover all my bills, so I kept searching for better opportunities.

Soon enough, luck was on my side, and I landed a job as a junior staff at one of the biggest companies on the continent, Kreigs establishment. After a while, Liz and I moved out to a two-bedroom apartment with our hard-earned money.

I juggled the two jobs together, working as a restaurant attendant in the mornings and as a junior staff in the morning. However, the pay from both jobs was just enough to stay alive and keep the roof over my head.

I let out a long sigh and laid back down for a few seconds trying to get myself together when it finally hit me. “Shoot! It is morning already.”

I hurriedly jumped to my feet and rushed towards the bathroom, a new wave of adrenaline flowing through my body. I had to resume work at the restaurant by 7:00am, and my alarm was always set to ring by 6:00am. Doing a little calculation in my head, I knew I had spent much time laying around and would have to rush myself to meet up.

I hurriedly took a shower and brushed my teeth with more force than needed. I looked in the mirror and the consequence of binge-watching our favorite series, Gossip Girls, with Liz up until midnight stared right back at me.

My long brown hair was a mess on my head and dark eye bags that I’ve accepted as permanent rested underneath my hazel eyes making it appear duller than usual.

I hurriedly packed my hair into a messy bun. Then applied concealer before some loose powder and eyeliner. At least now I looked better.

“You can do this Julian. It is just another day and you will make it through,” I repeatedly told myself as I scanned through my closet.

Giving myself pep talks like this has become a ritual, a way to empower myself and set a positive tone for the challenges ahead. But, it wasn’t just my own words that inspired me.

My older brother had always encouraged me to believe in myself and whenever things seemed tough, he always told me to give myself pep talks to remind me of my capabilities and strength.

I was told my dad died from a car accident before I was born and his absence was deeply felt throughout my life as a child. However, I was fortunate to have my older brother by my side.

He stepped up to fill the void left by my father and we had a bond that was so strong. He provided guidance and unconditional love that even my mother couldn’t provide. He was always there to offer a listening ear, advise, and cheer me in all my endeavors. But just as I leaned on him for support, life took another painful turn.

My brother, driven by a sense of duty and patriotism, made the decision to serve the country and left for war. I remember the day like yesterday and every day, I carry the weight of my brother's absence in my heart. When he left for war all those years ago, I was just a wide-eyed 13-year-old, unaware of the pain and longing that would consume me in his absence.

As years went by, the memories of our childhood adventures and laughter became bittersweet echoes in my mind. I clung to the photographs and letters he left behind, cherishing them as precious fragments of our bond, hoping one day he would walk through the doors he walked out from and hold my hands again.

Scanning through my closet, I finally settled on a light pink top, black pants and flats. I got dressed in no time and headed out.

I caught sight of Liz, she was preparing for work and had placed her pancakes on the counter. I stole one and raced out of the house.

“I will get you Juls!” I heard Liz scream

“I love you too Liz” I shouted in response with a smile on my face.

With a sense of urgency in my steps, I dashed down the familiar streets. The weight of the work I had to do today pressed heavily on my shoulders, propelling me forward despite the exhaustion that threatened to consume me.

As I approached the bus stop, I saw the all-too-familiar sight of the bus pulling away, its doors closing just as I reached the curb. Determined not to let this setback derail my day, I quickened my pace, hoping to catch the next one.

Finally, as I rounded the corner, I caught sight of the bus, its doors still open. My heart raced as I sprinted towards it, my breath coming in short gasps. With a burst of energy, I leaped onto the bus just as the doors closed behind me, a victorious smile spreading across my face.

Small blessings.

I got to the bus-stop in no time and as I stepped off the bus, my tired legs carried me towards the familiar entrance of the restaurant where I worked, Delights. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and sizzling bacon filled the air, instantly awakening my senses.

I saw my boss, Mr Ray standing behind the counter, preparing for the day ahead.

“Good morning Sir” I greeted with a weary smile.

