

THE CARLISLE SERIES: BOOK 2

ABOVE *ALL* THINGS



Roslyn Sinclair



CHAPTER 1

“WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR professional strengths?”

The question sent a shiver up Jules Moretti’s spine. No matter how many job interviews she sat through, the fears of inadequacy—the surety that you just weren’t what they were looking for—never went away. Not completely.

And she had to nail this interview. She really did. There were a lot fewer options than she’d expected when she’d begun the search.

“Well,” the slender, dark-haired woman in front of her replied, “as my résumé says, I’ve worked for two families in the past ten years—it really gave me a chance to bond with their children. Before that, I worked in a day care all through high school, where I got to know many of the kids over time. So I’d have to say that my real strength is”—she gave a self-deprecating laugh—“endurance.”

“Definitely seems useful. Essential, even.” Jules looked back down at her list of questions. “Um, how would you handle a crying baby?”

The woman, whose name was Zahra, folded her hands in her lap and gave a modest smile. “Well, since I’m starting my master’s in child psychology, I keep up-to-date on all the latest studies and models—”

“You mean the latest trends?”

Jules turned a swift glare onto Vivian Carlisle, who sat next to her on the love seat in the den opposite from their candidate. Even now, it took a bit of gumption to glare at Vivian. Nobody just glared at the editor-in-chief of *Du Jour*, the world’s most influential fashion magazine.

But nobody else was Vivian’s girlfriend either, much less a girlfriend who’d been tearing her hair out about finding a nanny.

Vivian had better not screw this up. They'd conducted two other interviews so far, and both of the applicants had taken jobs elsewhere. Finding a top-tier nanny in Manhattan was no joke. Jules could never have imagined the competition.

Zahra didn't seem rattled by Vivian's rude question, though. Instead, she gave Vivian a serene smile. "I wouldn't call them 'trends' so much as 'evolutions of thought,' but I certainly understand why that might seem frustrating. It's like, why can't we just pick an approach and stick to it?"

"Exactly."

That was the strongest display of enthusiasm from Vivian so far. Jules dared to hope. Zahra was a perfect candidate, and she'd be a real get for them.

Vivian was just over five months pregnant. They should have had somebody locked down by now. The best nannies planned months ahead when they were transitioning from their current jobs. Zahra's current charge was turning five in June, and his parents had decided it was time to hire a Parisian au pair instead. Never mind that Zahra was fluent in French, Arabic, and Spanish. She also had a minor in computer science and had played piano in the Columbia University Orchestra.

With all her might, Jules willed Vivian to hear her thoughts: *don't drive this one off.*

"Crying means that your needs aren't being met," Zahra said. "If the baby's hungry? I feed her. If she's sleepy? I rock her and sing to her, if she's into it. When your child is brand-new to the world, it's essential to make her feel like she'll get what she needs. Her future development depends on it."

"No pressure, huh?" Jules said. "Ha, ha."

Vivian's glare, coupled with Zahra's polite smile, told Jules that the joke hadn't landed.

The rest of the interview went more smoothly. Zahra seemed impressed by Jules's description of how the house would be set up for the baby and with how specific Vivian was about what Zahra's duties would be. How very, very specific. And particular. In fact, Vivian's particularity seemed to woo Zahra instead of scare her like it did *Du Jour* employees.

"It's really helpful to know exactly what a parent is looking for," Zahra said as she rose to her feet.

Jules glanced at Vivian with a rueful smile. “Vivian’s pretty good at knowing exactly what she wants from an employee.”

Vivian looked decidedly unapologetic.

Zahra flashed Jules a grin that showed off her perfect teeth. “Well, as her assistant, you probably appreciate the benefits of that.”

Jules opened her mouth to say “It’s a mixed blessing” when the truth caught up with her. She wasn’t Vivian’s assistant anymore. She’d been fired a week ago by Mark Tavio, chairman of the Koenig publishing group and Vivian’s asshole boss.

So now it would look weird to outsiders that she was helping out with this whole nanny process.

Sweat broke out under her arms. What should she say? She didn’t want to lie. Not exactly. But she and Vivian hadn’t discussed this. They didn’t have a cover story. Now that she was thinking about it, that was so stupid. Why hadn’t they worked something out?

Now Vivian’s face had closed off, inscrutable, as she gazed at Jules while Zahra waited expectantly. She was letting Jules take the lead.

Jules prided herself in thinking on her feet, but all she could manage to say now was, “It took a while, but there are definitely benefits to clarity.”

“For sure.” Zahra slung her Parker Clay tote over her shoulder. “It was very nice to meet both of you. Ms. Carlisle, thank you for your time.”

“Of course. Julia, will you walk Zahra to the door?”

Vivian’s tone was cooler than it had been before. It made Jules frown as she led Zahra to the front door. What was Vivian’s problem? Jules was only being professional.

She took Zahra’s business card, waved goodbye, and then turned back to the house. Time to find out what Vivian’s attitude was about.

When she returned to the den, Vivian was perched on the edge of the loveseat, hands folded over her in her lap and clearly ready for a conversation with a capital C.

Might as well beat her to the punch. Jules slid a hand through her thick, dark hair as she approached. “We should have prepped in advance.”

“Prepped what, exactly?”

Jules sat next to Vivian on the love seat. Normally, she’d reach out for Vivian to settle against her, but that didn’t seem to be on the menu right

now. “Our cover story about our relationship. Sorry I was clumsy earlier. I’ll—”

“Our cover story.”

Vivian’s tone was as flat as a Kansas highway. Her eyes hadn’t warmed up one jot either. What was her problem?

