



Dean's
LIST

CARMEN BISHOP

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Carmen Bishop



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By Carmen Bishop

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TO SURVIVORS.

Blurb

Last night, I *almost* had a one-night stand with the professor of my history class.

Of course, I didn't know that's what he was when he was making me see stars in the bathroom of a night club.

Running into him again shouldn't have been a big deal. After all, we agreed to no second taste. No continuations.

Except I catch him watching me when he shouldn't be... because I'm watching him, too.

Trouble is, your past has a way of catching up to you.

And even Professor Dean Dorsey cannot erase what's happened to me.

My scars are too thick.

My wounds too deep.

And the secrets I carry are enough to drown us both.

Chapter 1

Kate

The jarring beeping of a timer rips me from my half-sleep. The woman sitting on a rolling stool at my feet begins removing the hot towel wraps from my calves then pulls the hot wax bags off of my feet, one by one. Every muscle in my body is relaxed, every anxious moment a distant echo in my mind.

Honestly, I can't remember if I've ever been this relaxed.

"We need to do this weekly," Dakota, my younger sister by two years, groans. I glance over, a half-smile on my face. Her ashy purple hair is tied up in a messy bun, her bright green eyes hooded in relaxation. And even though I cannot ever remember my sister being particularly stressed, she looks absolutely serene now. Which makes my big sister heart happy.

"Single mom over here," I remind her. "I can't afford to do it weekly. And you're a new business owner. Weekly pedicures are likely not on your horizon either."

"I hate that you're right." She sighs. "But living the dream is bound to be stressful at times." She beams.

The dream. How often have I heard those words combined? My dream definitely wasn't becoming a mom at nineteen, and it certainly wasn't having an abusive ex nearly kill me and our unborn child.

It wasn't working three jobs to put myself through community college and putting off what I really wanted to do in order to take care of my son alone.

Familiar darkness creeps into the recesses of my mind, and I shove it back down, burying it as far as I can. No good can that come from reliving that nightmare. Besides, I wouldn't change a moment of any of it. Because the asshole high school "sweetheart" who nearly killed me, also gave me a perfect son.

Henry is the beat of my heart, and that is my definition of *the dream*. So, in a way, I suppose I am living it.

"Is this a good color?"

I glance down at the woman and smile at the bubblegum pink adorning my big toe. "Yes, perfect. Thank you."

She smiles and nods then continues painting each and every one of my toes the same brilliant shade. A happy color. One that will carry me into the next chapter of my life.

"When does your next set of classes start?"

"Next week." I close my eyes and lean back against the chair, soaking in the last few minutes of relaxation before I have to put my mom hat back on and juggle groceries, back-to-school prep, and the current state of a bathroom remodel in its final stages.

"You excited? This is the final semester, right?"

"I'm beyond stoked. I'll finally be done with school and ready for the next chapter."

"Which will leave you here in Boston?"

I crack open one eye and smile at Dakota. "Possibly. But I have to go wherever I can get a job. My inheritance from grandpa will only last so long. I'm already nearing the end." My sister used her portion of the money our grandfather left us to start up her business, and I bought my house. I've been living off of the remainder so I didn't have to put Henry into day care. I picked up odd work from home jobs here and there, but I'm so beyond ready for financial stability.

"You'll get a job here in Boston." She takes a deep breath. "I'm going to continue saying it until you believe it."

I don't tell her that finding a job as a historian, or even a history teacher, here in Boston is far easier said than done. My

sister is an optimist, always has been. And I've made it my mission not to steal that wind from her sails. The world is hard enough as it is.

"All done." The woman who has been pampering me for the past hour points to my toes. The color makes me smile all over again as I stare down at them. It's been years since I had a pedicure.

And the last time I had one, I was nine months pregnant and couldn't even see my toes.

"You are a miracle worker," I tell her.

She beams at me. "Thank you. You can pay up front, and feel free to book that next appointment while you're at it." She winks and carries her tray into the back as Dakota and I do our best not to trip over the floppy paper sandals on our feet.

After paying and leaving a generous tip, we move out onto the sidewalk. Dakota slips on a massive pair of sunglasses. "Want a coffee?"

"You buying?"

She grins. "Always." Then she loops an arm through mine. Together we make our way down the sidewalk toward the coffee shop she opened last year. *Espresso Yourself* has been a labor of love ever since and a dream way beyond that.

