

ONE

Sherise Robinson wasn't sure how long she'd been staring out the window of her Georgetown townhouse's living room onto the street, but her baby girl, Cady, was not happy at the lack of attention and pulled on her mommy's shorts.

"Mah!" she yelled.

Sherise broke from her trance and looked down at her 15-month old sitting next to her on the sofa. She had that adorable little frown on her perfect chocolate brown face. Her tiny nose was turned up and her little lips pressed together. She was not pleased.

"Sorry, baby." Sherise smiled and leaned down. She kissed her on the forehead.

"Play," Cady added, handing her mother a tiny stuffed panda bear.

Sherise took the bear and did what she thought her baby wanted. She gently pressed the bears face against Cady's and Cady made a kissing sound.

"Is this your baby?" she asked. "Do you love your panda baby?"

Cady nodded and giggled. She pressed a tiny squeeze ball in her hands. This wasn't one of her toys. It was a stress ball her mother used to use when work got to her

and she needed to calm down. But little grabby hands, which she called Cady, had gotten her hands on it and never let it go.

Didn't matter much, Sherise thought with a sigh. She didn't need it anymore. Except for dealing with the adorable little handful sitting next to her, life was not terribly stressful for her anymore. Six months ago, a series of near disastrous events urged Sherise to make the hardest decision of her life. This go-getter who was born to compete and achieve quit her job, turned her back on a powerful promotion on the Domestic Policy Council for the White House and became a stay-at-home mom.

She was only 28. Her life was not over. She was still married to the man she loved, Justin Robinson, a powerful lobbyist, despite making every mistake possible that could cost a woman her husband. In fact, saving her marriage was the reason she decided to give up the career that she had often put first in her life.

Known as a relentless competition, someone who excelled in office-place politics and games, Sherise had dreams of reaching the top of the power circles in D.C. Having come from one of the worst neighborhoods on the southeast side, she fought hard against the odds to make it to assistant director of communications for the domestic policy council.

Sherise had also sought out the perfect husband, with great connections. Justin was a recent Georgetown grad when she met him, but she knew he was already connected and would do wonders for her career in D.C. She also knew that although she was very attracted to the tall, handsome bookish brother, he wasn't so overwhelming that she would lose her head when it came to him. He was trustworthy and controllable.

After having Cady, Sherise had reluctantly taken six months off, instead of the usual twelve weeks, to please Justin, who had actually wanted her to stop working altogether. Although she loved her daughter more than anything, it was torture for Sherise to be out of the loop and not in control. When she finally went back, Sherise was so caught up in the game and a chance to take over when her boss announced he was leaving, she wasn't careful. She made a terrible mistake and fell into the bed of a sexy, powerful man, Jonah Dolan. A man who turned out to be as vindictive and hateful as he was tantalizing and seductive.

Almost getting found out was what made Sherise decide to give everything up and refocus her life on what mattered. When her friend Erica's boyfriend, Terrell, had discovered them and threatened to expose their affair in order to extort Jonah, Sherise realized how much she loved Justin and couldn't live without him. Justin never found out, but he'd known something was wrong. He'd wanted his wife back and she gave up everything else to be a better wife to him and a mother to their baby.

Looking down at Cady as she mumbled incoherently in a conversation with a tiny plastic pink horse, she smiled from ear to ear. She loved this little girl more than anything and couldn't imagine depriving her of a life without a father. That was the life that Sherise had and she didn't want that for her baby. Justin loved Cady and Cady needed him.

Yes, it was true that Cady might not even be his. Jonah wasn't Sherise's first infidelity. She had allowed herself to get too close to Ryan Hodgkins, a successful architect. She was trying to make her way into the black elite social circles, but found herself unable to fight her attraction to this married man. They spent one night together

before Sherise came to her senses and ended it. She found out she was pregnant a month later, but had always been too afraid to find out if Ryan was Cady's father.

But things were worse now. After six months of trying for a second baby, something she and Justin wanted very much, she wasn't pregnant and Sherise was beginning to wonder if Justin could even get her pregnant. It broke her heart, but with every month that passed with no pregnancy, Sherise was more convinced that Cady might not be Justin's and she was afraid of what would come out if Justin started to suspect as well.

This was all made worse by the fact that Justin was starting to get so disillusioned with the whole situation that he wasn't initiating sex the way he used to. It was as if he was losing interest in her and that was a foreign concept to Sherise. She was an exceptionally beautiful woman by anyone's standards.

