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OFF-CAMPUS

ELLE KENNEDY



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Originally self-published in 2016 by Elle Kennedy, Inc.
This updated version published in the US in 2021 by Bloom Books,
An imprint of Sourcebooks
Published in Great Britain in 2023 by Piatkus

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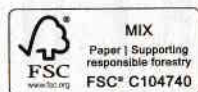
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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-349-44087-3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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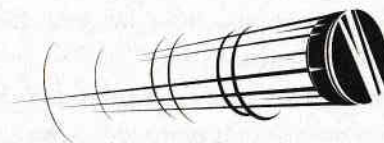


Piatkus
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

The authorised representative
in the EEA is
Hachette Ireland
8 Castlecourt Centre
Dublin 15, D15 XTP3, Ireland
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CHAPTER 1

OCTOBER SABRINA

“CRAP. CRAP. CRAP. CRAAAAAAP. WHERE ARE MY KEYS?”

The clock in the narrow hallway tells me I have fifty-two minutes to make a sixty-eight-minute drive if I want to get to the party on time.

I check my purse again, but the keys aren't there. I run through the various locations. Dresser? No. Bathroom? Was just there. Kitchen? Maybe—

I'm about to pivot when I hear a jingle of metal behind me.

“You looking for these?”

Contempt lodges in my throat as I turn around and step into a living room so small that the five pieces of dated furniture—two tables, one love seat, one sofa, and one chair—are squashed together like sardines in a can. The lump of flesh on the couch waves my keys in the air. At my sigh of irritation, he grins and shoves them under his sweatpants-covered ass.

“Come and get 'em.”

I drag a frustrated hand down my flat-ironed hair before stalking over to my stepfather. “Give me my keys,” I demand.

Ray leers in return. “Da-amn, you look hot tonight. You've turned into a real babe, Rina. You and me should get it on.”

I ignore the meaty hand that's falling to his crotch. I've never known a man so desperate to touch his own junk. He makes Homer Simpson look like a gentleman.

"You and I don't exist to each other. So don't look at me, and *don't* call me Rina." Ray's the only person who ever calls me that, and I fucking hate it. "Now give me my keys."

"I told you—come and get 'em."

With gritted teeth, I shove my hand under his ass and root around for my keys. Ray grunts and squirms like the disgusting piece of shit he is until my hand connects with metal.

I drag the keys free and spin back to the doorway.

"What's the big deal?" he mocks after me. "It's not like we're related."

I stop and use thirty seconds of my precious time to stare at him in disbelief. "You're my stepfather. You married my mother. And"—I swallow a rush of bile—"and you're sleeping with Nana now. So, no, it's not about whether you and I are related. It's because you're the grossest person on the planet and you belong in prison."

His hazel eyes darken. "Watch your mouth, missy, or one of these days you'll come home and the doors will be locked."

Whatever. "I pay for a third of the rent here," I remind him.

"Well, maybe you'll be in charge of more."

He turns back to the television, and I spend another valuable thirty seconds fantasizing about bashing his head in with my purse. Worth it.

In the kitchen, Nana is sitting at the table, smoking a cigarette and reading an issue of *People*. "Did you see this?" she exclaims. "Kim K is nude again."

"Goodie for her." I grab my jacket off the back of the chair and head for the kitchen door.

I've found that it's safer to leave the house through the back. There are usually street punks congregating on the stoops of the narrow

townhouses on our less-than-affluent street in this less-than-affluent part of Southie. Besides, our carport is behind the house.

"Heard Rachel Berkovich got knocked up," Nana remarks. "She should've aborted it, but I guess it's against their religion."

I clench my teeth again and turn to face my grandmother. As usual, she's wearing a ratty robe and fuzzy pink slippers, but her dyed-blond hair is teased to perfection and her face is fully made up even though she rarely goes out.

"She's Jewish, Nana. I don't think it's against her religion, but even if it is, that's her choice."