Even when we were in high school, she'd been doodling expressive coffee mugs boasting big eyes and bright smiles, cartoons she insisted would one day cover the menus of her very own shop. Our father, a far-too-serious-for-his-own-good general in the Army, thought she'd change her mind and follow in our mother's footsteps to become a doctor.

But Dakota stuck to her guns. Something that I cannot help but admire her for. Especially given that I grew up under the same scrutiny. Hell, when Dad found out I was pregnant, he didn't talk to me for nearly a month.

And, well, our relationship certainly hasn't improved.

The moment we step through the front door of her cafe, I'm greeted with the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans,

pastries that make my mouth water, and the happy chatter of patrons at tables scattered around the main area.

Every time I walk into this place, I'm reminded just how much love my sister put into it. The chairs are all different patterns, bold florals, impressive lines, newspaper print... that's the theme of *Espresso Yourself*, nothing matches. Not the chairs, the mugs, the art—it's all an expression of Dakota. One wildly adorable print at a time.

I follow Dakota around the impressive line and straight toward her office.

Mick, one of her baristas, raises his hand and waves at us as we walk in. "Your usual, Kitty?" he asks me.

The nickname makes me cringe. He's been calling my Kitty ever since my sister opened the place, and the cringe level never fades. "Kate," I correct for what must be the thousandth time. "Yes. Thanks."

"Anything for you." He grins at me, so I immediately avert my gaze.

"You know he has a thing for you, right?" Dakota says as she plops down in the lime green chair behind her desk.

"Please. He hits on everyone."

"Not like he does you. He's always asking about you, too."

"Because he's into you," I retort. "It's called making casual conversation."

She snorts. "My policy on dating employees is legendary. Trust me, no way he's thinking about crossing that line."

I settle back into the chair across from her, letting my mind wander over the endless to-do list waiting for me as soon as I leave here. Pickup Henry from Mom's, grocery and school shopping for both of us, meal planning and prep, pay bills... and I'm sure that I'm forgetting something.

"What are your plans for tonight? Your last Friday before getting back to the grind?"

"Sleeping," I reply with a laugh.

“Lame,” she replies as she clicks something on her computer then re-focuses on me. “Let’s go out.” She sits up straight then leans in towards me, eyes shining bright with excitement. “Come on, let’s go out on the town, have some drinks.”

“I can’t. I have to grab Henry from Mom’s and—”

“So do all of the things; then see if Mom can come watch him. You know she would totally stay over at your house for the night. You can sleep at my place, and we can let loose like we’ve never let loose.”

“The last time I let loose, I ended up in labor and delivery nine months later.”

She laughs. “Fine. Safe sex. Use condoms if you get lucky.” Dakota reaches across and grabs my hands right as Mick steps into her office and sets our coffees down on the desk between us.

“Making exciting plans?” he asks with a wiggle of his brows.

“Going to braid our hair and chart our periods,” Dakota replies. “It’s going to be a blast.”

He pales ever so slightly. “Have fun with that.”

As soon as he’s out of ear shot, I snort. “You’re going to get in trouble for inappropriate conduct.”

“Nah, he knows it’s all in good fun,” she replies, completely dismissing it. “So, come on. Let’s go. Please. I’m begging you. Dad’s coming over tomorrow, and I desperately need a stress release.”

I sit up straighter, all joy leaking from the cracks her words just gave me. “Dad’s coming into town?”

Dakota squeezes my hands gently. “Yeah. I didn’t want to tell you until right before.”

I haven’t seen my father in four years. When he and my mom divorced, it was like we both got her, but Dakota got custody of him. He doesn’t call, doesn’t answer me when I do, and hasn’t seen Henry since his third birthday.

“Why is he coming to town?”

“To check in on the coffee shop.” She groans and releases her hands then leans back. “Because I’m not an adult who can take care of herself.”

“At least, he cares,” I reply then wince. “Sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

“You’re good.” Dakota smiles. “So, tonight? Bennett sisters out on the town?”

I can see how desperately she needs this, and to be honest? So do I. Especially after finding out I’ll be sharing the same city limits with a man who will go to any lengths to avoid me. “If mom can watch Henry, then yes. But I’m not going out until after his bedtime.”

Dakota’s entire expression lights up. “Deal.”