He returned my greeting with a nod of acknowledgment, his eyes reflecting the same fatigue that I felt.

After a quick exchange of pleasantries with Dan, a co-worker and the cashier, I made my way to the back room, where I slipped into my work apron. Its faded fabric served as a reminder of the countless hours I had spent serving customers, each stain and worn thread telling a story of its own.

As I emerged from the back room, I took a deep breath, steeling myself for the bustling day that awaited. The restaurant was already humming with activity, the clinking of silverware and the murmur of conversations filling the space.

With a determined stride, I approached my first table, a group of friends engrossed in lively conversation. I greeted them warmly, my exhaustion momentarily forgotten as I focused on providing them with what they needed as swiftly as possible with Mr Ray watching my every move.

Throughout the day, I weaved through the maze of tables, taking orders, refilling drinks, and ensuring that each customer left satisfied. Because, every dissatisfaction will leave a dent on my paycheck at the end of the month.

As I finished my shift at the restaurant and took off my apron, I was coming out of the back room when Dan approached me. “Off to save the world I see.”

“Ha ha, very funny Dan. At this point, I need the world to save me.” He laughed a little too much at that.

Liz is so convinced Dan likes me ever since he came to the house to check up on me on a day I called in sick and I’m not surprised since she is always trying to persuade me to date someone.

“Hey Julian?” Dan asks

“Yeah” I reply looking back at him

“I hope one day you’ll have just one job and we’ll hang outside of work.” A faint blush spread across his tan cheeks.

Okayyy, that wasn’t weird at all.

“Of course.” I gave him a quick smile as I finally left the building and made my way to the Kreigs Establishment which was nearby.

The road was bustling with vehicles and people walked hurriedly, each one consumed by their own agenda. I weaved through the crowd, my mind focused on the tasks my beloved senior colleagues would have me do, note the heavy sarcasm.

Arriving at the company, I hurriedly made my way to the staff office noting I was a few minutes late. The familiar hum of keyboards and occasional ringing of phones filled the air, creating a symphony of productivity.

As I rushed towards my desk and settled in quietly, I heard the annoying voice of Natalie James, a senior staff of the company. One I was unlucky enough to be working directly under.

“You are late Miss Keatings!”

By a few minutes? Give me a break.

“I’m so sorry Miss James.”

Different eyes flew up towards us as their attention was now on the scene unfolding in their presence.

She scoffed “You are always sorry. We have a lot to do and I placed some files on your desk so get yourself together and get to work immediately!”

She stared at me for a minute before this hateful words rolled off her tongues

"Can't you get better shoes to wear? These look like you have worn them since you were born" she said and walked out on me.

“Yes ma’am.” I sat back on my chair and dove into my work. I wasn't really surprised at her actions and her choice of words every time she spoke but I had just one question that kept running through my mind.

Why was she always bitter?

Everytime I had a conversation with her I ended up asking these questions and I hope one day I would be able to ask this question to her face. I searched through my table to see the amount of work I had to do and all I could say was

"I sure do hate my life right now" I sighed and started working.

I tackled assignments, analyzed spreadsheets and sent emails with unwavering focus and determination. The transition from the fast-paced restaurant to the office setting was one I had to get used to.

“Miss Keatings?” “Ma’am!”

“Fetch me the file from the second office on the third floor.”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Miss Keatings?” “Ma’am!”

“I need you to take this document to the file room.”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Miss Keatings?” “Ma’am!”

“I need you print this out for me and be fast about it. We don’t need slow workers here.”

“Yes ma’am!”

Miss Keatings, Miss Keatings, Miss Keatings!

If I had a dollar for the amount of times my name gets called everyday, I would be on the Forbes list. It was always one errand or the other. It would be better to change my Job title from Junior staff to Errand Staff because at this point everyone in this office saw me as one.

I sometimes felt Natalie James was sent by an enemy from my previous life, if there was something like that to make this life miserable for me. But this was my life and I had to work through it.

“Miss Keatings?”

