

# Three

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**THE SUN POSITIVELY SCORCHES, THREATENING** to leave behind nothing but my liquefied insides and a melted puddle of plastic that was once this container of decor, which I'm now convinced I no longer need. I swear, my shoes sizzled when I stepped onto the blacktop. The parking lot is so packed, I've left my car in the fire lane as I unload, unwilling to add even a few more feet to my journey to and from my new apartment. I'm thanking every god I've ever heard of that it's on the first floor, because stairs might kill me at this point.

I got a head start on my full-body sweat when I stepped into the UGH leasing office earlier to pick up my key. I was certain the police would be waiting to haul me off in handcuffs after they figured out I'd forged Victor's signature on the lease they'd emailed me, which required a parental cosigner. Luckily, I still had Victor's income information and signature on file from my financial aid applications,

which was easier than digging around in Mom's filing cabinet for something of hers to use.

But all I found in the leasing office was a girl not much older than me, who gave my ID a perfunctory glance before handing over the key that would let me into the dead-silent apartment. (Another stroke of luck: no one is home to see me make my sad, sweaty journey with my worldly possessions.)

It feels like the least the universe could do for me after everything, and especially after the last twenty-four hours, which truly put the rotten cherry on top of the garbage sundae of this whole situation.

Leni, Starr, and I were supposed to caravan to school together today. We had playlists synced up, and had planned which rest stops we'd use and where we'd eat lunch. It was supposed to be the opening ceremony to the rest of our lives, yet despite their insistence that *we're still friends, of course we're still friends*, I had to see on social media that they left yesterday. Without me. Without even talking to me first.

In fact, we haven't spoken once since the night they kicked me out, and after a week of silence, I've become painfully aware how small my world is, especially since I broke up with Kyle last month, cutting my social circle down to two. Every buzz of my phone has me jumping for it, stupidly thinking that it might be my best friends realizing they'd forgotten to check in on me *once*. Mikey, a virtual stranger, has been my most consistent contact, texting me nonstop about how excited she is for me to move in. She's also taken to calling me "Bee" exclusively.

I'd barely driven three hundred feet from the house—leaving Mom, the only one home, tearful in the driveway with Goose straining on his leash, unbothered—when the panic hit me that this was really happening. The thoughts that had plagued me all week came roaring

back, and I pulled to the side of the road just shy of the neighborhood exit as it all rushed in: *What am I thinking? I can't go live with a bunch of strangers! I don't even know how to talk to people who aren't Starr and Leni. I made it through my call with Felicity and Mikey off sheer adrenaline, but living with them and two guys? What if I have to use the guys' bathroom because Felicity or Mikey is in the shower? What if they want to use mine? What if one of them brings a girl home? Do I have to hide in my room with the door shut while they're on their date?*

*What if we have to, like, sit down and have a totally normal conversation?*

On the cusp of making it all a reality, it took me twice as long to breathe through the panic as it had earlier in the week, before my car was packed and my house in my rearview mirror. When I finally got my hands to stop shaking, I employed what has become my foolproof calming method: I scrolled over to my inbox and read, once more, the welcome email from Stone & Spiral.

*Thank you for enrolling in Sculpture Studio with Deonne Tran!*

This is what it's all for—one last summer before the real world hits, where I get to fulfill my dream of studying under not only a master sculptor but my idol. The person whose art I saw for the first time at fourteen and thought, *This is art I understand. This is art that says something*. The white hand closing around a small house, fended off by a small, dark-skinned figure with a broom held like a weapon; or the leafless tree with anatomical hearts speared on each branch, blood pooling into a soft cloud to cradle one small heart at the very bottom.

I'm not first-generation American, and I'm not Black or Vietnamese, and I still probably haven't had half the life experience Deonne had had by the time she made those sculptures. At fourteen, I'd never

even skipped school, been kissed, or had a meaningful fight with my parents. I'm a white girl from the suburbs.

But Deonne's art made contact. Over the years, I've followed her online religiously as she's revealed new pieces focused on the immigrant experience, familial expectations, grief over her father's death, and the warmth of her mother's love and support. I've felt it all so deeply, it was like she'd reached into my chest and touched my beating heart. The walls were closing in, but there was a sense of hope and peace that I'd never felt before while looking at art. I didn't know art could *feel* like this.