“Well, yes,” Jules said. “I can’t exactly snuggle up to you and give you a big kiss.”

“What a shame,” Vivian said. “That’s exactly the sort of gesture I love. Julia, I agree there’s something we need to discuss, but I wouldn’t have called it a cover story.”

Zahra’s business card crumpled in Jules’s palm. “What would you call it?”

“I know we’re in an unusual situation,” Vivian said tightly, “but I’ve never been interested in living a lie.”

“I didn’t *lie*,” Jules protested. “I didn’t say I’m your assistant.”

That was so weak, and Vivian didn’t let her get away with it. “No, but you let her think it. You’re not my assistant, you’re my girlfriend. I’m not saying it’s a problem right now, but if we hire her, I’m not interested in pretending to be something we’re not.”

Even in a fraught moment, hearing the words *you’re my girlfriend* from Vivian Carlisle’s lips sent an uncontrollable thrill through Jules. Only a month ago, that would have seemed completely impossible. Was Jules to be blamed for wanting to protect their fledgling relationship?

“So what do you want her to think?” Jules asked. “Vivian, it’s still too early to come out in public. You just got divorced, and I just stopped working for you. Plus, we haven’t been together for long.”

“I’m not talking about taking you to the Met benefit,” Vivian said in exasperation. “Good domestic help is known for being discreet, and if Zahra is as qualified as she seems, she’s not going to blab to Page Six if we hire her. You don’t have to tiptoe around our relationship in my house, of all places.”

Put like that, Jules’s caution did seem extreme. The thought of being out to anyone, including the nanny, still made her blush. Ordinarily, it wouldn’t have bothered her at all.

Ordinarily didn't include your lover being pregnant, freshly divorced, and—oh yeah—the most powerful person in the fashion industry. To say nothing of that person being your former boss.

People would talk so much shit about both Jules and Vivian for this. Jules would be alternately a victim and a gold digger while Vivian would be alternately a predator and a sucker. Nobody would see it as a relationship of equals who were going into it with clear eyes and level heads.

Yeah. Jules definitely felt level-headed about Vivian Carlisle, all right.

She bit her lip as she looked at Vivian, taking in her bright blue eyes and short, blonde hair; her sharp, elegant features and her faultless poise. A slouchy cream sweater played down the slightly rounded shape of her stomach. Today, on a relaxed Sunday afternoon, she still looked more chic than most women dressed to the nines. Behind her eyes ran a mind that could see every situation from every angle without breaking a sweat. And beneath her casually elegant clothes hid a woman who was incredible in bed.

The most primitive part of Jules's brain snarled, *Of course I want everyone to know she's mine.*

The slightly more evolved part reminded Jules that Vivian might not feel the same way. Vivian might not, for example, get a mushy feeling in her chest at the thought of Jules. Vivian might not see a brunette woman in a crowd and feel her heart skip a beat, wondering if it was Jules.

Vivian might not love Jules back.

Oh, she cared for Jules. She'd made that clear. But how far did caring go? So far, it extended to wanting to have Jules around, wanting to have sex a lot, and talking and spending time together in a way that Vivian didn't with anybody else. But she hadn't used the word *love* or anything like it and showed no indication of doing so.

"It was just a reflex, I guess," Jules muttered instead of saying any of that. "I wasn't thinking about it. We've both got a lot of other things going on right now, right?" She held up her hands and began to count on her fingers. "You having a baby, tying up your divorce, fending off Mark, plus me starting a new job, and..."

Thankfully, a rueful smile crossed Vivian's face. "I take your point. The divorce is in the rearview mirror, though."

No kidding. Vivian's cheating ex-husband, Robert Kirk, had been eager to finish the divorce process. Which would have been fine, if not for the fact that he was just as eager—no, more eager—to sign away all rights to his own daughter, leaving Vivian with sole custody.

That was just how Vivian had wanted it, but Jules couldn't help thinking it was kind of a shame, even if Robert was an asshole. The baby was going to grow up knowing that her dad hadn't wanted her.

I'll make up for it, Jules thought before she could catch herself.

"Yes," she said instead, scooting in closer to Vivian. "He's history, and you're all mine."

Vivian's snort belied her relaxing body language, the way she leaned toward Jules. "The possessiveness comes out, does it?"

"You know it does." Jules slid a hand through Vivian's hair. "Wanna make out before we call Zahra?"

Vivian's fingertips were already tracing over Jules's blouse buttons. "Think this one will say yes?"

"Do you?"

"I do." Vivian's eyes cut a swathe into Jules's own. "I'm pretty good at seeing when someone wants to say yes to me."

Heat suffused Jules until her scalp prickled. She made a low, breathless sound.

Vivian dropped her hand down to Jules's knee and slid it forward until it cupped the inside of Jules's thigh, burning through her pants. "Would you like to do more than make out, Julia?"

"Yes, Vivian," Jules whispered, leaning forward for a kiss. "Oh yes."

CHAPTER 2

A FEW DAYS LATER FIRST thing Friday morning, Jules finally got a look at the office space that her new boss, Simon Carvalho, had commandeered. It was the headquarters for Adrian & Jo—the upscale online consignment store he'd left *Du Jour* to found. Even though Jules had been thrown into working with Simon thanks to being fired, she was still excited. It was cool to be in on the ground floor.

Not that she was doing anything thrilling. Currently, her duties were similar to what they'd been while working for Vivian at *Du Jour*. Simon had promised her a quick path to advancement, though. She'd be more than an assistant soon.

How soon remained to be seen.

