

Protect the Institution

Slowly, I slip my dress back on as James runs his thumb in circles on my shoulder. He beckons me back to bed, but I pull myself away with an embarrassed smile. I have told him so many times that someone will notice if I am here late, and I want this kept secret. He always smiles mysteriously with an upturned corner of his mouth, and his blue eyes twinkle. He begs me to stay, and I remind him of my job. "It is very important," I say.

His smile broadens. "I love you, Rosie."

The words play on my lips, ready to say them too for a second. "Go to bed. You have a big day tomorrow."

He laughs. "I have a big day every day."

I know he watches me as I leave, and I do not look back. His bedroom door closes softly behind me, and I tiptoe to a corner. When I look around the corner, I expect to see the maids, butlers, bodyguards and everyone else that roam the halls in the early mornings, yet I stand alone in the hallway. I slip on my high heels and stride happily toward the main office.

People stand around in eerie quietness, and then one phone rings. No one answers it. The roar of the television comes to life. My fearful colleagues stare at the news, and I move among them. "What do we do?" whispers Daniel, a new bodyguard with hope in his eyes but a hard stance.

"Protect the Institution."

Marching myself back upstairs, I knock on James' door, like I had done times before. I don't wait to open it. On the floor, James lays on his side, trembling and eyes wet. I do not hesitate like others would in my place. Settling down next to him, he puts his head on my lap, and I brush my fingers through his hair.

"I love you, Rosalind MacTavish," he sobs. His fingers curl into my dress. "You're the only one I have left. What are we going to do?"

In this moment, I have a choice, and I have worked all my life to be here. Whatever the cost, I will reign. "Carry on."

A day later, I stand next to my colleague, Mr. Collins, as he speaks to me, "You are new, not from here, don't know our cultures, our values. You may have been close with his predecessor, but if he has called us both here, that means nothing." My colleague straightens his pristine gray suit and royal blue tie. "May the best man win." He chuckles as the doors open to reveal the grand foyer.

Our employer looks out of place. The whole life of James had been planned out for him, and this wasn't part of it. Not the chosen one or the smart one, he stands while others have been struck down. Now he must survive when everyone wishes to take his place.

While my colleague has taken his place and comfort, James does not let him say a word. "Ms. MacTavish, congratulations, you will be the next home secretary. Mr. Collins, you are being asked to leave."

"Sir—"

"My mother ran this Institution a certain way, like my older brother was going to, and now it is on me. I must keep this Institution alive, and you have no place here." When the doors finally close again, James leans against the desk. "That wasn't too harsh, was it?"

I begin to walk around the office, letting my fingers go over the priceless items. "No." Dust collects on my fingers, and I make a mental note to fire whoever is supposed to clean this room.

“He might be needed for the future, Rosie.”

Shaking my head, I walk over to him. I wrap my arms around him and make him look me in the eyes. “You have me.” I kiss him, and I know that he knows he only needs me. “However, James, it’s a dangerous game we’re playing. It only takes a slip of the tongue.” Others do not have the privilege that I have accumulated here, and they would love to be in my position.

A dawn comes to his mind, he jumps like a naïve child on Christmas morning. “I love you!”

I grip his shoulders and make him meet my gaze. Just outside the door are people with their ears pressed against the glass just waiting for juicy secrets. This thing between us has never been suspected, and I hope to keep it this way. “Be quiet, James.”

He laughs, joyous. James doesn’t have malice, for his young and protected life hasn’t given him the opportunity to learn what people want in life. He gives a dramatic look around the room and whispers, “You are with the most powerful *man* in this country.” The job was always given to a man.

“I am.”

“There is no one who can do it better.”

I know it in my bones. “I have work to do,” I say.

I leave the room without another word, and I know his eyes watched me go sadly. He becomes moody when left alone, especially after the untimely death of his mother and brother in the bloom of flames and boom of explosives that took out their car. Yet, someone had to be there for him, and I was already making my way to the top. James just helped me get my footing.

I am in control. This whole Institution might feature his face, but it would know my name. My office is only a floor down from his, and I sit in the old home secretary’s position. He is the face, but I am the mind. My fingers run over the cool brown wood. All of this is mine.

“Ma’am.” In walks one of my secretaries, and he is nervous. “The press wants a word.”