A little taller than the average woman, but not too tall, she was a stunner. She had flawless, golden caramel skin, silky dark brown hair that went a couple of inches below her shoulders, high cheekbones, full, sultry lips and piercing green eyes. She was fit and trim, but had killer curves that made her look incredible in the expensive designer clothes she always wore. Everywhere Sherise went, women and men looked...more than once. Most men wanted her and most women hated her for it.

She had always been able to control Justin and he could not resist her. The problem was that after being out of the career game for so long, Sherise was losing interest in most things, except her daughter, so she wasn't sure if she was the reason their sex life was cooling down, or him.

“Dooce!” Cady yelled. She squeezed her fingers together and smiled up at her mother with those large eyes that always got her what she wanted.

“No juice,” Sherise said. “Too much sugar. Water?”

Cady pouted, seeming to understand that she wasn’t getting any juice. She folded her tiny arms across her chest, looking almost edible in her little pink and white polka dot dress. But Sherise wasn’t going to give in. She wanted only the best for her daughter and that didn’t just mean healthy food and drinks. She wanted a life for her daughter that meant a happily married mother and father.

She had to figure out how to get pregnant. Sherise had spent a lot of time in the last six months convincing herself that if she got pregnant she wouldn’t miss the world of power brokers and fast-paced deal making. She would have a baby to take care of and another to plan for. Eventually, she would go back to work, but in the meantime, two babies would keep her more than busy and satisfied. At least that was what she tried to convince herself of. It wasn’t really working.

“So sorry. So sorry.” Jackson Snow apologized to the other two people at his lunch table at Birch & Barley restaurant on 14th street just as he got off the phone. He placed it on the table next to him and looked across the pan roasted fish and Yukon potatoes in parmesan broth. “So where were we?”

30-year old, petite and adorable Billie Carter, formerly Billie Hass, wasn’t really sure how to answer that. They had barely been able to get through a conversation before Jackson answered the phone every five minutes. It wasn’t a surprise. This was a lawyer’s life and being a newly minted partner at their firm, Jackson was smart to never pass on a

phone call. It was a double standard because if either she or her fellow associate, Richard Nelson, interrupted him to take a phone call, it would not be looked upon kindly.

“You were congratulating Billie on her work on the Bosley case,” Richard interjected. Richard, who went by Ricardo in his private life, was a young, handsome Hispanic man who was always impeccably dress. His rigid professional demeanor hid the ultra-liberal interior that Billie had come to appreciate so much.

He looked at Billie and winked. He knew it would have been awkward for her to remind Jackson to continue praising her, so he did it for her. She would do that for him. He was the only person at their large law firm that she could trust although she hadn't really tried hard to give others a chance.

Reeling from a divorce that left her in a bad financial state, Billie had to leave her position at the public defender's office and her dream of fighting for the voiceless against a powerful system and transition to a big law firm where most of her clients were the people she had built a career fighting against. She needed the money, so she decided to swallow her pride and take the high paying associates position, hoping that one day she could be in a position to go back to doing what she loved.

It hadn't been the easiest of transitions, especially considering all of the distractions she had including her ex-husband having one of the paralegals spy on her, but Billie hunkered down and did her best. Richard, whom she shared an office with, had helped her navigate the office politics and deal with the moral ambiguity of what she had to do at times. There was a short moment when he had tried to flash those Latin charms on her, but they had both thought better of it. It was a good idea. As friends they had

both been able to focus on helping each other focus on their jobs without any distractions. It was paying off.

“Yes,” Jackson said as he reached for a fork. After stuffing a bit of fish in his mouth, he pointed at Billie with a smile across his generous face. “I don’t give credit just for the sake of looking like a good guy. You made me look good on this case. The client is very pleased with the settlement. We avoided all kinds of embarrassment for them.”

Billie smiled even though she wasn’t so sure that was a compliment. Their client’s product hurt a little boy. In a previous life, their embarrassment was the least of what she would have expected. But this was the law and her job was to protect her client to the best of her ability. A settlement that included a non-disclosure agreement saved them millions of dollars and preserved their reputation in time to remove the chance that anyone else would ever get hurt was a win.

“I’m sure we’ve secured their business for the future,” Billie said with a smile. “I’m glad I could contribute.”

“Oh you did more than that.” Jackson looked around and waved to someone in the distance. “That guy over there, he’s an asshole, but his wife is cheating on him, so it’s all good.”