The space itself was nothing special. *Du Jour's* office was an exquisite place, laid out in cream and glass, the walls covered with original work from the hottest artists. It occupied a prime place in the Koenig Building in Midtown. Adrian & Jo had humbler beginnings: standard, crappy office tile. Bare walls. Cubicles dotting the landscape. Simon was renting half a floor in Murray Hill. Not the most fashionable part of town.

It was definitely a letdown after *Du Jour*, but Jules supposed she'd been spoiled in that regard.

Adrian & Jo would move up in the world. You had to start somewhere.

At least it wasn't an open-office plan. Simon had imitated Vivian, who said it was a basic human right not to have to look at people in all directions. It was her one mercy to the underlings.

Jules looked around the empty office, put her hands on her hips, and exhaled. There was plenty to take care of. And taking care of things was

her specialty. She whipped out her cell phone with the ease of a career gunslinger and got to work.

After a few days of being at loose ends, it was like putting on a comfortable pair of shoes. You needed those when you hit the ground running. She'd never had to pester tech support at *Du Jour* or the phone service provider or office furniture rental stores. But it was all about having soft skills, right?

She was carving out a professional space for herself to make up for the one she'd just lost. It was separate from her relationship with Vivian too. Something just for Jules.

The experts said that kind of thing was healthy in a relationship. Separate interests and careers and all. If Jules repeated that to herself enough, she might believe it.

To Jules's pleased surprise, Simon called her at six thirty p.m. and told her to wait at the office. He arrived fifteen minutes later, looking exhausted, and gave her a wry smile.

"I was busy wrapping up *Du Jour* business all day," he said. "I'm so glad Vivian wasn't there. I just thought I'd stop by and see what—"

He glanced around the reception area and saw Jules's iMac humming along atop her neatly organized desk. Then he looked into his office and saw the same thing.

"Wow," he said.

"I called in our IT guy," Jules said. "I think he likes me."

"Do I smell coffee?"

"I got a Keurig."

"Did you *vacuum*?"

"Dusted too."

"Do you want my job?"

Jules laughed. So did Simon.

"Give me another ten years," she said. "At least. Then maybe."

"Ah-h-h." Simon stretched, pressing at the small of his back. "I kid, I kid. I'm not giving up this gig."

Then he took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. He looked a little apprehensive.

"You'll be great," Jules said. "This whole thing will be great. I've been sending emails," she added, "and I got some replies. It sounds like a lot

of people are excited about what we're doing. A high-end online designer consignment store is groundbreaking."

"I know." Simon raised an eyebrow, impressed. "I got copied on a lot of those replies. You've been a busy little bee."

Jules shrugged. Better not to say that keeping busy was the best remedy for missing Vivian.

"Well." Simon rubbed his hands together as he headed into his office.

Jules followed him, watching with amusement as he sat down in his chair and straightened his shoulders.

Then he lifted his chin.

"Julia," he began.

"Oh no," Jules said, already giggling.

Simon prissily placed his hands on the top of the desk and then looked at Jules over the rim of his glasses. "I'll want my La Colombe coffee here in five minutes. No. Three."

"Oh...stop..." Jules said, and leaned back against the wall, holding her stomach as she laughed.

"And then I'll want to hear from Testino yesterday. Literally. Now hurry up and reverse the Earth's rotation—"

"Yes, Simon," Jules managed as she tried to control herself. "I'll get Allie on that right away."

"Oh God," Simon said and broke character as he lowered his head to his desk, laughing. "Allie. We left her with *Allie*."

Thinking of Allie, the hapless intern Jules had hired right before getting fired herself, only made Jules grin. "Maybe not for much longer." The thought sobered her. "If Allie can't do the job on her own, she's toast."

"Out of your hands, I'm afraid," Simon said, sitting up again.

"I know, but I feel kind of responsible," Jules said. "I mean, I hi—I recommended Allie in the first place. And Vivian told me she might have to fire her if—"

She realized just a moment too late what she'd just confessed. When Simon looked at her with wide eyes, she knew he'd realized it too.

"And when did Vivian say this?" Simon inquired neutrally.

Jules took a deep breath and tried to sound casual, which didn't really go well with taking a deep breath, so she wasn't surprised when it didn't work. "Yesterday."

“So you’re still talking to her.”

“Yes,” Jules said, refusing to break eye contact or back down. She wasn’t about to lie about it. Not to Simon. It wasn’t a crime to communicate with your former boss.

“You know,” Simon said, leaning back in his chair, “I’m actually not as surprised as I probably should be.” He never took his eyes off Jules’s face.

Try not to sweat. “You said she’d miss me. You knew all along that she—”

“Needs you?” Simon said bluntly.

Jules turned pink. “I guess so. But...but I won’t let it interfere with my job, Simon. I work for you now, not her. It’s just”—she waved her hand helplessly—“we’re sort of—”

Simon’s lips quirked. “Friends?”

“Yes,” Jules said, a little ashamed. It didn’t feel good to deny what Vivian meant to her. But if she couldn’t explain their relationship to the nanny, she sure as hell wasn’t going to try it with Simon. Not yet.

“I wonder if it’s easier to be friends with Vivian outside of work,” he mused, then smiled ruefully. “You’ll have to let me know. I don’t think I’ll get the chance to find out for myself.”

Jules bit her lip, wishing she could say otherwise. But Simon had wounded Vivian. Worse, he’d caught her unawares, and that was what she’d never forgive. The best Jules could tell Simon was that Vivian had decided he might still be useful, and she was pretty sure she shouldn’t say that at all.

“Anyway, what are you doing tomorrow afternoon?” Simon asked. “I’m attending a little get-together with Jack and Lazaro. Should be fun. Lots of alcohol. Be nice if you could come too.”

