

Rule #1

THE NEVER SAY NEVER SERIES



NEVER MARRY YOUR BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND

WALL STREET JOURNAL & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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CHAPTER ONE

CARTER

“SON OF A BITCH!”

I slam the door to my office behind me, well aware that it was a second too late to muffle my outburst. I snarl over my shoulder, muttering under my breath the way my grandma taught me to do when you don't have anything nice to say. “Cam's nose is so far up Dad's ass, he can probably tell what he ate for dinner last night.”

I can't help that Cameron is the golden child—the oldest, most brilliant, the most like our father and grandfather. Except we all know Cam's flawed in the worst way possible with a soul-deep scar from the accident that took his wife and left him a single parent.

That's not something we discuss out loud, even in an empty room under our breath. But Cameron's ever-present ability to stay in Dad's good graces and make me come out looking like a hack? That's fair game.

I throw the report Cameron presented onto my desk, glaring at it as if my brother can feel my anger through its perfectly formatted brilliance. I pace left, glare, then right, sighing as I try to find fault with any detail of his plan. But there's none. I know it. Cameron wouldn't have presented it otherwise.

He might be an ass, but he's a damn good businessman.

The door opens behind me and Zack comes in.

“Fuck off. Not now.”

Considering he's my best friend, he doesn't take the slightest offense. Nor does he listen. Instead, he walks in like he owns the place. He doesn't even work here, and the meeting for our private real estate company is supposed to be over dinner tonight, so he shouldn't even be here.

Not that anything like that has ever stopped him. I don't think Zack has met a single obstacle in his life that he didn't tackle with single-minded,

obstinate determination. Or steel balls, whatever the case may call for.

“Whoa, who pissed in your grits this morning?”

His humor makes me even angrier. Launching in without preamble, I inform him, “Cameron did a big-ass, full-court presentation today. I had no idea he was even working on anything, but then he goes and throws out a whole business plan with plotted out progress points and fully developed return on investment figures like he shit it out after his morning Metamucil.”

I wave a hand at the report on my desk, shooting it another sour look for good measure. I hope Cameron feels the glare like a solid kick to his family jewels. Not that he fucking needs them. He’s head-down, focused on work or his daughter, twenty-four-seven. I’d be surprised if he ever distracts himself with something as frivolous as jacking off.

Zack picks up the paperwork and helps himself to one of the chairs in front of my desk, flipping pages as he scans to get the gist of Cameron’s new grand plan. “Venture capital?” he surmises as he throws it back to the desk carelessly.

“Yeah, some hotshot chef’s opening a restaurant. Somehow, the damn thing already has a waiting list before they’ve even begun construction. It’s a ‘sure bet’, or at least Cam thinks so.” I add finger quotes to make sure Zack understands how idiotic this proposal is. I would never admit it, but I’m pouting.

Normally, I’d be laughing that he brought in an investment into a restaurant because generally, they’re risky, but I’ll admit this is gold. But only to myself, not to Zack.

My grandfather began the family business decades ago with a profit-sharing deal with a friend, and it’s grown exponentially since then. We have our well-manicured fingers in business deals around the globe, in everything from real estate to stock markets to small start-ups to portfolio management.

We’re the archangels of angel investors. Anything we can do to make money, or make someone else money, which in turn also makes us money, is our specialty. And in a business that traditionally has more misses than hits, we have a remarkable ‘batting average’.

Because of deals like Cameron’s Hottie McHottie chef.

I also have a side hustle business with Zack, using my funds and his brains. Not that he doesn’t have money or I don’t have a brain, but we started it long ago when my focus was on making my way in the family

business and he needed an influx of start-up cash.

Zack holds up his hand, rubbing his fingertip against his thumb. “Want me to play you a sad song on a tiny violin the size of your teeny-tiny dick? You can cry your whiny tears ’til you blow snot bubbles out of your nose.” His voice is gratingly pitying as though I’m a fussy toddler demanding their way.

“My dick is not teeny-tiny,” I correct, focusing on the most important part of what he said and purposefully ignoring the rest as I plop into the chair next to him.

“That’s the spirit!” Zack cheers sarcastically. “Not that there’s a need to go crossing swords with your brother, but you’re too good to pout about a done deal. What you need is a deal of your own. Not coincidentally, that’s why I’m here.” He holds his hands out wide like he’s God’s gift to fix my bad mood.