To learn from her, I can bear anything—a new apartment, new roommates. I can even deal with the mess I found when I arrived at UGH this morning: the haphazard pile of shoes by the front door, the dishes stacked in the sink, and the carpet that probably hasn't seen the underside of a vacuum in at least a month, though you'd never know from the dusty brown color of it.

Maybe if Leni and Starr had talked to me just once, I could've quietly dealt with their messes too. They didn't even give me a chance to try. Was I really that terrible? Do I need to be an entirely different Blair to make sure I don't get kicked out by a whole new set of roommates?

I almost count myself lucky that it's too hot to worry about anything but getting my belongings inside as quickly as possible. No time to panic when you're slowly being scorched from the earth.

It takes me five trips in total. The apartment, already on the warm side, has turned muggy from the constant in and out. I lift the bottom of my shirt, scrubbing it over my face as I catch my breath. I'm panting loud enough to wake the dead, which I guess is why I

don't hear the sound that comes from deeper in the apartment: a door creaking open, footsteps on carpet. I'm still standing there with my face buried in damp, scratchy polyester, my torso and sweat-soaked bra exposed for all the world, when a voice grumbles, "What the hell's with all the noise?"

I scream, dropping my shirt as I stagger back. My foot catches on one of my containers, and my arms pinwheel as I trip backward over it. My elbow catches the wall as I go down, and I land in a heap, half scrunched against the wall with my legs thrown over the container, one flip-flop lost and the other dangling from my toes like a Christmas ornament.

I close my eyes tightly.

"Holy shit."

"I'm—I'm okay," I choke out at the same time that he says, "You just put a hole in the wall."

My eyes pop open, and I look up. Sure enough, there's an elbow-shaped impact site knocked straight through the drywall.

I wince. "I'm so sorry. You scared me." I struggle to right myself, pulling my legs the rest of the way over the container. "I didn't think anyone was home."

But when I sit up, I freeze. The boy has moved to the end of the hall, rubbing a hand over his short brown hair, his sleepy hazel eyes going alert when he sees my face.

My own eyes must look the same. It's the type of sharpness that can only come from recognition.

Because Jamie Atwater has just stepped out of the shadowed hall and into the sunlit living room.

\* \* \*

## THE ROOMMATE ARRANGEMENT

I met Jamie for the first time when I was eleven years old. Mom and Victor had just announced their engagement, prompting Sawyer to put his fist through his bedroom wall. It was the last straw before Victor finally convinced Mom to send Sawyer to anger management, something we could never have afforded before Victor came into our lives. Mom, who was fresh out of a yearslong holistic phase, thought group therapy would be a good way for Sawyer to learn coping mechanisms without feeling alone and adrift in his rage, like some kind of monster. (Pre-therapy, his only coping mechanism was screaming, breaking stuff, and then hiding in a crawl space he'd found in the back of his closet. My brother, the only person in the world who finds small spaces comforting.)

Within a few weeks, Sawyer started talking about his *new friend* from therapy, and even though Mom and Victor didn't discourage him from meeting people, I could tell the idea of my angry brother linking up with another angry kid made them nervous.

Then one day, Mom and I arrived to pick Sawyer up, and there was a long-haired boy standing with him at the curb. He was small—smaller than any boys in my class, a year below them, let alone the seventh-grade class, where half the boys had already hit puberty, shooting up like magic beanstalks. But I noticed, as I *very subtly* twisted around and stared at him from my spot in the front seat—prompting shouting protests from Sawyer, which I ignored—that he had big hands and feet. Not unlike our new puppy, Goose, who the veterinarian said had a long way to grow.

Goose was *supposed* to be a gift to me, a family dog for my good behavior while my brother was in anger management. But of course Goose immediately clung to my brother, following him everywhere

he went, and suddenly my reward became his. Things weren't going my brother's way, but they certainly weren't going mine, either.

As for Jamie, he hardly paid any attention to me then, which would become a theme of our non-relationship for years to come. For as long as we've known each other, I've been little more than furniture to him—the way you might glance at a coffee table long enough to acknowledge you've just bumped your shin on it, and maybe think of it now and then when you see the bruise, but never for much longer than it takes for the mark to fade.