“I’d love to.” Jules bit her lip. “But I might already have plans.”

“Oh?” Simon raised both eyebrows. “Anything particularly exciting that justifies missing an opportunity to make new connections?”

Jules squirmed. “It kind of falls under the rubric of, uh, the subject we were just discussing.”

“The sub—” Simon blinked. “Vivian?”

Jules blushed. “She wants to take me out to lunch for my birthday.”

“Your birthday was last week.”

“I remember, seeing as how it was the day I got fired,” Jules said dryly. “It’s kind of a belated thing.”

It was also kind of a fictional thing. Vivian and Jules were meeting for a belated birthday celebration, it was true. But they weren't going out anywhere. Jules had been very clear that her idea of the perfect celebration would involve more private activities.

They'd had a *pre*birthday celebration for Jules already, one that involved their first time having sex. It had also involved an email from the magazine *Modernity* inviting Jules to submit a lifestyle article, courtesy of Vivian's influence.

Jules was still on the fence about that particular gift, to say the least. She'd been relieved when Vivian had said she wanted to give Jules something more traditional this time.

Simon sighed, and his thoughtful expression vanished into a resigned why-do-I-even-bother look. "I'll think of you when I'm sucking down gin fizzes and ogling male models."

The statement was benign enough. Simon's voice had no suspicion or accusation in it.

Jules still had the feeling she wasn't off the hook just yet.

CHAPTER 3

WHEN JULES CALLED THAT NIGHT, Vivian picked up on the first ring. It was a total ego stroke, but Jules knew that if she made any waiting-by-the-phone jokes, the conversation would be over before it could even begin. And she hadn't heard Vivian's voice all day long, so that option wasn't on the table.

You're such a goner, Moretti.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"It went," Vivian said, and hearing her voice made Jules feel weightless, buoyant, and giddy. "I'm glad the day is over."

"What happened?" Jules asked in concern.

"Nothing out of the ordinary." Vivian sighed. "Just another Saturday when I didn't have a second to myself until now."

"Oh." Jules bit her lip. "Should I call back later? Or—" It was almost ten o'clock. "Or just wait till tomorrow?"

"No. Tell me about your day. Is setting up an office as thrilling as it sounds?"

"Oh yeah. I got a lot of work done. I ordered a coffee maker."

"And here I was afraid your talents would be wasted."

Like Jules had been using them to their highest potential at *Du Jour*? "Nope. In full bloom."

"So I see."

And then Jules got an idea. A wonderful, magnificent, potentially impossible idea. "I mean, I am multitalented."

She'd tried to sound innocent—bland, even—but something in her voice must have tipped Vivian off because the moment of silence went on a little too long.

And Vivian sounded suspicious when she replied, "I suppose so."

"I've missed you," Jules said.

Vivian cleared her throat. "Well," she said, "you'll see me tomorrow."

"I haven't seen you since Wednesday."

"I came by your apartment on Thursday."

"Not what I meant."

"Julia..."

"I meant I haven't seen some of my favorite parts of you since Wednesday."

"Julia!" Now Vivian sounded almost scandalized.

Jules grinned. "Well, it's true."

"You'll—like I said. Tomorrow."

"Not soon enough," Jules said.

Vivian's breath caught again.

"Have you missed me too?"

"I, uh..." Vivian said, then admitted, "Yes."

"Any particular parts of me?"

"This conversation took a classy turn."

"Sorry." Jules laughed. "I didn't know phone sex was about class."

"We are not having phone—we're not doing that."

"No?" Jules made sure her disappointment came through loud and clear.

Vivian coughed. "No."

"Even if I do all the talking?"

"No."

Jules felt her face flushing and her nipples going tight beneath her pajama top. "Even if I tell you all the things I want to do to you tomorrow?"

"Who says," Vivian replied, "that you're going to do all the work?"

Jules gasped. She could practically see Vivian smirking on the other end of the line. She rallied quickly. "But it's my birthday party, isn't it?"

"I'm pretty sure we already had that particular kind of party," Vivian said archly.

"That was the pre-birthday party. This is the post."

"Who do you think you are," Vivian asked, "Kim Kardashian?"

Jules ignored her and barged onward. "So, anyway, as birthday girl, I think I should get to do whatever I want. And what *I* want is to do *you*."

“I...” Vivian’s voice trailed off. Then she said, “Yes?”

Jules grinned. The night was looking up. “Yeah. Don’t get me wrong: everything you do to me feels great. But what really gets me going is pinning you down and having my way.”

“Oh?” Vivian said faintly.

“And you like it too, don’t you? I like doing. You like being done to. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” Vivian admitted.

“How’s that make you feel?” Jules said, her face flushing hotter than ever. “All you have to do is just *be*, and you’ll drive me crazy. Does that make you happy?”

“Yes,” Vivian repeated—gulped, really.

“Good.” Jules smiled. “So...you’ll let me, won’t you?”

Vivian’s voice dropped down into a low rasping register as she asked, “Let you what?”

Jules closed her eyes and swallowed hard. “Strip you off, lay you down, and fuck you.”

“Oh,” Vivian said after a few seconds, “well.”

“And take it slowly,” Jules whispered. “No more of that quickie stuff. We’ll take it so slowly. Just the way you like it. I like it too.”

“Y-you do?”

“Oh yes,” Jules said. “Licking you up and down. And whatever else you want. Don’t you know I like doing that?”

“I might have had a clue,” Vivian croaked.

“Will you let me do that?”

Jules could practically see Vivian discarding a dozen clever responses before giving in and saying, “Yes.”