I can sense the carrot he’s dangling, and while there’s a part of me that wants to be angry—fine, *jealous*—a bit longer, I can’t deny the appeal of the next new thing. Dad definitely bred that into Cameron, but he also put a good dose of those genes into me too, along with a fair amount of brotherly competition.

“What’ve you got?”

“A little birdie told me about a widow—” he starts.

“Weak,” I interject. “I need something big.”

“As I was saying,” Zack continues, not slowing down, “portfolio management for a widow with a huge estate. I’m talking property, an art collection worth well into the eight figures, investments, and more.”

Looking his way, I concede. “I’m listening.”

Zack grins triumphantly, knowing he’s got me solidly wiggling on his hook and he’s a patient and skilled fisherman. “She’s only considering outsourcing, but I think you could sway her with that magic charm of yours. Seems to work with every other woman between twenty-two and ninety-two.”

I flash him my signature smile. “Now who’s jealous?” He doesn’t answer, merely stares back, waiting me out. “Fine, tell me more. Please.”

Pleased as punch with himself, he reels me in slowly. “Elena Cartwright, seventy-five, but spry and sharp. Her estate is out past Pearl, about ten thousand acres. But who’s counting at that point?” He rolls his eyes, well aware that my family owns that much too, though not in one plot. Land like that comes from more than three generations of wealth like

us Harringtons, but Pearl is far enough away that I don't know the Cartwright legacy.

He continues, "She lost her husband, Thomas, three years ago and has been grieving ever since. Though not too upset to manage the portfolio with her financial advisor. But he's in over his head and knows it. More importantly, she knows it. She's looking to the future."

"Her future?" I ask incredulously. "Didn't you say she's seventy-five? She should be sitting on the porch, drinking a sweet tea, and singing the praises over witnessing another sunrise."

"She probably does a fair amount of that, but she's also been the brains behind the latest generation of Cartwright success. She's not an empty-headed placeholder, which you'd do well to remember," he warns.

"Noted. So, what's the catch?"

"The way in."

I knew it. If it sounds too good to be true, it's damn-near always a guaranteed loss.

"Thomas Cartwright was the art collector, and an artist in his own right. Elena is his biggest fan. The art is your way in."

"I know approximately less than fuck-all about art," I argue.

Zack kicks out, knocking my foot off my knee. "No shit. I have a plan for that." The full effect of my scowl lands on Zack, who seems completely unfazed. "Luna."

I know the word, Latin for moon, but I'm not sure why he's suddenly speaking a dead language.

"My sister, Luna," he explains slowly. "She knows more about art than anyone. We can get her to tutor you or something, at least give you some talking points to get Cartwright on your side."

The suggestion might as well be for me to speak to Elena Cartwright in a dead language because there's no way Zack's little sister will help me. I've been friends with Zack for over ten years, since our freshman year of college. And though I've met her at a handful of birthday parties, I've heard plenty of stories about how eccentric Zack's sister is.

Some of the tales are simply the difference in ages, since Luna is almost nine years younger than Zack, but others highlight that sometimes, siblings can be polar opposites. And given that Zack and I are two peas in a pod, I'm sure Luna wouldn't care too much for me, either.

I look at him as though he's lost his damn mind because I'm considering the fact that he may actually have.

“Don’t give me that,” he orders, despite my not having said a word.

“You think she’s going to help?” I ask doubtfully. But it really doesn’t matter. Even if Luna were to agree, it’s unlikely I could learn enough in a short amount of time that’d fool someone passionate about art.

He smirks confidently. “I might know a thing or two about a thing or two, not that I’ll tell you. It’d make a crappy secret if I go blabbing it all over town.”

“You plan to blackmail your sister into teaching me enough about art that I can charm an old lady into choosing me to manage her portfolio.” It’s not a question, I’m simply repeating the plan concisely so I can evaluate it.

“Yep.” Zack looks self-satisfied. With that, he gets up and pops me in the shoulder. “See you at dinner tonight.”

Alone, I glare at Cameron’s report once more. I hope Zack’s intel on this Cartwright deal is right because I could really use a win.

CHAPTER TWO

LUNA

“NEVER BE ENOUGH . . . *never enough . . . for me . . . for me-ah!*”

The lyrics turn to humming as I focus on the precise linework of my illustration. A little thinner here, a little thicker there for perspective. And . . . voila!