“Yes, Miss James.” I said tiredly

“Well, I need you to go get something for me and the others.” She said with a fake smile.

Oh no no, Not again!

“We need coffee from your usual spot.” She concluded, her scowl back in its place.

Ever since I brought in coffee from Delights to the office one afternoon and Miss James snatched it from my grasp thanking me like i had bought it for her, she told me how much she loved it and did not hesitate to spread the news to the other senior staffs about how it tasted better than the break-room coffee.

Since then, I’ve been a coffee shopper. Running to the restaurant to get multiple coffee orders and running back to the company. The only good side is the little smile it puts on Mr Ray’s face as he gets to make more money.

“Yes ma’am.” I said defeatedly.

“Be fast about it because I need you to type this document for me as soon as possible.”

“I will just teleport there and back then.” I muttered under my breath.

“Did you say something?” Miss James said as she turned to look at me, eyebrows raised.

“I said I’ll be back before you know it.” Today was not the day to risk losing my Job. I hastily made my way out of the company and walked along the streets towards the restaurant.

I finally got to the restaurant and quickly placed the order, making sure to include everyone’s preference. Dan was nowhere in sight and I was being attended to by one of the other workers. I saw Mr Ray at the other end of the counter and he gave me a tight-lipped smile with his glass frame on the bridge of his nose.

I gathered all the orders in the paper bag and had both hands full as I made my way out of the restaurant. I was in a hurry, trying to navigate through the sea of people on the streets.

As I walked, I ran and walked again earning concerned stares from people on the road. I was determined to get to the office early and escape Miss James’ usual complaints this time as I clutched the paper bags tightly as though my life depended on it.

I was trying to round the corner that led to the entrance of the company when I suddenly felt a forceful impact like I collided with a wall that sent everything flying. The impact caused the coffee to erupt from the cups like a mini volcano.

I bent down quickly on reflex hoping to get a few cups that were still intact. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw a black briefcase on the floor soaked with coffee with its content spilling out.

I slowly looked up and then I saw him. My mouth suddenly experienced an unexplainable lack of saliva and my heart suddenly skipped a bit. I convinced myself it was from the adrenaline rush.

He was staring right back at me with anger morphed into his well structured face and an icy glare that seemed to intensify with seconds. My heart sank as I saw the coffee stain splattered all over his impeccably tailored suit that looked like the price could pay my rent for the next 20 years.

I quickly stood up feeling the weight of embarrassment wash over me. As I was about to mutter an apology, his next words halted my words.

“See what you’ve done, you clumsy twat!”

“What did you just call me?” I hissed with emphasis on each word as I matched closer to him and glared at his towering figure.

“How dare you talk back to me!” He looked at me like I was a fly on his expensive shoes with disbelief on his face.

“And who do you think you are? We ran into each other and instead of you apologizing like a sane person, you are here acting like you own the world.” I ranted all in one breath.

I was already frustrated from my stressed morning to the point where I already was and honestly what I needed was for just one person to trigger me and I would be all over the place like a machine gun that lost its control

"Excuse you! You are walking around holding some substance in your hand and you aren't even concentrating and you stand here speaking with authority. You peasant!" I had lost it at this point

"You uncultured rich arrogant piece of meat! You think because you are in some suit and in some shiny shoes you are suddenly greater than every other person.”

“Well I have news for you if you don't gut out of my way I would buy another coffee and this time I would dump it all over you intentionally" I began to walk back to Delight with so much anger in me that I didn't even notice if the man had left or not, I really didn't care.

I hadn't realized that my top was soaked in coffee and when I checked the time I was already super late but I was too pissed to realize. I got into Delight and I met Dan at the table close to the door, so he finished up with the customer and came to me

"Hey , what happened?" He could see how red I was and how soaked my shirt was

"This day just got worse. I just need to get a new shirt and new cups of coffee"

"Sure I will help you with the coffee" he began to walk back to the counter to make the cups of coffee for me.