“Good,” Jules breathed. “I can’t wait.” She paused. “Can you wait?”

“I don’t have much choice, do I?” Vivian said in a strained voice.

“Yes, you do. You know you do.”

“Don’t,” Vivian warned.

“Why not?” Jules said. “What would be wrong with...it?”

“With what? If you want me to do it, you can say it.”

“Touch yourself, then,” Jules said, and she blushed at her own audacity, telling Vivian Carlisle to masturbate.

“You’d like that, would you?” Vivian murmured. “Listening to that?”

It was Jules's turn to make a croaking noise. "Yes," she managed.

"That's a shame," Vivian said, "because while I've done my fair share of that, this time it won't satisfy me. I want your touch, Julia, not my own."

Jules's mouth opened, but nothing came out. And yet more nothing. Then she managed a squeak.

"Good night, Julia," Vivian purred. She ended the call.

Jules stared at her phone and then fell back down against her pillow with a wail, cursing the woman she loved with all of her heart.

* * *

Vivian was the most powerful woman in the fashion industry. It made sense that she gave extravagant presents without a second thought. And now that Jules wasn't working for her, she'd clearly decided it was fine to do just that.

Jules tried not to feel self-conscious about opening three beautifully wrapped boxes that contained a Bottega Veneta bag, Stella McCartney ankle boots, and a bottle of Amouage perfume. Put together, they amounted to almost two months of her new salary.

She spritzed the perfume on her wrist. She smelled strong notes of incense and amber. Not something she'd have bought for herself—hefty price tag aside—but it was already growing on her. A new perfume was a risky gift. Of course Vivian had gone for it.

Jules sniffed her wrist. "This is really nice. How did you know I'd like it?"

Vivian smiled at her. They were on the sofa in the living room, Vivian with one bare foot tucked beneath her, Jules with a lapful of wrapping paper. "It suits you, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. I wouldn't have thought so. It's...heavier than what I usually wear." Jules sniffed again.

"Like everything in fashion, perfume either has intelligence or it doesn't. You deserve something smarter than a one-note floral. Give me your arm." Vivian held out a commanding hand.

Jules obeyed, extending her arm so Vivian could smell her wrist. At the brush of Vivian's nose on her skin—and seconds later her mouth—Jules got goose bumps. As Vivian had no doubt intended.

"I'm starting to think you have an agenda," she breathed.

“See? It’s making you more intelligent already.” Vivian kissed her wrist again.

“Ha, ha.” Jules used the opportunity to stroke Vivian’s cheek, which turned pink beneath her touch.

Vivian’s breath caught. “Behave yourself.”

“Me?” Jules withdrew her hand from Vivian’s grasp and put the stopper back on the perfume bottle. “I’m just packing up all these lovely presents.”

Vivian cleared her throat. “There might be one more.”

Jules looked at her quickly and saw that her cheeks were even pinker.

“*Really*,” she said.

Vivian nodded.

Hell yeah. Whatever this was, Jules was one hundred percent here for it. “Gee, why isn’t it here with all the other stuff?”

“You’re infuriating,” Vivian said very calmly for someone blushing.

“Glad to hear it,” Jules said, aroused and more than a bit curious. It had to be naughty underwear, but what would Vivian have bought for her? If she knew what Jules would like perfume-wise, did she have similar insight into teddies and chemises?

Whatever she’d bought, she knew Jules would want to wear it for her. That was beyond question. Jules was already anticipating putting on something skimpy and filmy, only to take it off again slowly before Vivian’s burning gaze.

Then Vivian shifted on the sofa, looking uncomfortable. “Nnngh.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Vivian said, rising to her feet, “but I think I’d better go upstairs.” Now her pink cheeks didn’t so much suggest arousal as embarrassment. “Just give me a few minutes and then feel free to come on up.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll be up soon,” Jules said, delicately not pressing for further information. Vivian had once said that pregnancy was a degrading experience. She wouldn’t appreciate being asked about the particulars of whatever symptoms degraded her at any given moment.

“Fine,” Vivian said and headed quickly out of the room.

While she waited, Jules looked at the Amouage bottle she’d placed back in its velvet-lined box. It was a big bottle, not the usual hope-you-like-it smaller size. Vivian had known it would suit Jules.

Unspoken was: *I know you well enough for that.*

A shiver ran up and down Jules's spine. To be known, to be seen by Vivian was both thrilling and scary. What if Vivian saw something Jules wasn't yet ready for? Like how deeply she'd fallen?

One day at a time. Jules took a deep breath and let it go. *That's what relationships are about, right?*

It had been long enough. Jules headed upstairs.

She knocked on Vivian's door, but there was no answer. Anxiety of a different kind curled in her stomach. Was Vivian okay?

Jules dared to open the bedroom door uninvited. From the doorway, she called, "Vivian?"

"I'll be out in a moment," Vivian called back from behind her bathroom door. "You can come in."

Relieved that Vivian hadn't passed out or anything, Jules shut the door behind her and sat on the gigantic bed, trying not to bounce up and down in anticipation of naughty underwear and stripteases. Vivian apparently wasn't feeling well, after all. And that was the most important thing. Jules had to be considerate and thoughtful. Because Vivian might not even feel like—

Vivian opened the door and emerged from the bathroom in a rustle of champagne-colored silk and gold lace.

She was wearing the gown she'd worn on New Year's Eve. The night Jules had realized how far she'd fallen for Vivian when faced with all of her beauty and grace.

Jules's eyes widened. Her heart stopped. She couldn't breathe. Her skin heated as if with a fever. It was official: Vivian Carlisle was a medical condition.