“Okey-dokey, Daddy choke me, page fifteen is in the *books*.” I laugh at my own Dad-slash-Daddy joke as I scroll to the next page on my tablet. I’ve done plenty of work with paper and pencil, oils, and acrylics over the years, but this tablet has become an extension of my creativity, allowing me to bring my alter-ego to life. “Alphena, let’s show Bradley who’s boss.”

Alphena is the headlining character in the graphic novel I’ve been drawing since I was in high school, though she’s taken on a life of her own more recently. A little Alpha bitch, a bit of Greek goddess Athena, and a lot of me blend to create a character that attacks the patriarchy and makes the world her oyster.

If only I were this bold in real life, but that’s never been the case. In reality, I’m quiet, almost shy. Even when my mind is throwing out ideas about what I should have said, my mouth stays tight-lipped. My art is where I can let loose, where my mousy becomes mighty.

On this page, Alphena is smack-talking a guy who’s mansplaining the electoral college . . . incorrectly. “*No, Braaad. That’s actually not how it works, in fact. Try a basic Google search and you’ll see that I know more than cooking and cleaning. I retained my sixth-grade government education, something you seem to have forgotten.*” I’m in the zone, so when my phone rings next to me, I ignore it. Then my text alarm goes off, and I narrow my eyes, staying focused on the tablet screen. When it rings

again, I groan in irritation and set down my pen.

My eyes roll of their own volition at my annoying brother's name on the caller ID. For all the sass Alphaena has, I answer the phone relatively politely. "What?"

"Good to talk to you too, dear sister," Zack responds dryly.

"Mm-hmm. What do you want?" My brain is ninety percent work and only ten percent paying attention to Zack.

"What makes you think I want something?"

"Call. Text. Call. Unless something's wrong with Mom—which I know it's not because I talked to her earlier today and she was lamenting that you never call—you want something."

He can't fault my logic. "Valid. I want to take you to dinner tonight. I have something I'd like to talk about."

"I'm busy. Maybe next week?" I'm putting him off for tonight, and then next week, I can do it again. It's not that I don't want to see Zack, but he always picks fancy places where I'm uncomfortable and then plies me with unsolicited advice about how I should work with him. For some reason, he wants to shape me into a miniature version of himself, despite being well-aware that I would consider that a painful realm of hell. All the hand shaking, brown nosing, and negotiating he does? I would live in a panicked state.

My life is art, not in a poetic sense but a literal way.

To pay the bills, I work at the local museum doing tours of their collections and occasionally teaching a community outreach program class. It's enough social interaction to last me a lifetime and works because I only have to talk about what I love. Besides, the tour is mostly scripted, and I have it memorized.

To feed my soul, I create Alphaena. Between the two, I don't have time to care about much more, especially whatever angle my brother's working.

"Tonight, Luna. You name the place."

Interesting. And suspicious. "Anywhere? My choice?" After a beat, I clarify, "And you're paying?"

"Yeah, of course." The small chuckle he swallows down is one I've heard before, when he's commenting on my lack of salary compared to him. That's more like Zack.

"Fine. I'll meet you at Fairy Tales, then." I can already taste the coffee and sandwiches, and most importantly, smell the books in my greedy little hands.

“Seriously?” he scoffs. “I’ll buy dinner anywhere you’d like, and you want to go to a cheap café you eat at once a week?”

I smile an evil smile as I reveal my plan. “I’m going to add a significant stack of art hardcovers to that dinner bill you’re footing.”

“Deal. I’ll see you there at seven,” Zack answers too easily. “Bye, Sis.”

I look down at the phone in my hand, noting apprehensively that Zack has already hung up. He’s up to something, clearly. But I’m getting books I could never afford out of the deal, so it can’t be too bad of an arrangement. It’s only dinner, right?

I go back to page sixteen after setting an alarm to remind me to stop working to get to Fairy Tales on time.

“Shoot, shoot, shoot.” My alarm went off, but I only had a tiny bit left so I kept working, and now I’m late. Not that Zack will be surprised that I got lost in my art again. He’s used to my ‘five minutes’ being more like thirty. Or more.

I swing the door open and run smack into a guy carrying a huge paper bag of books. “Oops, sorry,” I tell him, already ducking inside and away from the guy’s scowl as I push my glasses back into position. The smell of books rushes through my nose and straight into my blood. I feel . . . at home here.