* * *

“Momma!” Henry throws himself at me as soon as I walk through the door of my mom’s two-bedroom brownstone. Since they sold our childhood home during the divorce, she downsized and has been living here since the papers were finalized.

It’s only two blocks from my place and ten minutes from my sister.

“Hey, baby.” I squeeze him gently, breathing him in like he’s my oxygen. A simple hug from this kid can ease my stress like nothing else. I pull him back to cup his cheeks and stare into bright green eyes that match my own. “Did you have a good day?”

“Yes! We made sourdough bread. It’s so yummy.”

I smile, remembering that I need to feed my own sourdough starter when I get home. Can’t have Willow dying on us. “Good. Where’s Grandma?”

“In here!” my mom calls out.

I head down the hall with Henry's hand in mine then slip into a kitchen that is nearly coated in flour. "What happened in here?"

"We got into a fight with a bag of flour," my mom says, gesturing to the front of her blue blouse. "It won." She winks at Henry.

"But it was so fun! Here!" He hands me a piece of sourdough. "Try it!"

I take a bite and grin. "This is amazing."

Henry beams at me. "We made it fresh."

"Good. Now, go get cleaned up and grab your bag. We've got school shopping to get to as soon as I help your grandmother clean up the evidence of your booty kicking."

Henry laughs and bounces off, all boy energy. As he does, I grab a paper towel and get it damp then start wiping flour off the island.

"Honey, I can do that."

"No, I don't mind helping." I wipe quickly, doing two and three passes with fresh towels until the island is completely cleaned and once again shining white marble. When I straighten, I find my mom watching me with a bemused expression. "What?"

"Your dad's coming into town, isn't he?"

"How do you know?"

"Because you're a stress cleaner. Just like I am." She offers me a glass of lemonade. "When was the last time you talked to him?"

"Henry's third birthday."

My mom shakes her head. "He has no idea what he's missing out on."

"I don't get it. We seemed fine until then. What happened?"

“You did nothing.” She crosses over and grabs my shoulders. “It is entirely on him.”

“Mom—”

“No. End of discussion. He’s an idiot, always has been.”

“You loved him at one point.”

“I did. Still do. And that love got me two perfect daughters. Which makes all the idiocracy I dealt with entirely worth it.” She kisses my cheek noisily.

I want to press, to beg her to tell me what she knows, but there is no budging Julia Bennett. When she wants to keep something to herself, she might as well be locked up like Fort Knox. “Can I ask for a favor? And it’s totally okay if you say no.”

“Of course.”

“Do you mind coming and staying at my place tonight to keep an eye on Henry? Dakota wants to go out and—”

“Absolutely. I’ll bring dinner. Tell your sister to be there at seven.”

“Seriously?”

“Of course. You two deserve some girl time.” She winks.

“Mom, we just had girl time.”

“Honey. Go out with your sister. Be crazy. Henry and I will be just fine.”

“You really don’t mind?”

“That mom guilt is something fierce, isn’t it?” she asks with a knowing smile.

“It’s just... I already left him today.”

“And he’ll be sleeping tonight, so he won’t even know you’re gone. Seriously, Kate. Go out. Live it up. Have fun. You’re twenty-six. Spend tonight acting twenty-six.”

“How old do I usually act?”

“Seventy,” she replies without hesitation.

“Seventy?” I gape at her. “Seriously?”

She grins. “A beautiful seventy.”

Henry comes rushing back in with his baseball cap on backward and his backpack on his shoulders. “Ready!” he announces.

“Thank you for helping me fight that flour,” my mom says as she kisses his forehead.

“You’re welcome, Grandma. Tell him we’re coming back for him.” He puts his fists up and mimics throwing a punch.

My mom throws her head back and laughs. “Now. I will see you both for dinner tonight.”

“You’re coming over for dinner?” Henry exclaims.

“Is that okay?”

“Can you bring spaghetti?”

“Is there any other kind of dinner?” she asks.

“Not a good one.” He grabs my hand. “Can we get a boba tea?”

“Of course. It’s not like we can do school shopping without one.” My phone rings, so I reach in and pull it out of my purse. “Hello?”

“Miss Bennett?”

“Yes? This is her.”

“This is Marice with Boston University admissions, and there’s been an issue with some of your enrollment forms for this semester.”

Dread sinks into my belly like stones. “What? What forms?” My mom narrows her gaze at me, so I shrug.