“Have them line up.”

With a head bow, he leaves.

I sit at my mahogany desk with two large windows behind me that cast in light. The red carpet welcomes me into my future like the boss that it knows that I am. The leather chair is plush but holds me up, and I stare directly at the door in front of me, having stood there for centuries and does not even squeak when opened. I take a glass out of the tray next to me and pour a glass of Macallan. Opening up the bottom desk drawer, I set a large red folder onto my desk, and I take a sip of the scotch. It doesn’t even burn as it goes down.

Six months under my belt has given me enough opportunity to spread my wings and impress. The news of the deaths of the family has passed, and people look toward the future—how easily we forget pain. James settles into his position nervously, with slumped shoulders and uncertain steps; however, he wears a brave and plastered smile, along with the same charm he had before, and everyone laughs.

In the morning, I wake up beside him. Sun glistens on his skin, and the small hairs stand on end. His peacefulness comes easily, where he is no longer anxious or unhappy. As a gentle giant, anger never comes for James. Calmly, his chest moves up and down, and the even longer night we had last night doesn’t wear him down.

Going over to the window, paparazzi claw at the gates and crawl over each other, all hoping for some scrap of information. A white cloth covers the window, not allowing them to see us, but I like to watch them. I know each of their names, address, phone numbers and where

they like to have a drink. On the few that cause trouble, a red file is on my desk for their silence. A new face is among them.

“You are beautiful,” James murmurs, coming over. His fingers lace through my long and soft hair. James loves when my hair is down. With my hair drawn back, some describe me as a hawk.

I step away and into his closet, choosing a new dress for the day. “You have a busy day ahead of you.” Most women choose something floral for spring with bright colors and eye-catching designs; I choose deep purple.

“And you’re not busy?” he wonders.

“This is a normal day for me.” I start to dress. “I will meet you downstairs.”

As I walk downstairs, I am given the same respect as James, rising to my position, which was a place none of these people thought I would be. Coming from a humble background, I had no place here when I showed up. I was just a young random girl with grand ideas that no one listened to, and then James’ mother took me aside; she listened. I heeded her advice, and I rose. Then, I stood where everyone wanted to stand at the right hand of her; at this moment, I stand where everyone wants to stand at the top. Now, all these people give a head bow, a sign of respect.

James is prompt, which is unusual. When he comes into the red carpet and golden wallpaper room, everyone stands at attention, including myself. James is greeted with all good mornings, and he sits down. Papers are placed in front of him, and I go to work to make sure he has the information.

Outside among many people at this large event, I walk ten steps behind James, and all the cameras focus on him. No one dares notice me as I move through the crowd. My eyes dart to watch as another one of James’ jokes make people laugh. On the edge of the crowd, I am able to see all while all eyes come to him. I am invisible, except for one: James. His eyes fall to me, and he smiles. I flush, and like a teenage school girl, my mind plays out our future.

“Ms. MacTavish, how wonderful to see you,” a voice purrs behind me.

“You’ve fallen far, Mr. Collins, to stand among the grotesque stalkers of the Institution.” I face him, and he is greasy like the rest of them. “How can I help you?”

His dark gaze swoops to James, and I refuse to look. “Do the odds: how big would a story be if the home secretary was fucking the head of the Institution?”

My smile does not waver. “Mr. Collins, does your wife know of your affair? Does she know you have a love child with a woman named Kelci? Under your prenup to the woman, it would give her full custody of your children, and I would hate to have shame brought onto your family, especially when your mother was just diagnosed with breast cancer.”

He laughs. “Come now, Ms. MacTavish, whatever you have against me doesn’t matter, because think of all the money I will earn. Think of the name recognition.”

“You are supposed to be loyal.”

“*Protect the Institution*, but what did they ever give me?” Mr. Collins asks. “James only gave away my rightful job to a girl who knows nothing but a blow job.” His tongue brushes his bottom lip, like a nervous tick. “You have gotten a nice job, but how long will it last? You aren’t the first one James has fucked shamelessly, and you won’t be the last. You will fade away but not the position. You could destroy him, and you could destroy the Institution.”

“They come first.” I try to walk away, but Mr. Collins places his slimy paws on me. My eyes dart up, and he removes his hand like a peace gesture.