Richard laughed along with Jackson, but Billie only forced a half smile. As someone who had her marriage destroyed by infidelity, she didn’t really get the joke.

“You,” Jackson said, returning his attention to Billie. “You got a good mention at this morning’s partner meeting.”

“That is good to hear sir,” Billie said.

She had been planning for this. She felt now was the best time to ask for what she wanted; to ask for one of the reasons she chose this firm over the others she could have gone to.

“Actually, I was wondering if...”

“You know who else was mentioned?” Jackson asked. “Your husband, Porter.”

Billie sighed. “Porter Hass is my ex-husband, Jackson. Ex.”

“Oh yeah.” He nodded. “That’s what I meant. He should have made partner by now, so some people were wondering if he was gonna move on.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Billie said.

She hated talking about Porter, but he was one of the most talked about financial lawyers in D.C. and more than a few people at her firm were fans of his. She always managed to cut any questions about him short but that didn’t stop them from popping back up every now and then. They were divorced for a year now and she wished that people would let it go.

The truth was, she was the reason Porter hadn’t made partner this year, but it was too long and embarrassing a story to ever tell anyone. Despite their divorce, his decision to move his mistress in with him, and using his daughter as a tool to control Billie, she couldn’t get him out of her life. He even threatened to ruin her career if she cut him off from her bed and her life. But with the help of her friends, Sherise and Erica, Billie finally turned the tables on Porter and put him in his place.

With Sherise using her influence on Jonah, some powerful strings were pulled that put Porter in a bad light at his firm. While the last soft spot Billie held for him urged

her to save his career, it did push his progress back a year and gave Billie the courage to get over Porter once and for all.

But she would never tell anyone that. No one knew except her, the girls and Jonah Dolan what had happened and hopefully no one ever would. Billie was still dealing with the guilt, never one to take the underhanded route, but she knew that she had to get Porter out of her life if she was ever going to have a life of her own.

Her progress since had been slow, but she was hopeful.

“I was hoping I could ask for a pro...”

“I know what you want,” Jackson interrupted her. “And I think you’ve earned it.”

“Billie is getting a pro bono case?” Richard asked, smiling proudly at her.

Jackson nodded. “It’s about time, don’t ya think?”

“Yes,” she said. “I do. I’m...”

“No problem,” he said. “I’ll have Allison give you the file when we get back.

Look its...”

He jumped up from his seat to greet an older white man in a suit that had to cost at least five thousand dollars walking by. The older man barely acknowledged him, but Jackson, the ever-eager networker, returned to his seat with a smile of pure joy and accomplishment.

Billie smiled thinking that Sherise would like this guy. He was a lot like her; at least how she used to be. “You were saying?”

Jackson took a moment to focus before adding, “Yes, the case is some guy who...I don’t know... He runs a homeless shelter or something and got hit with some violations that he needs to fight.”

Billie's eyes widened with anticipation. She was excited. Finally, she could get a taste of the life she used to have, fighting the power. At one point, she was going to ride that life to political office. Now, she wasn't so sure where she could go with it, but this news warmed her heart. She was going to do more than get paid to do her job. She was about to do some good.

Twenty six-year old Erica Kent was rushing like mad through the communications department of the Pentagon building. The director, whom she worked for as an assistant, had a press conference in ten minutes and had just demanded several changes to the release that would accompany the conference. The job had been slapped on her desk and she typed at her computer as fast and furiously as she could. She made sure not to make a mistake because she had made one before; a spelling error which caused the director to accidentally mispronounce a word. After being yelled at for an hour, Erica learned her lesson fast. No more mistakes.

Rushing over to the printer, she leaned over the machine waiting for the release to print out perfectly on letterhead. She caught a glimpse of herself in the window's reflection. You could tell she'd had a hectic day. While her fair skin still looked fresh and vibrant, her large brown eyes look tired. Her natural curly, auburn hair was going in several directions. She raised her hand to smooth it out a little, but the first copy was printing and she forgot all about herself. She snatched it and read furiously as she rushed back to her desk.

"Erica!"

The familiar voice of the director's main assistant, Jo Lemmons, got on Erica's nerve, but she was ready for her.

"Is it ready?" she asked, more in the tone of a demand, as she reached Erica's desk. "Now."

"It is," Erica said confidently as she handed the press release to her. "I'll print off twenty-five copies right..."