Vivian folded her hands placidly and cocked her head to the side, her eyes bright with amusement, which was par for the course whenever Jules looked like a drooling idiot. But how else was Jules supposed to look with Vivian standing right in front of her and wearing...*that?*

The gown fit her differently now, of course. The waist of the dress looked tighter, for one thing. And her breasts were bigger than they'd been on New Year's. And she obviously wasn't wearing any kind of bra. And *oh, oh, oh.*

"Um, uh," Jules said and held out both her hands, frantically beckoning Vivian to the bed. Her knees might not hold her up if she tried to stand.

Vivian chuckled and glided forward.

“You’ve already worn your New Year’s outfit for me,” she said. “Turnabout’s fair play.”

This was turnabout with interest. Jules’s head spun as she remembered how Vivian had moved in that dress on New Year’s Eve. How everyone in the ballroom had stared at her. And how Jules had been so completely certain that she’d never, ever be allowed to touch so much as Vivian’s hand.

She stood up. And without a word, she took Vivian’s face in her hands and kissed her very slowly, very gently, as if it were their first kiss all over again.

Vivian grabbed her shoulders and pressed closer but seemed content to let Jules take her time with their kisses. Days. It had been days since they’d—

“You have quite a few fantasies to fulfill.” Vivian breathed the words against her mouth.

She’d have to get more specific. Jules had more than *quite a few* fantasies. “I-I do?”

“Of course. The fantasies you told me about with me wearing this dress.”

Jules bent down to kiss Vivian’s throat. Oh Jesus, she was wearing the same perfume. She’d even tousled her short hair the same way. Had she done it on purpose, or was Vivian just being *Vivian*, uncannily able to do the perfect thing with the perfect outfit every single time?

“What fantasies were those? Tell me.” Jules nipped Vivian’s throat.

Vivian hissed.

“Tell me,” Jules repeated.

“Let me see.” Vivian tilted her head to the side and shivered when Jules cupped her breast. “Oh. You said...something about taking me on my back in the coatroom.”

Jules rubbed her thumb, and Vivian’s nipple went pebble hard.

“*Oh*,” Vivian moaned.

“That was actually your fantasy,” Jules pointed out, her head starting to spin. She slid her free hand down Vivian’s back and stroked her ass.

Vivian shuddered again.

“You had another one.” Jules kissed Vivian’s shoulder. “Remember?”

“I—”

“You fantasized about me pushing you down on the bed while you were still wearing the dress and still in your shoes.” Jules kissed her again, deeper this time, until they were both panting. “And about how wet you’d be.”

She bit gently at the side of Vivian’s throat.

Vivian groaned, sliding her hands up and down Jules’s back. Jules felt her getting weak in the knees, felt her breath becoming uneven, and recognized the other signs that meant Vivian was losing the ability to do anything but let Jules fuck her.

“Are you wet yet?” Jules whispered.

“Julia,” Vivian said, then whimpered, “*Julia*,” when Jules began to kiss downward along the edge of her bodice, nuzzling at the rise of her breasts.

Jules bit her nipple through the silk and lace, and Vivian gasped, scrabbling at Jules’s back with her fingernails and rubbing her nose in Jules’s hair.

With shaking knees, Jules sat back down on the edge of the bed. When Vivian made to join her, Jules held her still so that she could lean forward and bury her face in Vivian’s breasts again, could reach around and cup her ass.

Vivian swayed forward even as her head fell back, and she had to put her hands on Jules’s shoulders for balance.

“You said you’d beg me to do whatever I wanted to you,” Jules said. She stroked up until she found the gown’s zipper between Vivian’s shoulder blades and carefully slid it down. The hiss of the zipper, almost indecent by itself, made her feel faint.

She didn’t want Vivian to take the dress off yet, though, so she left the zipper at half-mast and tugged at one of the gown’s spaghetti straps. “Here, let’s...”

Vivian wriggled, shrugged, and eased the strap down until she’d slipped her arm through it and exposed one of her breasts, flushed pink and with its nipple tight and hard.

Jules leaned in and kissed and licked and pulled with her teeth until Vivian said, “Please,” and “please,” and “*oh*.”

Dizzy with heat, Jules paused just long enough to pull off her own shirt before tugging Vivian down to the bed. She laid her flat and leaned down, kissing her again, then again, over and over. She reached beneath the skirt—Vivian trembled eagerly—to find the soft, smooth skin she loved,

then trailed her fingers higher up until she realized Vivian wasn't wearing any underwear at all.

"Oh," Jules whispered. She moved her fingers. "Yeah, you're wet."

Vivian trembled, looking up at Jules with dazed eyes.

Jules moved her fingers down and away to stroke the inside of Vivian's thigh.

"Oh no, please."

"Please what?" Jules whispered, nibbling her throat again.

"Please," Vivian managed. She arched her hips. "I need, I need—"

"Need what?" Jules remembered Vivian being high-handed on the phone last night. She smiled against her skin. "My mouth? You want my mouth on you?" She stroked Vivian's thigh again. "Want me to eat you right up?"

"God!" Vivian gasped and squeezed her eyes shut.

Jules pinched her nipple.

"Oh! Hurry... Don't make me wait..."

"It's my birthday party," Jules whispered, and something in her voice—maybe the promise of torment—made Vivian moan and tremble again. "And I get to do what I want."

"Oh no," Vivian whimpered, but it was the opposite of a protest.

"And I want it slow. Nice and slow."

"No," Vivian repeated, which might have worked better if her nipples hadn't gone even harder and if Jules hadn't felt her moisture beginning to drip down the inside of her thigh. "I need—"

"I've got what you need."