"Probably wants those extra food stamps," Nana concludes, blowing a long stream of smoke in my direction. Shit. I hope I don't smell like an ashtray by the time I get to Hastings.

"I'm guessing that isn't the reason Rachel's keeping the baby." One hand on the door, I shift restlessly, waiting for an opening to tell Nana goodbye.

"Your mama thought about aborting you."

And there it is. "Okay, that's enough," I mutter. "I'm going to Hastings. I'll be back tonight."

Her head jerks up from the magazine and her eyes narrow as she takes in my black knit skirt, black short-sleeved sweater with a scoop neck, and three-inch heels. I can see the words forming in her mind before they even leave her mouth.

"You're looking uppity. Going off to that fancy college of yours? You got classes on Saturday night?"

"It's a cocktail party," I answer grudgingly.

"Ooh, cocktail, schmocktail. Hope your lips don't get chapped kissing all the ass down there."

"Yeah, thanks, Nana." I wrench open the back door, forcing myself to add, "Love you."

"Love you too, baby girl."

She does love me, but sometimes that love is so tainted, I don't know if it's hurting me or helping me.

I don't make the drive to the small town of Hastings in fifty-two minutes *or* sixty-eight minutes. Instead, it takes me an entire hour and a half because the roads are so damn bad. Another five minutes pass before I can find a parking space, and by the time I reach Professor Gibson's house, I'm tenser than a piano wire—and feeling about as fragile.

"Hi, Mr. Gibson. I'm so sorry I'm late," I tell the bespectacled man at the door.

Professor Gibson's husband gives me a soft smile. "Don't worry about it, Sabrina. The weather is terrible. Let me take your coat." He holds out a hand and waits patiently while I struggle out of my wool jacket.

Professor Gibson arrives as her husband is hanging my cheap coat among all the expensive ones in the closet. It looks as out of place as I do. I shove aside the feelings of inadequacy and summon up a bright smile.

"Sabrina!" Professor Gibson calls out gaily. Her commanding presence jerks me to attention. "I'm so glad you arrived in one piece. Is it snowing yet?"

"No, just rain."

She grimaces and takes my arm. "Even worse. I hope you don't plan on driving back to the city tonight. The roads will be one sheet of ice."

Since I have to work in the morning, I'll be making that trek regardless of the road conditions, but I don't want Prof to worry, so I smile reassuringly. "I'll be fine. Is she still here?"

The professor squeezes my forearm. "She is, and she's dying to meet you."

Awesome. I take my first full breath since I got here and allow myself to be led across the room toward a short, gray-haired woman dressed in a boxy pastel suitcoat over a pair of black pants. The outfit is rather blah, but the diamonds sparkling in her ears are larger than my thumb. Also? She seems too genial for

a professor of the law. I always envisioned them as dour, serious creatures. Like me.

"Amelia, let me introduce you to Sabrina James. She's the student I've been telling you about. At the top of her class, holds down two jobs, and managed a 177 on her LSATs." Professor Gibson turns to me. "Sabrina, Amelia Fromm, constitutional scholar extraordinaire."

"So nice to meet you," I say, holding out my hand and praying to God it feels dry and not damp. I practiced shaking my own hand for an hour leading up to this.

Amelia grips me lightly before stepping back. "Italian mother, Jewish grandfather, hence the odd combination of names. James is Scottish—is that where your family is from?" Her bright eyes sweep over me, and I resist the urge to fidget with my cheap Target clothing.

"I couldn't say, ma'am." My family comes from the gutter. Scotland seems far too nice and regal to be our homeland.

She waves a hand. "It's not important. I dabble in genealogy on the side. So, you've applied to Harvard? That's what Kelly has told me."

Kelly? Do I know a Kelly?

"She means me, dear," Professor Gibson says with a gentle laugh. I blush. "Yes, sorry. I think of you as Prof."