Mom and Victor couldn't stand Jamie from the beginning. They said he had bad manners, that he was messy, that he said whatever he wanted, that he was *violent*. That last part I could hardly reconcile—not with the quiet, assessing kid who hardly made eye contact with any of us.

But Victor insisted Jamie was a bad influence on Sawyer. I wonder sometimes if they regretted sending Sawyer to therapy, knowing now what the result would be. Sure, it's been years since Sawyer screamed himself hoarse or broke something in a rage, but the trade-off was life with Jamie Atwater. And if my parents would hate the thought of me living with any boy, it has nothing on how much they would despise me living with this one.

"This has to be a joke," I say, staring at him. "I'm in the wrong apartment, aren't I? I knew it looked different."

Jamie rubs a hand over his face. "You're *Bee*?"

I pause, confused. Then it hits me—Mikey's nickname for me.

"No." It comes out flat and hard, a plea to the universe. *No, you did not do this to me.*

Jamie lets out a sigh of relief, clearly misunderstanding.

"No, I mean—I am. Mikey calls me Bee."

Jamie stares at me, and his expression says what his mouth doesn't: *Fuck*.

"This—this is unbelievable. Do you actually live here?" Panic seeps into my words, and they wobble out like someone's stuck me in a paint shaker.

Jamie motions to himself—the cotton gym shorts that reach mid-thigh; the sleeveless shirt, collar a little damp with sweat; his hair mussed and sticking up on one side. Bare feet on the ugly brown carpet. His sleepy eyes when he first saw me.

He obviously just woke up.

"What do you think, *Bee*?"

He adds a derisive little twist to the nickname that, up till now, had warmed the desolate space in my heart where my affection for my best friends used to live. It feels stupid hearing him repeat it. Trust Jamie to squash what little happiness I found in this situation.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and when I pull it out, I have two missed texts and a call from Mom.

**MOM**

Did you make it?

Don't forget to call me!

I swear. "I need to call my mom. Please don't speak."

Jamie's mouth flattens, making the lines on either side of his mouth press deep into his cheeks. "I take it they won't be thrilled with the idea of us shacking up?"

"Oh, no, Jamie, I'm sure they'll be so happy for us when we send our save-the-dates." My smile ends its life as a snarl. "You know how much they love you." *Be quiet*, I mouth as I lift my phone to my ear.

“Hi, Mom,” I say when she answers. I’m breathless from the exertion of carrying in my things and the shock of finding Jamie—*Jamie*, of the tens of thousands of people on this campus—in my new apartment.

“You didn’t call,” Mom says accusingly. “I want to see the place. FaceTime me.”

I glance wide-eyed at Jamie, then the rest of the apartment.

“Don’t tell me you’re embarrassed of me,” Jamie says.

I slap a hand over his mouth with such force, he hits the wall behind him with a *thump*. His eyes narrow, and he tries to smack my hand away, but I really lean my strength into it, squeezing my fingers into his cheeks with a severe look.

“Sorry, Mom, I totally forgot,” I say as I wedge the phone between my ear and shoulder so I can free up another hand. Jamie gets a grip around my wrist at the same time that I jab my fingers into his rib cage, and he jerks sideways with a wheeze. *Ticklish*. How embarrassing. “We’re already gone. We’re getting”—I grab the back of his shirt and pull it over his head, trapping it around his eyes—“pizza!”

“Blair!” Jamie snaps, annoyed, as he untangles himself from his own shirt.

“Who was that?” Mom says.

I duck away, cupping my hand around the mouthpiece. “My order’s ready! Sorry, I’ll call you later!”

I hang up before she can respond, and I don’t even have my phone back in my pocket before it lights up with her call again. I let it go to voicemail.

Clearly I have bigger things to worry about. Jamie has freed himself from his shirt and is red-faced and breathing hard, jaw set in furious determination.

“If I could just say, in my defense, that I did ask you very nicely to be quiet.” I hold up my hands, placating. “I even said ‘please.’”

“Oh, don’t worry, Blair, no one would ever accuse you of being impolite,” he says as he finishes straightening his shirt. The movement pulls its long-cut sides open, and I see a flash of ink. A tattoo?