In the café, Zack is sitting at a table in the middle of all the action, staring at his phone. A definite change from my usual hidey-hole in the corner where no one interrupts my reading and quiet dinners, but I’m not going to ask him to move because he’d totally give me a hard time about it. Leaning against the chair across from him, I drawl out, “What’s so important that you’re willing to come here to see me?”

Unbothered, Zack looks up with a smile. “Have a seat.”

He kicks the chair out next to him, but I see the flash of disappointment on his face when he takes me in. My baggy overalls, tank top, and Converse aren’t exactly Zack’s style. In contrast, his hair is styled perfectly, his glasses spotless, his button-up shirt tucked in, and though the rest of him is beneath the table, I know he’s wearing slacks and dress shoes. The quintessential businessman to my creative artist. For siblings,

we couldn't be more different.

"Let me order first." I hold out my hand for his card, which he hands over wordlessly. My brother is nothing if not predictable, and an agreeable Zack doesn't bode well.

I spin and head to the counter. "Hey, Lydia. How're you?"

Lydia is here most weeks when I come, and we've gotten to be friendly, which mostly means she talks and I listen. Lately, she's been telling me about the guy in her economics class she's crushing on. After hearing the tea, I order one of my own. "Chai tea latte and a Greek salad, please." I swipe Zack's card, but as Lydia hands me the receipt, she gasps.

"Who's that?"

Without looking, I answer, "My brother."

"No, I recognized him. I mean . . . *him*." She purses her lips, indicating the table behind me, and I glance back.

"What the—" I gasp, spinning back around so he doesn't see me staring.

Him is my brother's best friend and business partner, Carter Harrington, who's sitting at the table with Zack. Carter looks like a model in an Armani photo shoot wearing a black suit, blue shirt, and dark blue power tie. Even from here, his blue eyes pop, his tan looks island-vacation fresh, and his jaw is sharp and square.

"Don't get excited," I warn Lydia. "Carter's the devil in disguise." When she leans forward eagerly, I know it's my turn to return the gossip. "He's my brother's best friend, richer than God, handsome and knows it, bossy because he assumes he knows best, and an all-around annoyance. And he's *not* supposed to be here."

Lydia raises one brow as she leans around me to peer at Carter and Zack. "Well, I for one don't mind that he showed up uninvited. Especially when your negatives are rich, handsome, and bossy." She ticks the traits off on her fingers, adding, "Girl, that's what I'm looking for in a man. I can teach him everything else he needs to know."

She forgot annoying, but I don't argue the point. It doesn't matter when her eyes are more glazed than a dozen Krispy Kreme donuts. Returning to the table, I throw out a hand to indicate Carter and speak only to Zack. "Is *this* why you're bribing me with dinner and books?"

"I can hear you, ya know?" Carter responds. Out of the corner of my eye—because I'm not giving Carter Harrington a moment of my full-eyed attention—I can see that he's grinning in amusement at my irritation. *He*

probably gets off on it, I think wryly.

I don't react, keeping hard eyes on Zack. He's the one who owes me an answer. "Sit down. Please. And yes, this is what I want to talk to you about. I mean, *he is*."

Slowly, I lower to the chair with a 'nope' already on the tip of my tongue for whatever Zack wants.

"Thank you," Zack says with a placating nod. "I've called you both here tonight to discuss an opportunity," he starts, sounding like a salesman on late night television. Although, if he starts trying to sell me some ever-sharp knives, I might be buying, because I might have an immediate use for them. "Luna, I found a potential client for Carter, but he needs help. That's where you come in."

"I'm not interested." I cross my arms over my chest, trying to become small and invisible. But I shoot a look of distaste at Carter despite the fact that he's barely spoken. His mere presence annoys me. Actually, his existence on the planet.

"I'll pay you," Carter offers.

Nostrils flaring, I stare at him. As if I want his fucking money.

Zack holds his palms up to slow my impending implosion. Yeah, I implode, not explode like most people. I hate it, but it's how I'm built. "Not like that. He means he'll pay you to tutor him." I flick my eyes to Zack, silently questioning his sanity. "About art."

Wait. What?

"What?" I echo my own thought.

"Carter is approaching a potential client who is particularly art savvy, a topic he has admittedly minimal knowledge on. Luckily, I know someone who knows more about art than virtually anyone in the world." He smiles charmingly. "You," he clarifies as if I didn't know he was talking about me.