“Just a few missing signatures. Can you come in this afternoon and sign them? It should only take a few minutes.”

“Yes. Of course. Thank you.”

“We’re here until five.”

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes.” I hang up the phone and shove it back into my pocket. “Sorry, kid, we have to make a quick stop before school shopping.”

Chapter 2

Dean

Sweat slicks my body as I dribble the ball back toward the hoop. My muscles are on fire from the workout I did beforehand, but that doesn't slow me down. Because the last thing I want to do is let any of my brothers get the drop on me.

I throw out an arm to stop Everett in his tracks, spin to avoid Zander, then grab the ball and does a jump shot. Zander mutters a curse as it sails right into the hoop.

“Nothing but net, assholes.” I grin at them.

Axel gives me a high five. “Want to go again? Double or nothing?” he asks.

Everett shakes his head, sweat dripping from his hair. “Hard pass. I've got a job site to get to.”

“Coward,” I retort.

“And I have a new baby.” Zander glares at me, but it lacks heat. “You going to call me a coward?”

“Of all of us, you have the best excuse,” I tell him. “We can wait until next week to kick your asses again.” The four of us cross the court and retrieve our discarded shirts.

There's a group of women in the corner, all grinning and fanning themselves as they check us out, and while my three older brothers are all happy and in love with their fiancés, I am spectacularly single. So, I grin and wink, enjoying the blush that floods their cheeks.

“One of these days, you’re going to find yourself knocked on your ass by one woman. And I, for one, cannot wait to see it.” Everett downs some of his water.

“Nope. Not going to happen.” I do the same, drinking my mixture of water, salt, and fresh lemon.

“That’s what I said,” Everett tells me.

“Same here,” Axel adds.

“I don’t even need to answer,” Zander says as he slips his gym bag over his shoulder.

“But that’s the difference between us,” I tell them. “I’m not wired for compatibility in long-term relationships. Give me a one-night? Maybe two? Done. I can be whatever is needed. But more than that and it just doesn’t work.” I sling my bag over my shoulder. “And that’s the way I like it.” With a wink at my brothers, I head over toward the women still waiting in the corner.

A red-head, two blondes, and a brunette who make no attempt to shy away when I approach. “Ladies,” I greet with a wide smile.

“You did good out there, professor,” the red-head comments. She’s a regular at this gym and has been trying to get me alone in the locker room for over two months now. But I make it a habit not to sleep with anyone I see regularly. It gets messy if you do.

And messy is *not* something I’m interested in. Not unless pudding, Jello shots, or body chocolate are involved.

“Thanks, gorgeous.” I wink.

“Listen, if you’re not doing anything later—” she starts.

“Sorry, all booked for the afternoon. Prepping for classes.”

She pouts. Gorgeous lips I’d love to have wrapped around my— “Are you sure? You can’t spare an afternoon?”

“Nope.” I smile. “See you ladies next time.”

After pushing through the door and out onto the main floor of the gym, I head straight for the locker room to shower and

change into dark jeans and a white button-down, a blue vest over the top. My typical attire when walking the halls of Boston University.

The sun is bright today, so I leave my windows down as I drive over to the college to work on class prep for the upcoming semester. Thankfully, I'm already nearly done, and it's just about putting the final touches on my plans. Then, I can knock out some work on the novel I've been writing for the last ten years before changing and heading out for the night.

I grin. It's going to be a good night. I can *feel* it.

I park in my spot then climb out and head into the college, stopping by the main office to check my box. Seated on a bench just outside is a young boy playing a game on a phone, though he looks bored out of his mind. His dark hair is partially hidden behind a worn, backward baseball cap, but he looks to be only a few years older than Aara—Zander's daughter.

"Hey, bud," I say with a grin. "Winning?"

He looks up at me with the brightest green eyes I've ever seen, his expression laced with frustration. "No. I can't get this level." He turns the phone around to show me a cup with a sad face seated on a blue line, a waterspout just to the left of it.

"Ahhh, yes. Can I?" I ask, kneeling and holding out my hand.

"Sure." He offers me the phone, so I stare at it for a moment then make the marks that will send the water into the cup. As soon as it's full, I hand the phone back to him. "How did you do that?" he asks, eyes wide.

I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone then show him the app. "That one had me for weeks." When he smiles, I shove it back into my pocket. "So, what are you doing out here?"