"So formal, Kelly!" Professor Fromm accuses. "Sabrina, where else have you applied?"

"Boston College, Suffolk, and Yale, but Harvard is my dream."

Amelia raises an eyebrow at my list of tier two and three Boston schools.

Professor Gibson jumps to my defense. "She wants to stay close to home. And obviously she belongs at someplace better than Yale."

The two professors share a contemptuous sniff. Prof was a Harvard grad, and apparently once a Harvard grad, always an anti-Yale person.

"From all that Kelly has shared, it sounds like Harvard would be honored to have you."

"It would be my honor to be a Harvard student, ma'am."

"Acceptance letters are being mailed out soon." Her eyes twinkle with mischief. "I'll be sure to put in a good word."

Amelia bestows another smile, and I nearly faint in happy relief. I wasn't just blowing smoke up her ass. Harvard really is my dream.

"Thank you," I manage to croak out.

Professor Gibson points me toward the food. "Why don't you get something to eat? Amelia, I want to talk to you about that position paper I heard was coming out of Brown. Did you have a chance to look at it?"

The two turn away, diving deep into a discussion about intersectionality of Black feminism and race theory, a topic that Professor Gibson is an expert in.

I wander over to the refreshment table, which is draped in white and loaded with cheese, crackers, and fruit. Two of my closest friends—Hope Matthews and Carin Thompson—are already standing there. They're the two most beautiful, smartest angels in the world.

I rush over to them and nearly collapse in their arms.

"So? How'd it go?" Hope asks impatiently.

"Good, I think. She said that it sounded like Harvard would be honored to have me and that the first wave of acceptance letters is going out soon."

I grab a plate and start loading it up, wishing the pieces of cheese were bigger. I'm so hungry I could eat an entire block. All day I'd been sick with anticipation because of this meeting, and now that it's over, I want to fall face-first into the food table.

"Oh, you are so in," declares Carin.

The three of us are advisees of Professor Gibson, who's a big believer in helping young women along. There are other networking organizations on campus, but her influence is solely geared toward the advancement of women, and I couldn't be more grateful.

Tonight's cocktail party is designed for her students to meet

with faculty members of the most competitive graduate programs in the nation. Hope is angling for a place at Harvard Med while Carin is headed for MIT.

Yep, it's a sea of estrogen inside Professor Gibson's house. Other than her husband, only a couple of other men are present. I'm really going to miss this place after I graduate. It's been a home away from home.

"Fingers crossed," I say in response to Carin. "If I don't get into Harvard, then it's BC or Suffolk." Which would be fine, but Harvard virtually guarantees me a shot at the job I want after graduation—a position at one of the nation's top law firms, or what everyone calls BigLaw.

"You'll get in," Hope says confidently. "And hopefully once you get that acceptance letter, you'll stop killing yourself, because Lord, B, you look tense."

I roll my head around my neck stiffly. Yeah, I *am* tense. "I know. My schedule is brutal these days. I went to bed at two this morning because the girl who was supposed to close at Boots & Chutes bugged out and left me to close, and then I was up at four to sort mail. I got home around noon, crashed, and almost overslept."

"You're still working both jobs?" Carin flips her red hair out of her face. "You said you were going to quit the waitressing gig."

"I can't yet. Professor Gibson said that they don't want us working our first year of law school. The only way I can swing that is to have enough for food and rent saved up before September."

Carin makes a sympathetic noise. "I hear you. My parents are taking out a loan so big, I might be able to afford a small country with it."

"I wish you'd move in with us," Hope says plaintively.

"Really? I had no idea," I joke. "You've only said it twice a day since the semester started."

She wrinkles her cute nose at me. "You'd *love* this place my dad rented for us. It's got floor-to-ceiling windows and it's right on

the subway line. Public transportation.” She waggles her eyebrows enticingly.

“It’s too expensive, H.”

