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SYDNEY

“Omigod, this is so not good.”

Sydney Duke heard her identical twin sister, Lauren, whisper fearfully as the Lincoln Town Car bringing them home from school slowly stopped in front of their awaiting mother and stepfather, Altimus.

Sydney felt the rush of her heartbeat pounding in her ears and tried to accept that these could very possibly be the last moments of her life. *Well, it's been a good run*, she thought morbidly. There weren't many people who could say that they'd lived as fabulously — or as dangerously — as the Duke twins. For the past ten years, the two had been the reigning “it chicks” of Atlanta's young, beautiful, and progressive African-American social circle: Sydney was the more reserved, politically connected tastemaker and Lauren,

the outgoing devil-may-care fashionista. Designer clothes, hot shoes, expensive jewelry, fast cars, exotic vacations — say the word and, thanks to their superwealthy stepfather and social-climbing mother, the Duke twins both owned it and worked it. However, recently, the walls of the glass castle had started to crack.

“Here we are, ladies, home sweet home, and a whole five minutes ahead of schedule,” their driver, Caesar, happily chirped in the rearview mirror. The normally outspoken Lauren groaned weakly in response. “Just give me a second to get your gym bags out of the trunk and I’ll open your door,” he continued before hopping out of the car.

Sydney thought about the events of the past couple of months. First, the girls’ biological father, Dice Jackson, was released from federal prison and then rearrested. Then Sydney’s so-called perfect boyfriend of four years impregnated Lauren’s former best friend, Dara. Add to that Lauren falling in love with Jermaine, a cutie from the wrong side of the tracks, and the combination set off the biggest scandal Brookhaven Prep (and its vicious student-run gossip blog, YoungRichardTriflin.com) had seen in years. Just when it seemed things couldn’t get any more complicated, Jermaine’s brother was suspiciously murdered . . . and the girls suspected Altimus might be involved.

“Are you ready?” Lauren whispered fearfully as she looked past her sister and out the car’s tinted window.

Keisha and Altimus were standing together, filling the arch of the doorway.

“Of course not,” Sydney replied with a small shake of her head. Despite the distance, she could see her mother clenching her jaw. Sydney briefly wondered exactly what pictures they would use to eulogize her in the yearbook. She hoped her best friends, Carmen and Rhea, would pick one from her parents’ anniversary party — that silver Ungaro dress had done a great job making her butt and thighs look super skinny that night.

“I can’t believe they found the number of the phone Jermaine gave me,” Lauren whimpered as she looked down at the small cell in her hand. “Did I tell you they called twice from the house? I knew I should’ve gotten rid of it when Jermaine disappeared from our party, but I was just hoping that he might call. . . . If you want, I’ll tell them you didn’t know anything about it.”

“Shh, Lauren, stop. There’s nothing you can do about it now. Just put it away. Everything’s going to be okay, I promise. Remember, we’re in this together,” Sydney said softly as she stroked her sister’s trembling hand. She hoped her words sounded more reassuring than she truly felt. In reality, after the melee that broke out at the girls’ holiday party over Thanksgiving break, her parents had made it very clear that Lauren was to cut all ties with her boyfriend or there would be hell to pay.

“You go first,” Lauren insisted at the sound of the closing trunk.

“What? Why do I have to go first?” Sydney questioned, dropping Lauren’s hand like a hot potato.

“’Cause you’re the oldest,” Lauren responded without missing a beat. She nervously tugged at the diamond heart pendant on her charm bracelet as she looked pleadingly at Sydney.

“Whatever, Lauren, three minutes *so* does not count,” Sydney scoffed as the door swung open. Time was up. Sydney took a deep breath, grabbed her gray Marc Jacobs bag, and stepped out of the car.

“It’s been a pleasure, ladies. Have a nice day,” the completely clueless driver said as he held the door.

“If you say so,” Sydney replied with a small smile as she accepted her pink Nike bag. She smoothed her hair, straightened her back, and squared her shoulders. Even if Caesar was the last person to see her alive, at least he could tell the police Sydney Duke looked good. She slowly headed toward the front door.

“Welcome home, ladies,” Keisha hissed once both girls were in earshot. Sydney flinched as if she’d been slapped in the face. For a moment, she considered taking Lauren’s earlier suggestion and making a bolt for it. But from the fiery look in her stepfather’s eyes, Sydney had no doubt that he’d not only catch her before she made it halfway down

the driveway, but he just might tackle her to the ground for the hell of it. For sure, if there had been any doubt in Sydney's mind whether Altimus Duke was capable of murder, it was all erased now. She could see why everyone in the hood thought he was as cold-blooded, calculating, and dirty as Marlo, the Baltimore crime lord in the classic HBO series *The Wire*. Sydney shivered.