"My mom had to sign some papers. She goes to school here."

"Oh? Nice."

“Do you go here?”

“Nah. I teach history.”

“History?” He looks like I spit in his cereal.

“Oh yeah, but only the cool stuff.”

“Like wars?”

I chuckle. “Something like that. Hopefully, your mom gets all her stuff taken care of soon. It’s good of you to come with her, though. Keep her safe.”

“Yeah. I don’t have a dad, so I’m the man of the house. It’s kinda my job.”

My heart aches for him because not having a father in the home is something I know all too well given that mine died before I was born. “Well, it’s a job I can tell you’re awesome at.” I hold out a fist, and he bumps mine with his. “Keep watching out for your mom.”

“Always.” He beams at me. “Thanks for beating the level.”

“Of course, kid. Good luck on level one-hundred-twenty-two. That one is a doozy.”

“Woah, okay!” He goes back to the phone, so I glance behind me through the window. A woman with dark hair stands in front of the desk, her back to me. Out of respect for the kid, I don’t check her out anymore before heading down the hall and making my way into my office.

I no sooner set my bag down than Professor Allison Andrews steps into the doorway, her shirt unbuttoned to reveal an impressive amount of cleavage. The pin-striped skirt she wears is skin-tight, and the black spikey heels make her calves look insanely defined.

She’s attractive. In a way that is borderline cardiac-event-inducing.

But even if I didn’t already have rules in place *because of her*, the venom in her smile is more than enough to turn me right the hell off.

“Dean,” she greets.

“What can I do for you, Allison?”

She moves farther into my office, so I instinctively take a seat behind my desk. “Are you ready for classes?” She takes a seat on the edge of my desk, and I do my best to ignore what I know she considers a power move.

“I am. You?”

“Have been for weeks.”

“Good.”

Allison teaches Literature just down the hall from me and has been trying to get in my pants since we made out at the faculty Christmas party two years ago. I’d been hammered on spiked eggnog and forgotten about it entirely until she reminded me of it the next morning—with photographic evidence to back it up.

Now, I don’t indulge in more than one drink at faculty events.

“You looking forward to the year?” she asks.

“Yep.” I slip my glasses on, and since I know for a damned fact she won’t go away until I do, I look up at her. “Is that all? I have some things I need to get finished.”

“I thought you said you were done?”

“I said I was ready,” I reply. “Not that I’m completely done.” I add a smile for effect.

“How’s that adorable nephew of yours?” she asks.

“He’s great. I really need to get to work, Allison. But thanks for stopping by.”

She stands then knocks a pencil off my desk and bends over to get it. Her breasts damn near fall out of her shirt, and it takes everything in me not to roll my eyes. I want so badly to tell her to move on. To tone down the desperation and find someone who actually wants her, but since I’m not looking for a sexual harassment lawsuit, I simply take the pencil when she offers it to me.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll check back in with you later.” She turns and leaves, swaying her hips as she does.

The moment she’s clear of the door, I jump up and lock it so she can’t make good on that promise. Then, I start making notes for the first week of classes.

Chapter 3

Kate

The shrill tone of my cell phone nearly knocks me off the ladder right as I finish mounting the new light above my bathroom mirror.

“Henry!” I call out. “Can you get my phone!”

When he doesn’t immediately answer, I groan and climb down the ladder then rush out to grab my phone. Henry is seated at the table, playing solitaire on my old laptop, headphones covering both ears.

With a half smile, I reach my phone right as it starts ringing again. I don’t recognize the number, but since it’s local, I assume it could be the college, so I answer quickly. “Hello?”

The line goes dead so I pull it away and try to call back, but it goes straight to a voicemail that has not been set up yet. So, not the college but likely a wrong number. After setting it back onto the counter, I creep forward and grab both of Henry’s shoulders.

He jolts, and I laugh.

“Mom!”

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

He grins at me, and the sight of it warms my heart. “I’m going to get you back.”

“You can try.”

“I’ll do it when you’re least expecting it.” He rubs his hands together.

“I’m always expecting,” I reply. “But, until your failed attempt, do you want to come see the light?”

He closes the lid to the laptop and jumps up then follows me into the bathroom. Aside from some touch-up paint, it’s completely done and has been a labor of love since I first started the project at the beginning of the summer.