“You know I’d cover the difference—or my parents would,” she corrects herself. The girl’s family has more money than an oil tycoon, but you’d never know it from talking to her. Hope’s as down to earth as they come.

“I know,” I say between gulping down bites of mini sausages. “But I’d feel guilty and then guilt would turn into resentment and then we wouldn’t be friends anymore and not being your friend would suck.”

She shakes her head at me. “If, at some point, your stubborn pride allows you to ask for help, I’m here.”

“*We’re* here,” Carin interjects.

“See?” I wave my fork between the two of them. “This is why I can’t live with you guys. You mean too much to me. Besides, this is working for me. I’ve got nearly ten months to save up before classes start next fall. I’ve got this.”

“At least come for a drink with us after this thing is over,” Carin begs.

“I have to drive home.” I make a face. “I’m scheduled to go in and sort packages tomorrow.”

“On a Sunday?” Hope demands.

“Time and a half. I couldn’t turn it down. Actually, I should probably take off soon.” I lay my plate on the table and try to catch a glimpse of what’s going on beyond the huge bay window. All I see is darkness and streaks of rain on the glass. “Sooner I’m on the road, the better.”

“Not in this weather you’re not.” Professor Gibson appears at my elbow with a glass of wine. “The weather advisory is for sheets of glass—temperature’s dropping and the rain is turning into ice.”

One look at my adviser’s face and I know I have to concede. So I do, but with great reluctance.

“All right,” I say, “but I do this under protest. And you.” I tip my fork in Carin’s direction. “You better have ice cream in the freezer in case I have to crash with you, otherwise I’m going to be really mad.”

All three of them laugh. Professor Gibson wanders off, leaving us to network as best as three college seniors can. After an hour of mingling, Hope, Carin, and I grab our coats.

“Where are we going?” I ask the girls.

“D’Andre is at Malone’s and I said I’d meet him there,” Hope tells me. “It’s like a two-minute drive, so we should be fine.”

“Really? Malone’s? That’s a hockey bar,” I whine. “What’s D’Andre doing there?”

“Drinking and waiting for me. Besides, you need to get laid and athletes are your favorite type.”

Carin snorts. “Her only type.”

“Hey, I have a very good reason for preferring athletes,” I argue.

“I know. We’ve heard it.” She rolls her eyes. “If you want a stats question answered, go to the math geeks. If you want a physical need met, go to an athlete. Bodies are the tools of an elite athlete. They take care of it, know how to push its limits, yada yada.” Carin makes a yapping gesture with her left hand.

I flick up my middle finger.

“But sex with someone you like is so much better.” This comes from Hope, who’s been with D’Andre, her football player boyfriend, since freshman year.

“I like them,” I protest. “...In bed.”

We share a giggle over that, until Carin brings up a guy who brought down the average.

“Do you remember Ten-Second Greg, though?”

I shudder. “First, thank you very little for bringing that bad memory up, and second, I’m not saying there aren’t duds. Just that the odds are better with an athlete.”

“And the hockey players are duds?” Carin asks.

I shrug. "I wouldn't know. I didn't ax them from my list of potentials because of their performance in the sack, but because they're hyper-privileged jerks who get special favors from the pros."

"Sabrina, girl, you got to let that go," Hope urges.

"Nope. Hockey players don't make the cut."

"God, but look at what you're missing out on." Carin licks her lips with exaggerated lasciviousness. "That one guy on the team with the beard? I want to know what that feels like. Beards are on my bucket list."

"Go on, then. My boycott against hockey players just means more for you."

"I'm on board with this, but..." She smirks. "Need I remind you that you hooked up with the man-slut Di Laurentis?"

Ugh. That's a reminder I *never* need to hear.

"First, I was totally drunk," I grumble. "Second, that was sophomore year. And third, he's the reason I've sworn off hockey players."