It’s such a jarring realization—that the boy I’ve known for almost half my life is somehow a man now. A man who can legally get a tattoo, play the lottery, vote.

That somehow I can too. That all those things, as of May 2, are within my ability now. I could go out tomorrow and get Michelangelo’s *David* tattooed down my entire left arm, were I so inclined.

Of course, then my parents would get my credit card statement, see the charge from the We’ll Corrupt Your Daughter Tattoo Studio, and I’d be ripped from my bed in the night and spirited back to South Florida in the back of Mom’s Volvo.

Jamie crosses his arms, and I realize I’m staring. My gaze flicks up to his face, and I find him watching me with a look of mild disgust.

“Do you own any clothes that *don’t* look like they’ve gone through a woodchipper?” I ask, lest he (so wrongly) think I’ve debased myself enough to check him out.

He ignores this insult, unfortunately managing to focus on the issue at hand. “I’m confused. Sawyer was just telling me you’re living in some nice-ass house Leni’s rich parents bought. What are you doing here?”

“Obviously my situation has changed.”

“He said this *last night*.”

“I don’t know why you think my brother would know anything about my life. Are you new here? Sawyer cannot know about this. He’d

go sprinting to my parents so fast, he'd tear a hole in the space-time continuum, just to rat me out."

Jamie stares at me. "Sawyer doesn't know."

I stare back, eyes widening. "I'm not sure how to make that clearer, but your surprise has me seriously wondering about your powers of perception. You know my brother. He'd never pass up a chance to throw me under the bus for once."

Jamie tips his head back against the wall, closing his eyes. "Blair. I have to tell him."

"Why would you have to do that?"

"Because he's my best friend, and you're his sister."

"And?" I don't understand where he's going with this.

"And you're moving into my apartment," he says slowly, as though, between the two of us, I'm the one with a comprehension issue.

"Not if Sawyer finds out. He'd have my parents here so fast, you'd think they teleported."

"So your parents don't know about this either. Hence that weird little phone call I just witnessed."

"Does stating the obvious over and over again help you process or something?"

Jamie's expression folds into a glower. "Blair, the last thing I need is to be involved in some lie you're telling your parents."

"The last thing? *Really?* There's not one other thing that might be more—hey, where are you going? Jamie!"

He's halfway across the apartment when he says, "I told you. I have to tell your brother, and there's no point in waiting. I don't want to be involved in whatever you're doing."

"What?" I scramble after him, catching his arm in both my hands

as he reaches his bedroom. His skin is still sleep-warm, like clothes just taken from the dryer. “No—Jamie, hold on. Just listen to me for a second.”

He pauses, waiting.

I clear my throat. “Um.” How am I supposed to admit to the guy I’m trying to convince to let me stay that *Oh yeah, my best friends—the people who are supposed to love me the most in the world—thought I was so unbearable, they kicked me out a week before move-in?*

Jamie rolls his eyes, tugging his arm out of my grasp. “Your second’s up.”

I’m two steps behind him, barely registering his bedroom—his *bedroom*, I’m in Jamie Atwater’s *bedroom*—as I cross the threshold. Jamie has just reached his nightstand, and I see what he’s planning.

I lunge for his phone. Jamie gets a hand around it first, but I’ve spent the last eighteen years fighting with Sawyer, and that’s like training for the American Ninja Warrior of in-home brawling.

I grasp the top of the phone with one hand and grab his wrist with the other. I yank hard in a circle, sticking one leg out to block him from following the trajectory of his own arm. His grip on his phone begins to slip, and Jamie takes a step forward to right his balance, knocking me off my own. I stumble, going to my knees, and Jamie releases the phone as he catches himself on the wall.

I flip around to face him, balking at the position I’m now in—still on my knees, with Jamie standing over me. My gaze snags on his muscular thighs in those truly indecent shorts. (Since when did a modest pair of knee-length basketball shorts go out of style?)

*Stop staring! Right now!*

I drop into a sitting position against the wall, knees up protectively, his phone in the safe cradle of my lap. I imagine I look like a wild animal

that just successfully dragged some roadkill off the asphalt and into my den for dinner.

“Fine. Keep it. I don’t need it.” Jamie turns toward his computer, but I’m already three steps ahead. He and Sawyer have been using Discord for years, and it’s accessible right there on his desktop—if he can reach it.