We stand in the doorway now, and I let my gaze travel over the black hexagon tile I chose for the floor and the bottom of the shower, and the white marble I ran up the sides. Complete with rubbed bronze fixtures and the quartz bathroom countertop. It took nearly all of my savings, but I couldn’t be happier with the fact that I did it.

All with my own two hands.

In here, I was tile master, electrician, and plumber.

I grin.

“It looks so great, Momma!”

“Thanks, baby.” Leaning down, I press a kiss to the top of his head. “Before Grandma gets here, do you want to go grab an ice cream?” I offer since we didn’t get the boba tea earlier.

“Um, yes!” He bounces on the balls of his feet and claps his hands together. “I’m going to get mint chocolate chip!”

“As always,” I reply with a laugh.

Not caring that I’m in old work overalls and a stained, red long-sleeved shirt, I grab my purse and head out the door.

I’ve lived in Boston my entire life. Was born and raised here and have literally never left the city, unlike Dakota, who has been to four countries since she graduated high school. Before I had Henry, I’d wanted to see the world. Jerusalem, Barcelona, Rome, Italy...I’d wanted to visit them all and so many more.

But those two pink lines had changed all of that, and now I merely hope for the opportunity to live vicariously through

historical artifacts and textbooks that paint the pictures I'd been hoping to see in person.

Could I travel with my son? Absolutely. But traveling the world as a single woman is dangerous enough. Doing it alone with a child is just not a risk I'm willing to take.

"Can I get a double scoop, Momma?" he asks as we're climbing out of the car at our favorite ice cream joint.

"Sure. Why not."

"Yes!" He pumps his fist and does a little dance.

Just as I'm reaching for the door, it opens, and a man steps out with a little girl beside him. I stop, losing the ability to breathe momentarily as I stare at one of the most handsome men I've ever seen. Covered head to toe in tattoos, though, he has trouble written all over him.

Along with a gold band adorning a special finger on his left hand.

The urge to ask if he has a brother is strong, especially when he offers me a smile and steps aside, holding the door. "Come here, Aara," he says to the little girl, who smiles widely and steps to his side.

"Thanks," I say.

"You're welcome."

"Man, he looks so cool," Henry comments.

"He seems nice. Which is more important than looking cool," I tell him.

He rolls his eyes. "Yes, Mom."

* * *

"And you didn't ask if he had a brother?" Dakota demands as she lies on my bed, looking absolutely jaw-dropping after literally thirty-minutes. Meanwhile, I resemble something that crawled under a bridge, requiring weary travelers answer my riddles of three.

“I’m not interested in dating.”

“No, but I am!” she exclaims. “Had a chance to hook a sister up and you didn’t even try.”

I laugh. “And if he hadn’t had a brother, I would have looked like an idiot. Besides, I am trying to set an example for Henry.”

She purses her lips and shakes her head. “All you had to do was ask the question.” Dakota stands and crosses over to me. She reaches down and tugs the skirt of my dress up just a smidge, and thanks to how tight it is, it stays.

“Um. No.” I pull it back down so it’s a few inches above my knees. “You already have me wearing it. I’m not trying to have my ass grabbed tonight.”

Dakota shrugs. “Fair enough. You still look hot.”

I study my wavy hair and the little bit of lipstick I put on my face after refusing a full face of makeup from Dakota. She looks stunning, natural with her smoky eyes, but I’d just look like I got punched in the face. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. And I’m never wrong.” She grins. “I do this all the time.”

“Well, I don’t. And I’m already over tonight.”

Dakota grabs my shoulders. “We’re going to have so much fun tonight. I promise.”

“You do know I haven’t been to a club since my eighteenth birthday, right?”

“I know, and I couldn’t go with you.”

“You were sixteen.”

“Exactly.” Dakota slings an arm over my shoulders and faces the mirror with me. “This is going to be a night to remember, Sis. I promise.”

While I very much doubt that, I force a smile and nod because I can see the excitement all over Dakota’s face. “Then let’s get started.”

Dakota beams at me. “Yes! That’s the spirit!”

Together, we make our way out into my living room where my mom is prepping dinner for Henry as he plays outside on his swings. She whistles when she sees us. “Man, I have some good genes. You’re both very welcome.”

“Thank you, Momma,” Dakota says as she kisses our mother nosily on the cheek, leaving a lipstick mark. “Don’t wait up.”