Even though Briar University has a championship-winning football team, it's known as a hockey college. The guys who wear skates are treated like gods. Case in point: Dean Heyward-Di Laurentis. He's a poli-sci major like me, so we've had several classes together, including statistics in our sophomore year. That course was hard as fuck. Everyone struggled.

Everyone but Dean, who was screwing the TA.

And—shocker!—she gave him an A, which he absolutely did *not* deserve. I know this for a fact, because we were paired together for the final assignment, and I saw the garbage he turned in.

When I found out he aced it, I wanted to chop his dick off. It was so unfair. I worked my butt off in that course. Hell, I work my butt off for everything. My every accomplishment is stained with my blood, sweat, and tears. Meanwhile, some asshole gets the world handed to him on a platter? Fuck. That.

"She's getting mad again," Hope stage-whispers to Carin.

"She's thinking about how Di Laurentis got an A in that one class," Carin shout-whispers back. "She really does need to get laid. How long has it been?"

I start to flip her off again when it occurs to me that I can't remember my last hookup.

"There was, um, Meyer? The lacrosse guy. That was in September. And after that was Beau..." I brighten up. "Ha! See? It's only been a little over a month. Hardly a national emergency."

"Girl, someone with your schedule isn't allowed to go a *month* without sex," Hope counters. "You're a walking ball of stress, which means you need a good fucking at least...daily," she decides.

"Every other day," Carin argues. "Give her lady garden some time to rest."

Hope nods. "Fine. But no rest for the pussy tonight—"

I snort in laughter.

"You hear that, B? You've been fed, you had an afternoon nap, and now you need some sexy times," Carin declares.

"But Malone's?" I repeat warily. "We just established that the place is crawling with hockey players."

"Not exclusively. I bet Beau is there. Want me to ask D'Andre?" Hope holds up her phone, but I shake my head.

"Beau's too much of a time commitment. Like he wanted to talk during sex. I want to do the deed and leave."

"Oooh, talking! Scary."

"Shut it."

"Make me." Hope tosses her head, her long braids smacking against my coat, and then exits Professor Gibson's house.

Carin shrugs and follows her, and after a second of hesitation, I do too. Our coats are drenched by the time we reach Hope's car, but we have our hoods on, so our hair survives the downpour.

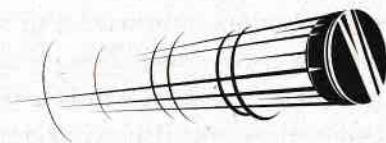
I'm really not in the mood to chat up any guys tonight, but I can't deny that my friends are right. I've been plagued with tension for weeks, and these past few days I've definitely been feeling the...

itch. The kind of itch that can only be scratched with a hard, ripped body and a hopefully above average-sized cock.

Except I'm extremely selective about who I hook up with, and just as I'd feared, Malone's is thick with hockey players when the girls and I stride inside five minutes later.

But hey, if that's the hand I've been dealt, then I guess there's no harm in playing it and seeing what happens.

Still, I have zero expectations as I follow my friends to the bar counter.



CHAPTER 2

TUCKER

"STAY AWAY FROM THAT ONE, KID. SHE'S TOXIC."

Dean is dispensing his (usually misguided) wisdom to our freshman left wing, Hunter Davenport, as I walk into Malone's out of the pouring rain.

The roads are shit, and I don't particularly want to be here tonight, but Dean insisted that we needed to party. He'd been restlessly pacing our townhouse all day, grumpy as hell and obviously upset, but when I questioned him about it, he shrugged and said he was feeling antsy.

Which is bull. I might be considered quiet compared to my loud-mouthed teammates, but I ain't slow. And I sure as hell don't need to be a detective to put the clues together.

Allie Hayes, the best friend of our other roommate's girlfriend, crashed at our place last night.

Dean is a man-whore.

Chicks love Dean.

Allie is a chick.

Ergo, Dean slept with Allie.

Plus, there were all the clothes scattered around the living room because Dean is physically incapable of having sex in his bedroom.