Jules proved it, making love to Vivian slowly, peeling the gown off her inch by inch. And the more Vivian begged for Jules to do it faster and harder, the more thrilled she was when Jules refused to comply.

By the time they were both naked, the gown was probably ruined and Vivian had lost the ability to speak in recognizable words.

Jules finally gave in to her own desires and stopped the torture. She fingered Vivian so slowly, so gently, that when Vivian began to shudder and sob and clench all around Jules's fingers, it seemed to echo inside Jules as well.

Vivian moaned when she was done and melted back against the mattress, trembling. The sight of her flushed and delighted made Jules's vision swim.

“Jesus *Christ*, Julia.”

Jules, sticky and breathless and so turned on that she might actually die, tried to come up with something to say. All she managed was, “I love doing this. I—”

Vivian opened her glassy eyes and looked at her. Before Jules could say anything else—before she could admit to loving Vivian even more than sex—Vivian stroked her own hand up Jules’s thigh.

To her own surprise, Jules gasped. “No. Not yet.”

Vivian blinked and said hoarsely, “No?”

“Not yet,” Jules repeated and swallowed hard. There was something else she wanted even more. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Vivian blinked again. “What?” And then, when Jules bent her head and began lapping hungrily between her legs, she cried out.

“Can’t get enough of you.” Jules’s cheeks, hair, and even her ears were getting sticky. She kissed, licked, sucked, all while Vivian writhed and grabbed at the pillows, too breathless now to beg or plead. “Wish I could do this to you all the time.”

“Please,” Vivian wailed and came again with a cry that ended on a sob. Her thighs quivered.

Jules pulled away, licking her lips, and waited for Vivian to pry her eyes open.

After a moment, she did, and her breathing began to slow again. Vivian trembled, covered her eyes with her hand, uncovered them again, and swallowed hard. “Um-m.” Then she managed to say, “Come here.”

Jules did, lying down next to her, looking into her eyes. *Get it under control*, she ordered herself. *Make the moment last*.

Vivian, of course, was interested in doing no such thing. Instead, she touched Jules’s chin, urged her in for a kiss, and tasted herself on Jules’s lips.

“Well,” she said throatily when they parted.

Her voice made Jules shiver; Vivian was always at her most mischievous when she’d just been sated and was ready to turn the tables.

“Enjoyed that, did you?” Vivian asked.

Jules might have been able to come up with something smart-assed had Vivian not trailed her fingertips up the inside of Jules’s thigh. So she just gasped, “Yeah.”

“Did you get what you wanted?” Vivian’s eyes glinted. “Having your way with me? Wasn’t that how you put it? Did you get to do that?”

She slid her middle finger inside Jules, who almost came on the spot.

Vivian’s lips curved into a pleased little smile. “Well, did you?”

“You tell me,” Jules panted. “You were there, weren’t you?”

Vivian pressed her thumb against Jules’s clit.

Jules whimpered. “Oh God.”

“Yes,” Vivian murmured. “I was there.”

“A couple of times.” Jules grinned, suddenly elated. She loved Vivian so much in that moment that it hurt. It actually took the edge off her arousal for a second. She beamed, combed her sweaty hair off her forehead, and kissed Vivian’s nose.

Vivian, of course, looked surprised. Then her eyes narrowed in clear suspicion, as if wondering what Jules had up her sleeve this time.

Absolutely nothing, as it happened. Jules chuckled. “Are you going to get me off or what?”

“You do laugh at the strangest times,” Vivian said and took her revenge by sliding another finger inside Jules.

Jules stopped giggling at once and bit her lip too slowly to stifle a moan.

It was Vivian’s turn to chuckle. “So what would get you off?”

Jules decided to go for it. She kissed Vivian’s forehead, then her temple, and murmured, “Last night, you said you’ve touched yourself. More than once.”

Vivian hissed, and her fingers went still.

“Tell me what you think about.” Jules cupped Vivian’s breast again, plucking at her nipple. “Tell me.”

Vivian could have played with her a little more. Taunted her a little more. She didn’t. Just whispered, “You.”

“Jesus.” Jules rested her forehead against Vivian’s.

Vivian’s breath puffed against Jules’s lips as she said, “Would you like to hear about the first time I did it?”

“Yes,” Jules whimpered but forestalled Vivian by kissing her because she couldn’t help herself.

When she pulled away again, Vivian flexed her fingers.

Jules trembled. And trembled harder when Vivian began to whisper.

“When you kissed my cheek.” Her voice, that purr, raced up and down Jules’s every nerve. “The first night we had dinner here.”

“Oh, my God.” Jules gasped.

“I was so surprised at my reaction.” Vivian turned her head and kissed Jules’s throat. “That night, I tried to go to sleep.” She bit down lightly. “I couldn’t.”

“Vivian.” Jules dug her nails into her own palms as she tried not to come, her mind on fire. “Please.”

“I thought about New Year’s Eve. How much you wanted me. And how soft your mouth was.” Vivian licked where she’d bitten and began to thrust with her fingers.

Jules’s hips arched forward helplessly.

“And I wondered what I would have done if you hadn’t gone home. If you’d come into the room and slipped into bed with me and began to kiss me, touch me...”

“Jesus,” Jules sobbed again, grinding down onto Vivian’s fingers.

“What would I do?” Vivian murmured. “Would I be angry? Would I tell you to leave? Or would I...” She parted her legs.

Jules groaned and buried her face in the soft, salty curve of Vivian’s throat.