She laughs, “Honey, I learned not to do that ages ago.” Her attention shifts to me, and the smile falters just a bit. Something that doesn’t surprise me given my mother has always been able to read me like a book. “It’s going to be okay. This is long overdue, my dear.”

“I’ll have my phone on me, so you can reach me if Henry needs me.”

“He won’t. We won’t.” She kisses my forehead. “You go and have a good time tonight, and we’ll have breakfast ready for you both as soon as you get here in the morning.”

“Might be noon!” Dakota calls out as she grabs her clutch by the door.

“It won’t be noon,” I tell my mom.

She laughs. “See you at eight.”

“See you then.”

The door opens, and Henry comes in. He stops in his tracks and holds up both hands. “Woah, Mom. You look beautiful!”

Tears spring to my eyes, but I blink them away then squat down as best I can to get a hug from my best guy. He wraps both arms around me and squeezes. “Thank you, baby. You be good, okay?”

“I always am,” he retorts.

“You sure are.” Releasing him, I stand. Nerves dance in my belly, but I try my best to shove them down as I muss his hair. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, Mom. Have fun! Grandma and I got this.”

I look to my mom, and she winks. “I know you do.”

“See you later, Henry!”

“By Aunt Dakota!”

Dakota crosses over and grabs my arm then tugs me toward the door all while I think of a million and one reasons why this is an absolutely terrible idea.

Chapter 4

Dean

The club is packed tonight. My usual table is the only one open, thanks to the reserved sign sitting on top of it. I cross over, trying not to brush every person I pass on my way. By the time I get there, a brandy is already waiting, two fingers of amber liquid to wash away the day.

“Hey, Dean.”

“Ambrosia,” I greet the waitress as I lean back in the booth. “Busy night?”

“And then some.” She wipes the back of her hand over her forehead. “Good day for you?”

“Not too shabby. Kicked two of my brothers’ asses at basketball, worked on some planning...the usual.”

She smiles. “Busy, busy man.”

“Not too busy for you. Did you bring it?”

“Yes.” She reaches into her black apron and pulls out a rolled-up stack of papers, offering it to me.

I look down at the title page for her application essay then set it on the table. “I’ll have it read by the end of the night.”

“You are seriously the best.”

“Nah, I just like to read.” I wink and take a drink of my brandy. Then I pull out the red pen I brought specifically for tonight and start reading while Ambrosia slips back into the crowd.

I don't surface again until I'm closing the packet and nodding appreciatively. My drink has already been refreshed, and Ambrosia is returning to my table, wearing a nervous look on her face as she slides into the half-circle booth beside me.

"Well?"

"If Harvard doesn't take you, they're idiots." I slide it over to her. "Fantastic."

"Really?" She grins and throws her arms around me. "You are the absolute best, Dean Dorsey. Next drink is on me."

"What would you have done if I didn't like it?" I ask, amused.

"Spit in your drinks." She winks and stands then shoves the rolled-up paper back into her apron. She starts to say something, but a woman yelling pulls our attention. Even with the music hammering from all corners, I can hear the anger in her voice.

"Touch her again, and I'll remove your balls!"

"Shit. There's trouble." Ambrosia slips away, and I follow when I note there are no bouncers heading her way. Clearly, they're already occupied somewhere else.

"It's not like I have much room!" the man yells back.

I get close enough to see the altercation, noting the woman with ashy purple hair, her face bright red, as she stands in front of a brunette with wide, green eyes. She looks—scared? Which immediately puts me into protective asshole mode.

"Oh, I'm sorry, is that why you needed to grab my sister's ass?" Purple demands.

The man grins and looks the brunette up and down. "She didn't seem to mind."

"Clearly, she did," I say before Purple can respond.

He barely spares me a glance. "Not your business."

"It actually is my business." I turn to Purple. "You guys must have walked right by me. Come on, I have a table right over there." I gesture to the reserved one in the corner. Purple

narrows her gaze at me but doesn't argue. "Far away from gropey assholes." I cross my arms, damn near daring muscles here to take a shot at me. He may have me on bulk, but I've got him on height and skill. He'll be drinking through a straw if he tries anything, and from the look on his face, he's smart enough to figure that out.

"Come on, Sis." Purple guides the brunette away from Muscles and over toward my table. They slide into the booth, and I make sure to keep my distance from both women. "Thanks for the rescue, but we had it handled," she says.