"Take off your shoes and go straight to the library," Altimus directed with a curt nod of his head.

"Yes, sir," Sydney mumbled as she squeezed by her stepfather's hulking frame into the semi-darkened house. Following his instructions to the letter, she didn't look left or right as she dropped the gym bag, kicked off her Tory Burch ballet flats, and headed silently toward the back of the house. Sydney stopped uncertainly before the closed door. "Um, should we go in?" she questioned, not quite sure she was ready for whatever awaited on the other side.

"No, just stand there like two little dummies," Keisha snapped as she pushed past her daughters to slide open the two doors.

Sydney used the opportunity to turn and slyly shoot Lauren what she hoped was a look of encouragement. "It's okay," she mouthed to her visibly frightened twin. Suddenly, Lauren's eyes bulged and a small gasp escaped. Sydney whipped around to face whatever caused her sister to react. She found her biological father's only sister sitting

on the burgundy-colored leather couch, about to pull a Newport out of a half-empty pack. “Aunt Lorraine?” she sputtered.

“As much time as you spent running over to her house behind my back, what’s the confusion now, Nancy Drew?” Keisha snapped. “Put the cancer stick out, Lorraine,” she ordered, turning her attention to the tired-looking woman wearing an ill-fitting sweat jacket and noticeably worn jeans. “This ain’t the eighties. My house will not smell like a damn ashtray because you still don’t know any better.” Aunt Lorraine audibly sucked her teeth, but she put the cigarette back in its pack.

“Um, I believe your mother said inside,” Altimus gruffly reminded the stunned girls as he walked up behind them.

“Yes, sir,” Sydney and Lauren responded in unison as they rushed into the center of the gigantic, book-filled room.

Altimus entered and closed the door firmly behind him. “Have a seat,” he stated, walking past the twins to stand beside his wife at the front of the room. Lauren quickly grabbed the freestanding seat on the wall opposite the small couch on which Aunt Lorraine was sitting, leaving Sydney no choice but to sit next to the sour-faced woman. Unable to bring herself to make eye contact with Lorraine, Sydney fixed her gaze on the small snag in her tights as she twisted the silver hoop in her right ear.

“Since there’s no need for introductions,” Altimus began mockingly, “I’ll cut to the chase. In light of recent events, it has become, shall we say, necessary for this family to circle the wagons to avoid any more negative exposure. And by family, I mean immediate as well as extended, which is the reason I asked your Aunt Lorraine to be here today.”

When Altimus said the word “asked,” Aunt Lorraine cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Sydney tried to sneak a look out of the corner of her eye to gauge if the movement meant anything. However, heat from Keisha’s eagle-eyed glare kept her focused on Altimus.

“As you already know, your mother and I have a very long history with your aunt. And while it hasn’t always been smooth sailing, there was a time when it was, shall we say, profitable. And so, after much consideration, for her own bene . . . I mean *all* of our benefit, your aunt has agreed to come back to work with us again.”

“Excuse me, what do you mean by work with *us*,” Sydney blurted out before she could stop herself. Keisha or not, this time Sydney couldn’t help but turn and look at her father’s sister in total and complete shock. This was the same woman who, not even three months prior, was protecting her own flesh and blood from Altimus and company because she understood the ruthless man was capable of

anything. And now that Dice had gone to jail for a murder Altimus probably committed, Lorraine was joining “the team”? A million questions raced through Sydney’s mind but the most urgent was — *what the hell?*

“So, yeah, it’s just like Altimus said,” Aunt Lorraine started before a bout of smoker’s cough momentarily rendered her helpless. “My bad,” she wheezed. She turned and sipped a glass of what looked — and smelled — like a strong vodka and tonic with lime. “After giving it some, er, um, thought, things just might be better for everybody if we all work together.”

“How could you? After all you know?” Sydney demanded angrily. “I — I can’t believe you,” she stammered in shock.

“Humph, you can believe this — I ain’t ’bout to go to war with nobody behind some mess that don’t even belong to me,” Aunt Lorraine retorted with a smirk. “I’m a businesswoman.”

“You see, Sydney dear, that bleeding heart nonsense you and your sister have been pulling around here doesn’t necessarily run in the genes,” Keisha sneered. “You and Lauren would do well to take a page out of your aunt’s book before things get any messier.”