“I wondered. And I did this. Exactly this.” Vivian began to brush her thumb over Jules’s clit again—very, very lightly. “Exactly what I’m doing to you now. Which is when I discovered that I do like it slow. And gentle.”

“Going to come,” Jules panted against her skin. “Going to...going...”

“But you like it rougher,” Vivian said, “don’t you?” And she pressed down firmly with her thumb.

“Christ!” Jules wailed into Vivian’s shoulder and thrust her hips once, twice before freezing in place because she couldn’t move anymore. Pleasure locked up her muscles, and Vivian didn’t stop moving her thumb, and...

She almost fainted. The world definitely got blurry and gray, and she couldn’t exactly remember the seconds between Vivian lifting her thumb away and sliding her fingers out.

“I think,” Vivian said—gasped, rather—“that we made an even bigger mess than before you cleaned me up.”

“Did...did you really do that? Touch yourself? After I kissed you?” Or had Vivian just thought Jules would like the idea?

“Oh yes,” Vivian said. “I really did.”

“Wow.” Jules could almost hear Vivian rolling her eyes at that. She nestled in close and waited to get control of her own mind back.

Yeah. Fat chance of that now.

“Thought you didn’t like talking dirty,” she added and, for want of something better to do with her hands, stroked Vivian’s gently rounded belly.

Vivian harrumphed but didn’t sound truly upset as she said, “Many of my former rules don’t seem to apply to you. That’s the least of them.”

Jules grinned as her delight returned.

“Besides,” Vivian added, “apparently I’m good at it.”

“Oh yeah,” Jules said fervently.

“Yes,” Vivian said, having needed no affirmation. “I like doing things I’m good at.”

“You don’t say.” Jules propped herself up on one elbow and squinted at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost three.

As if reading her mind, Vivian rubbed her thumb idly against Jules’s arm. “I have to leave for the MOMA exhibit premiere at five.”

That meant Vivian’s personal stylist would arrive at four on the dot. Jules held back a sigh as she combed her fingertips through Vivian’s sweaty hair. “I remember. Hank Willis Thomas, right?”

“Yes. His mixed-media collection. It should be stunning. I was thinking Simon could reach out to...”

Silence fell so hard that Jules felt its weight land on her shoulders. She bit her lip. “Tomorrow is his last day, right?”

“We’re not talking about that.” All of the post-sex relaxation had drained from Vivian’s body, leaving her as tense as a pulled wire against Jules. “It was just a slip of the tongue. Put it down to pregnancy brain.”

“Okay.”

“I can’t believe—” Vivian began, then swallowed and repeated, “We’re not talking about it.” She stared up at the ceiling and refused to turn her head a single degree in Jules’s direction.

Her anger made sense. Simon had been at Vivian’s side for years, always faithful, always steady, always there. Always competent. He’d outlasted all of her husbands. He’d weathered her moods and catered to her whims and—from what Jules had gathered—very, very occasionally called her on

her bullshit. He'd been the closest thing she had to a real friend. And he'd had enough.

Jules couldn't blame him, really. Since he'd been at *Du Jour* for so long, he knew how easily Vivian discarded people when they couldn't get the job done. Jules had seen the same thing enough times that it had made her sure Vivian was going to throw her to the curb too. So Simon hadn't wanted to take the risk that Vivian's favor would last. The prospect of striking out on his own had been much more attractive.

No, Jules couldn't blame Simon for wanting out. But now, looking at Vivian's blank face and tightly pressed lips, Jules could hate him a little for it. Just a little.

She wondered if Vivian was actually about to cry. She wasn't sure she'd be able to handle that because what did you do when Vivian Carlisle wept? Maybe take shelter since it must be a sign of the end-times.

But Vivian didn't weep. She just swallowed hard and didn't say anything else.

There had to be something Jules could say. But before she could think of it, something else saved her.

Vivian gasped and pressed a hand to her belly. "Ah!"

A rush of panic, cold and immediate. Jules tried to stay calm in the face of it. "What's the matter?"

"She kicked." Vivian grunted as if that wasn't the most mind-blowing thing to come out of her mouth all day.

Jules stared at her. Then she stared at Vivian's belly as she ran the calculations. Just past five months. Yeah, it was time for that. "Can I...?"

Vivian took Jules's hand in her own and placed it over her belly.

Jules held her breath. For a moment, she was afraid the show was over, but then she felt it: a faint, unmistakable thump against her palm.

"Wow," she breathed. "Is this the first time it's happened?"

"It happened last night," Vivian admitted. "I was going to tell you earlier, but you distracted me."

Jules rubbed a gentle thumb against Vivian's belly. "What does it feel like?"

"Hard to describe. Not really like a kick. It's almost like a...twitch." For the briefest of moments, anxiety crossed Vivian's face. "That's normal, right?"

A minute later, they were both looking at Jules's phone as Jules scrolled through WebMD.com.

"Normal," Jules said in relief. "Looks like it can feel like all kinds of things."

Vivian exhaled. "Good."

"We should still check in with Dr. Viswanathan, though. Keep her updated." Sita Viswanathan was Vivian's obstetrician.

"And what cover story are we giving her?" Vivian asked dryly.

Jules gave her a quick look, but the question seemed rhetorical as Vivian continued. "I hope she doesn't get on me again about my diet. I can't be expected to cut out red meat *entirely*. Seriously, I think..."

It went in one ear and out the other. Jules tried to listen to Vivian, but it was a lot easier to worry about the future and everything it might bring—or worse, what it might not bring.

She rested her hand against Vivian's belly again. *One day at a time*, she reminded herself. *One day at a time*.

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ABOVE ALL THINGS

BY ROSLYN SINCLAIR

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