“I do have to give you some respect, Ms. MacTavish. Who knew that a little orphan girl with no money and no family, who grew up in a poor group home in the middle of goddamn nowhere could become the head?” he asks. “She groomed you, I know, and she even sent you to his bed. She had you following every order without question, and you were a good little bitch.” Mr. Collins likes that thought. “You twist James around your finger. I once had him around my finger too. We’re not that different; we all want the same thing.”

“We do,” I respond, “but I am the one who actually has it.” I walk away from him, knowing that someone’s eyes saw us, knowing that Mr. Collins is not a daft man, and knowing that this is the beginning of the end.

After a few minutes, James returns to my side and pretends I am just a normal employee watching over my boss for his every whim and need. I don’t let my eyes come up to find Mr. Collins. “Be aware of the time.”

“Yes.” He leans forward, and for a second I believe he will out us right here. His lips hover beside my cheek, but he realizes his mistake. James steps back and clears his throat. Disappearing into the crowd again, I stand alone.

My mind does the math, and Mr. Collins is correct: the story would be large scale. Due to social media, it would spread like wildfire. “Charlie,” I call, and a great oaf of a bodyguard walks over. My words travel at a hum into his ear, and he is not shocked. Having been here for at least thirty years, he knows the business.

“They come first,” he responds.

“Take Daniel with you. He looks far too happy here.”

“Ma’am.” He bows.

After the long day, I am ready to go home. I am the keeper of secrets with a few more hidden inside my mind and locked desk. I know the secrets and histories of the Institution. I know more than James ever will, more than his mother and grandfather before him knew. I glance at the red folder again, and then a knock comes to my door. Slipping it away, I answer, “Come in.”

Daniel has returned, and a perfect smile rests on his face. From his combat days, this task was easy. “He wishes to see you.”

I lock my office as I leave, climbing the red carpet stairs to reach the top floor, showcasing design and artwork. Gold tries not to rust away like the old walls do. James waits in his study, and Daniel closes the door behind me. Within a second, James has his lips on me, and I welcome the feeling of lightness. Happiness and childhood joy fill me, and at one time, the only home I needed was his arms.

“I love you.” Pulling back, James smiles at me. “I saw Mr. Collins speaking to you. Rosie, I know you well, and you had that... *scary* face.” He sounds terrified himself. “He knows, doesn’t he? He knows about us.”

“He does.”

James begins to tremble, and his eyes are wet. He fears this as well, especially so quickly after the death of his mother and brother. The public would not take this kindly, and surely the press would twist the narrative. “Marry me,” he pleads.

“No.”

“Please, Rosie, I am doing this to protect both of us.” He realizes that’s wrong. “I don’t want it to happen like this, and I do love you, Rosie. I just want more time, but—” his voice cracks. “Remember when we met?”

“You hated me.”

“I didn’t hate you; I just hated what you wanted to do.” James shifts on his feet, and he won’t meet my eyes. “Mother loved you because of what you brought to the Institution, these new ideas and how to speak to people, especially of a lower class, where it isn’t about what we have and they don’t—but it’s about the things we all want, like love and respect. You made us look human, and I think I bring out the humanity in you,” he rambles. “For so long, it was all the same, but today is changing. Marry me, Rosie.” He drops to one knee.

“No. Do not ask again.” I turn to leave.

“Rosie—”

“*Rosalind*,” I correct. “I choose my job— my position— the one you gave me. I will not be your wife. I will be your partner. I will do my job.”

“You’re choosing your job over me?”

“My job is you.” *Protect the Institution*, I remind myself. “I like this, a lot. I feed off of it. Do you know why your mother liked me so much? I was the only thing that kept this Institution afloat. It was being run into the ground, and I work every day and every night to make it strong. This Institution is my bitch!” I watch him carefully. “Do you understand, sir?”

James is still on his knees, and I tower over him.

“This is the end, James, and it was a good run. The woman you need beside you as a wife should be as kind as you are.” I kiss him deeply. “I will destroy anyone who tries to hurt you,” *like I was unable to do with your mother*. “Good night, James.” I walk out of the room, knowing I will still have a job tomorrow and the next day. James is just there to be the face of the Institution; my name is known within the walls as I carve my name into history.