“And just what can Aunt Lorraine do for you?” Lauren asked her mother as she looked over at her aunt’s sloppy physical appearance.

“You might say, your Aunt Lorraine is going to be helping out in our PR department,” Altimus hinted with a sly grin. “There’re some people in our old neighborhood that need to see the light when it comes to staying out of the Duke family business. Normally, I would deliver this kind of message in person — there’s nothing like a good face-to-face. But as I’m sure you know from your own sneaking around in the West End, we Dukes don’t exactly blend in. And with all the heat on, we think your aunt is the right person to get in below the radar and make it known that no one else will get a free pass. And if they rise up against me — in any way — they will be dealt with swiftly. ”

Sydney just continued to grind her teeth and glare at her aunt. She couldn’t believe that this worthless woman was somehow related to her or her father. “You can give her those looks all day, Sydney, it’s not going to change a thing,” Keisha snipped. “You and your sister need to cut the crap and get with the program. ’Cause truth be told, you are really becoming serious liabilities up in here. And I’m not having it.”

Both Sydney and Lauren were silent as they considered their mother’s words. “Does Dad know about Aunt Lorraine helping you spread your message to the hood?” Sydney asked her mother boldly.

“I ain’t scared of Dice,” Aunt Lorraine replied nonchalantly between sips. Apparently being down with Altimus

and Keisha had given her more courage than usual. “This is all part of the game. Shoot, Dice damn sure played long enough to respect it for what it is.”

“I take it that’s a no,” Sydney summarized curtly.

“Listen here, smarty-pants, you can take it however you want,” Keisha responded. “But it’s time for you to start thinking long term.”

“It’s really up to the two of you girls how you want this to play itself out,” Altimus said as he slowly crossed his arms and leaned against the floor-to-ceiling bookshelf behind him. “You can come to grips with the reality of the life you live, accept that everything your mother and I are doing is always in the best interest of the family, and go back to living the way you’ve obviously become accustomed to, in which case, there will be no punishments or restrictions; all will proceed normally.” Sydney rolled her eyes — as if life could ever be “normal” again. “Or you can choose to fight . . . and lose, in which case, I will confiscate any and every thing I have ever bought for the two of you, from the clothes on your backs to the beds you sleep in. Plus, I will send you both to live in a South American reform school that one of my clients owns and operates, until you are twenty-one. And let’s just say that what I’ve seen and heard of the institution isn’t pleasant.”

“Ain’t no weekly manicure/pedicure appointments or cell phone service to reach your little boyfriend when you’re

working in the jungle all day, cuteness,” Keisha scoffed at Lauren’s increasingly reddening face.

“But here’s the catch,” Altimus continued. “Whichever you decide, it’s a two-for-one deal. So if one of you decides to take the hard road, then you’re both gonna troop that together.”

Sydney was officially floored. Her stepfather was a maniacal dictator and her own mother was willing to send her away to what sounded like a modern-day concentration camp if she refused to sign on to their murderous lifestyle. For a moment, she thought she’d almost rather be homeless in Timbuktu than spend another second with either Altimus or Keisha. Then Sydney glanced over at Lauren, who was fanning herself and gulping for air. There was no way her sister could ever survive a minute in some third-world correctional facility. There was no choice.

“I guess we’re on board,” Sydney said in a voice filled with defeat. “Just tell us what we have to do.”

“Go figure,” snorted Aunt Lorraine with a nasty smirk on her face. Shame and anger rushed through Sydney’s body. She couldn’t believe she, too, had sold out her father so easily.

“Well, let’s start with the easiest thing — shut your mouth,” Altimus answered without missing a beat. “Stop asking questions about Rodney’s murder, insinuating guilt on this family, and all the rest of that rabble-rousing you’ve

been doing. The two of you need to learn to be seen and not heard — ever. If it isn't about school, your friends, or an after-school activity, I better not hear your opinion on the matter.”

“Yes, sir,” Sydney and Lauren intoned meekly in unison.

“At the end of six months, your mother and I will re-evaluate your behavior. If everything goes well, then perhaps something might be done to help Dice figure out his situation.”

“What do you mean by ‘help’ Dice?” Sydney questioned suspiciously. She knew that the last thing in the world her father wanted was anything to do with Altimus.

“Let's just say that Dice wouldn't be sitting in a cell to begin with if he understood how to play politics,” Altimus replied cryptically. “I'm hoping that since you have such a good relationship with him, you'll set the example and show him the way. You'd be surprised how quickly things can turn around when you're on a winning team.”