I drop his phone and lurch forward, getting a hand around his ankle. I give a hard pull, and he loses his balance and hits the floor.

“Jesus *Christ*, Blair,” he snaps, shoving at me with his free foot. But I’m already scrambling over his legs, straddling his thighs as I fend off his hands.

“Can you just listen to me for one second before you go tattling to my stupid brother?” I grunt, grabbing at his wrists.

“I already gave you a second,” he snaps as I manage to catch one wrist and pin it to the floor. But Jamie and I have never battled it out like this, and I’m startled when he yanks his arm up over his head, pulling me off kilter. As I land, my forehead hits his chin, and I let out a yelp of pain.

“Um . . . what’s going on?” someone behind me says.

I sit up, shoving Jamie’s face into the carpet as I go. I hope it’s so dirty.

He pushes me off with a growl, and I topple onto my hip, one leg still thrown across his thighs.

“Um, hi,” I say, breathing hard as I twist toward the voice. Felicity and Mikey are framed in the open doorway, staring at us with matching looks of horror.

“Bee?” Mikey says, brow furrowing. “What are you doing?”

“I can explain.” But as their expressions turn expectant, I find I actually *can’t* explain.

This is not how I wanted my new roommates to first meet me.

For instance, I hoped I'd be wearing something marginally better than my sweaty grad night T-shirt and athletic shorts. Maybe a tasteful lounge set, or my best jeans and a loose linen button-down, armed with some kind of baked good as a reverse housewarming gift.

I also didn't imagine they'd find me straddling their roommate while trying to plead my case (and inflict a little bodily harm on him).

"Better get that roommate ad back up." Jamie shoves my leg off him as he sits up. "She won't be staying."

Mikey and Felicity glance at each other in alarm. "Uh, what?"

"He's being dramatic," I say, administering a quick kick in the thigh that earns a responding glare. "Jamie and I are, um"—I hesitate over the right word—"acquainted."

Jamie rolls his eyes.

"More than I need to know," Felicity says, holding up a hand. "It doesn't matter. Jamie, you agreed."

"And I'd happily let her stay," he says as he gets to his feet. Then he glances down at me and arches an eyebrow. "Well, maybe not happily."

I clench my teeth.

"But in about five minutes, her parents will know she's here, and we won't have a choice." He drops into his computer chair.

*No, no, no, no.* I see him pull up Discord and scroll to what must be Sawyer's username. A moment later, the video call tone fills the room.

I scramble over on hands and knees. "Please, please, hang up, please, Jamie, I'm begging you," I whisper, but Jamie ignores me.

"Jamie, *what* is going on?" Felicity demands.

As my brother's voice fills the room—"Bro, what's up? Just rawdoggin' the video call?" (disgusting, he's disgusting)—my gaze

lands on the power strip on the floor, then on the PC tower on Jamie's desk.

He's using a desktop computer, not a laptop. Which means . . .

If I shut off the power source, his computer will shut off with it, ending anything that's running—including his call to my brother.

"Hey, you're not gonna believe—" Jamie is saying when I stretch forward and flip the switch on the power strip.

"—who just showed up . . ." He trails off, staring dumbfounded at his black screen.

I exhale in relief, collapsing to the floor, not even caring when he last vacuumed in here. I roll onto my back and stare at the popcorn ceiling. Sweet, merciful silence. My brother is gone.

"Please tell me," Jamie says slowly, deliberately, his words clipped and furious, "you didn't just power off my whole system."

"What did you want me to do, Jamie?" I sit up and face him, my heart still racing. "I'm clearly in a desperate situation!"

"I had unsaved code in there," he says through his teeth, his voice like two rocks scraping together.

I swallow. "You mean you don't . . . save as you go?" I blink at his reddening face. "Well, Jamie, I don't know what you want from me! You should always save as you go!" If only I could deliver this line without sounding like the kid who reminds the teacher that *actually, there was homework due today.*

Jamie's jaw goes so hard, I'm afraid he might crack a tooth. I glance nervously at Mikey and Felicity, who've watched this all unfold from the safety of the doorway.

Felicity's mouth flattens into a straight line as she glances between us, then points toward the living room. "Family meeting. Right now."