"Fifty," Jo said. She turned to leave, before turning back. "Bring them to the conference room ASAP. And if there is a mistake...."

"There are no mistakes!" Erica yelled after her as she rushed down the hallway.

In less than a minute after printing, Erica had delivered the press releases and returned to her desk. Her healthy, curvy frame made a thud as she fell back in her seat, sighing. She wanted to rest; needed to rest, but knew she had to email tons of copies of those releases out.

She had been in this job for almost six months and it wasn't getting easier. She knew she'd rather things be crazy than boring, but sometimes she was just so exhausted. At least she had tonight with her girls to look forward to.

Leaning forward on her desk, Erica noticed something new. Despite the madness that this department was, she always kept her desk orderly. It was essential to her staying focused and not getting tripped up. A neat desk was an error free desk. But now there was a little off-white envelope laid in the middle of her desk with her name written on it in cursive. It hadn't been there before she left, so someone had placed it there in just the few minutes she had ran to deliver the releases.

Erica looked around. No one was paying attention to her. Everyone who wasn't at the press conference was focused on their work. She had worked at the Pentagon in Arlington, VA for years in different departments and this was the most professional one she'd ever been in. Usually, the assistants would gossip and take coffee breaks to give them a rest from their demanding directors, but not this group. Everyone was all work, all the time. Erica actually preferred it this way. She didn't want to be all up in people's business and she didn't like people all up in hers. Especially considering the secrets she had.

Erica opened the envelope and noticed the handwriting looked familiar.

Jonah would like to have lunch with you in his office tomorrow.

- Jenna

Jenna was the main assistant to Jonah Dolan, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. He was also the man who, just six months ago, Erica found out was her father. It had been a disaster.

Erica had been happy with her life. She was dating Terrell Nicolli, her boyfriend of four years. He had proposed to her the same day she'd found out she was getting a new job with Dolan's office. Dolan was a powerful and influential man, one that many people thought could be President if he wanted to.

Erica never suspected Jonah was her father. She had been told by her mother that her father was an absent man in the lives of her and her brother, Nate. She had seen the man once, whom she knew now to only be Nate's father. Her mother died from cancer when Erica was only 19 years old and Nate was 12. She had been struggling ever since,

but was making a life for herself and Nate, and eventually Terrell. This new position in Jonah's office was more money and a great opportunity for her future.

Jonah was too nice to her and he seemed to like her very much. At first she thought he might have some sexual interest in her, but he made it clear that was not the case early. But his interest in her future, his disapproval of Terrell in her life still seemed a bit too personal, especially for someone like Erica who had problems trusting others.

Terrell, angry at Jonah's attempts to cut him out of Erica's life, was the first to find out that Jonah was Erica's father. He'd found out that Jonah and Erica's mother had a brief affair the summer before Jonah left for the military. They had not kept in touch. Earlier that year, Jonah had found out about Erica and made an attempt to bring her into his life without letting on who she was to him. Only his wife, a cold woman named Juliet, knew and she demanded that Jonah keep this relationship a secret.

Erica's heart was broken when she found out that Terrell had gone back to his old ways of hustling any chance he got, when he tried to blackmail Jonah over his affair with Sherise. This led to the discovery of his real relationship with Erica. Erica was dismayed and beyond upset when she realized that Jonah wanted to keep her a secret as if she was something to be ashamed of. Not to mention, he had threatened both Terrell and Sherise with unspeakable acts if they told the truth.

She wanted nothing to do with him, but he continued to reach out to her. She quit her job immediately. Jonah had not allowed her resignation to be formally entered and had her instead transferred to another department, the communications department. Erica didn't want to accept, but when she realized her financial situation now that Terrell was not going half on their rent and expenses and the realities of the tough job market, she

agreed to take the position on the condition that Jonah leave her alone and not do another thing for her ever again.

He agreed, but immediately started to try and reconnect with her. She didn't want to hear it. She had broken off her engagement with Terrell and was alone again. She only had Sherise and Billie to confide in. She threatened to tell the media that she was Jonah's daughter if he didn't leave her alone and for a while that had worked. But lately, Jonah was trying to reach out to her again. This was the second lunch invitation she'd gotten in the last week.

"Fuck off," she said under her breath as she ripped the invitation up and tossed it in the garbage.

She was just trying to get her life back on track. She was letting Terrell back into it one step at a time and now Nate was giving her problems. The last thing she needed or wanted was to be Jonah's little shameful secret.