Thank God I always keep extra clothes in my drawer at the back, so I went to my drawer to see what clothing I had back there and saw that I had just a white top left in the drawer. I brought it out and saw that it had a little stain on the edge.

"Can this day get any worse" I muttered to myself as I began to change out of the wet top and into the fresh one. I packed the wet top in a bag and carried it with me, by the time I was done Dan had packed the Ccoffeeand they were ready to go.

"Thank you, Dan, this was nice of you." I picked up the bag and I was on my way when I saw Ray walk into the restaurant with a few bags with him.

"Why are you still here at this time? Shouldn't you be at work?" Ray questioned me as he dropped the bags on the counter.

"Well I should but I had to get new cups of coffee cause the ones I got earlier spilled. I'm super late and you know that woman doesn't like me already" Ray chuckled a bit about what I had said

"Miss James is just uptight and I'm sure she likes you, she just has a different way of showing it"

**CHAPTER TWO**

**JULIAN’S POV**

**ETHAN’S POV**

I heard a gentle knock on my hotel room door and knowing who it was, I asked him to come in.

Immediately, the door opened and my bodyguard Leo stepped in, wearing a serious expression like he always did.

“The plane is here and ready for departure Sir”

“Already? I’ll be done here shortly and we’ll leave soon.”

Leo nodded, his eyes scanning the room.

“Do you need anything else Sir?”

“No. Just make sure everything is in order. I’ll gather the rest of my belongings and meet you downstairs.” I said as I dismissed him with a wave.

With that, Leo left the room leaving me alone with my thoughts. As I gathered the documents on the work desk and packed my suitcase, I couldn’t help the wave of disappointment that washed over me reminding me of why I had come to France in the first place.

I came here two-weeks ago hoping to close a huge deal that would have been a game changer for Kreigs Establishment. I was so sure about us getting the contract and I still don’t understand how it slipped through my fingers.

I worked closely with my team, analyzing market trends, conducting thorough research, and crafting compelling presentations to showcase the benefits of this collaboration even before I traveled to france.

And even when I arrived here, the negotiations were seamless and smooth. Countless meetings were held, both in formal boardrooms and over lavish dinners, which I spent a lot of money on by the way. And they seemed convinced.

So you can imagine my shock when I got an email three days ago saying the contract had been given to another company that offered better benefits. For the past few days, I tried negotiating with them but it all fell on deaf ears and now I wonder how I will face the board of directors and most importantly, how will I face my father?

I can already imagine the look of disappointment he will have on his face and the way he will shake his head as if to tell me I have failed him. He would remind me of how hard he worked to build his company, how he expected more from me and how he made me the CEO because he trained me to be a better man than him.

Growing up, my father’s sole purpose was preparing me to take over the family business and I never had a chance to have a normal childhood. Since I moved in with my father at the age of ten, I was immersed in a world of meetings, negotiations and high expectations, which only intensified my hate for him and with every passing day, my resentment for him grew.

The hate I feel towards my father started the day he left my mother and I, choosing to be with his pregnant mistress instead. I was seven years old at the time and I had no understanding of what was going on.

It started from the nights he would come home drunk out of his mind, the arguments and fights that would have me staying at our neighbors’ apartment.

Then one day, he decided not to come home. One day turned to two and two days turned to three. Weeks passed and months passed.

I remembered the look on my mother’s face the day I asked where he went and when he would come back home.

She looked at me with tears in her eyes and said

“Your father left us, baby. He left and he is not coming back”

It was a betrayal that cut deep, shattering the image I had of him. That was the last time my mother showed emotion that was human like. She became a shadow of herself and turned to drugs for happiness. When she overdosed three years later and It led to her death.

My father came running to take me with him, spewing lies about how much he loved us but had to leave because my mother told him to.

Seeing the family he left us to build only fueled my resentment and anger. I blamed my father for abandoning us and choosing his own selfish desires over his family. Over the years, the wounds festered, festering into a deep-rooted bitterness.