A laugh pops out before I can stop it. "Me? Help Carter?" Unconvinced, I wait for the punchline or a camera crew to pop out and say 'gotcha!' When neither is forthcoming, I realize Zack is serious. "No thanks. Like I said, not interested. Lydia," I call out, "can you make my order to go?"

Lydia, who's apparently been watching the whole show of Zack's big reveal, drops surprised eyes to Zack and then to Carter. "Uh, sure."

Carter leans back in his chair, completely unaffected by my denial. His eyes sparkle and his white teeth flash as he baits me. "Am I so repulsive

that you won't even hear me out?"

I'm quiet, my brain spitting piss and fire that my mouth would never say, even though I've been waiting for a chance to tell Carter what I think of him. Except this time, the words pour out in all their flat and dull honesty. "Physically, no. And you know it, which is part of the problem. Emotionally, I'm pretty sure you have the maturity of an eighteen-year-old boy on a Spring Break weekend, so despite your business success, I have no interest in helping you scam someone into signing their life and funds away to you."

Whew! Guess I've been holding on to more than I thought about my brother's best friend.

There's a flash in Carter's eyes, but I must've imagined it because he doesn't have the emotional depth to feel hurt. Especially based on an insult from someone like me.

"Luna! That's not what he does and not what we're asking you to do!" Zack hisses.

Carter holds up a hand, and to my chagrin, Zack leans back and gives him the floor. "I'm hearing that you think I'm attractive and successful, but immature and immoral." I'm actually surprised he could hear the negatives through the fog of his inflated ego. When I stay silent, he continues, "Give me the chance to prove you wrong. Please. I'll make it worth your while, I promise you that."

With that solemn vow, he stands, gives Zack a nod, and struts out of the café. I definitely don't notice that his long legs eat up the ground toward the bookstore door. But Lydia must because she yells, "Come back anytime! Especially Mondays and Thursdays for the dinner shift!"

I glare at her, and she shrugs. "He's cuter than Economics Alex, and definitely richer. Can't blame a girl for trying."

"She's got a point." Zack's agreement only adds to my annoyance. "I don't know why you've never liked Carter. He's a good guy."

I press my lips together, fighting the urge to argue with him. Zack depends on Carter to fund their real estate business, so he's loyal. But when you get into bed with the devil, you're going to get burned. No matter how many times I've warned Zack, he doesn't see it.

"Agree to disagree."

Zack sighs heavily. "Look, I'm asking as a personal favor, plus I'll buy you all the books you could ever want, and Carter really will pay you. All he needs are a couple of tutoring sessions on art so he can approach this

potential client. I know you don't care, but he needs a win."

My brother cannot be serious right now. But he seems to be. "Carter's whole life is one big Powerball lottery prize."

"I'm surprised at you," Zack says with a judgmental frown. "You know better than anyone that money isn't everything and doesn't make you happy. Like you, you might struggle sometimes, but you stay strong on doing what you love because it's what makes you happy. I've always admired that."

That was actually . . . sweet, which is not something I'm used to hearing from my brother.

"For people like Carter and me, closing a solid deal is what makes us happy."

There go any warm fuzzies I might've been developing. That's part of the problem I have with Carter. He's turned Zack into whoever this is sitting across from me.

"Do it for me, Moony," he asks sweetly. "Please?"

Ugh. He pulled out the nickname only he has ever been allowed to use because he's the one who gave it to me. Apparently, I went through a bit of a nudist phase as a toddler and liked to run around the house naked. That, coupled with my name, earned me the nickname 'Full Moon', which was shortened to Moony over time. And using that means he's pulling out the big guns.

I roll my eyes dramatically. "Fine, but no promises. I can't possibly make him an expert in a "couple" of tutoring sessions. Tell him to meet me at my place tomorrow at eight P.M. sharp. I'm only doing this for you, and I already regret it."

"It'll be fine. He just needs to be conversational. And thank you."

Zack stands, probably trying to make a run for it before I change my mind, but I clear my throat. "Unless you're leaving your card with me, we have some shopping to do before you go."

He laughs and throws a twenty on the table for Lydia. Considering he only got a cup of coffee and she packed my salad and latte to-go, that's generous. I hate to admit it, because I do live frugally to be able to chase my passions, but money is a necessity and Lydia will be grateful for the tip on a slow Monday night.

But my Mama didn't raise a fool, and I'm still getting the new books Zack promised me. "Come on, the art history section is back here."

CHAPTER THREE