"You could have taken him," I agree, "But it would have ruined your night."

Ambrosia drops another brandy off. "Thanks. I'm not sure where Carl and Eric are." She shakes her head then plasters on a smile and turns to the women. "Can I get you ladies anything?"

"Crown and Coke," Purple replies.

"Gin and tonic," Brunette adds. I study her, enjoying the sound of her voice and the way she watches everything around her. This is a woman who misses nothing and is not quick to anger.

"You got it." She slips back into the crowd like the damned waitressing ninja she is.

"Thanks for coming to our rescue, anyway. We won't linger long," the brunette says.

"Don't be silly. I'm not meeting anyone, and this is a big-ass table. Enjoy it as long as you want."

"What's the catch?" Purple questions, her gaze narrowing.

"No catch," I reply. "You don't even have to talk to me." To demonstrate, I pull out the book I always have with me and open it.

"That's such a great one," Brunette says.

I look up at her, and our gazes lock. Something in my chest tightens, a sort of knot, that makes me a bit uneasy.

But then her cheeks flush, and I'm lost in the embarrassed smile on her face. "You've read it?" I ask.

"Oh yes. Twice. Loved it. I thought it was such a wonderfully thought-provoking read."

"Book lovers unite," Purple jokes.

I close the book and offer the brunette my hand, not missing the slight flinch when I reach toward her. Is she still on edge because of the asshole? Or did someone in her life hurt her? I pull back just enough to hopefully not make her nervous. "Dean," I tell her.

"Kate," she replies. "This is my sister, Dakota."

"Great to meet you both." I pull my hand back and offer it to her sister then settle back in my seat. "Now, I'll get back to reading and can assure you that I will pay you no attention unless you wish for company."

"Like a true gentleman," Dakota says.

"I try." With one final smile at Kate, I force my attention back to the book. However, I can't bring myself to actually read any of the words since it's all I can do to keep from glancing over the top of it at the gorgeous brunette across from me.

Chapter 5

Kate

The mystery man with wavy brown hair, whose nose is currently buried in a book, is too gorgeous for his—and my—own good. Aqua-colored eyes, that one could drown in if given ample opportunity, meet mine occasionally, though he keeps true to his promise and leaves us to visit with each other without interruption.

He sips his brandy and reads his book, not paying us any attention as Dakota studies the crowd on the dance floor. She's already buzzed, and to be honest, I'm three drinks further along than I normally am.

And it's making me want to be bold and do something I've never done.

It's making me want to ignore the voices in my head that tell me I'm unworthy and grab Dean's attention.

The man is reading one of my top reads of all time. Isn't that a sign?

"You want to dance?" Dakota asks, though her attention isn't on me but rather on a man who looks like he wears way too much body spray. He stands near the dance floor, grinning at her like she's the last piece of pie in a display case.

"Maybe later," I tell her.

"Come on, please?"

"You can go," I tell her with a laugh.

"But then I look desperate." She pouts. "I don't want to go alone."

“And as soon as you start dancing with him, I’m going to have to dodge ass grabbers.” The very idea of strange men putting their hands on me brings a fresh wave of anxiety. I haven’t been to a club since before I got pregnant. Why did I think this was a good idea?

“Not if you have someone to dance with,” she whispers, nodding toward Dean. He turns the page, his ability to focus on the book in this environment astounding. I study his profile in the dim light of the club, enjoying the way the shadows dance off the sharp angles of his face.

Strong jaw.

Kind eyes.

“Come on, Kate. Live a little.” Dakota bumps me with her shoulder.

And because liquid courage is thrumming through my veins and heating my blood, I shake off a bit of my nerves, I down the rest of my drink and say, “Dean?”

“Hmm?” he looks up from his book, and our gazes lock. Connection charges between us, heat that I can’t quite explain but actually want to explore. Which surprises me since I haven’t been with a man since—well—I got pregnant.

Seven years is a long time to be in a dry spell.

“We’re heading to the dance floor. Are you interested?” Nerves have me clenching my hands into fists beneath the table even though the worst thing he could say is no.

“Sounds great.” He shuts his book and leaves it on the table as we slide out of the booth. Then, he reaches out for my hand. I slide mine into his, enjoying the feel of his slightly calloused palm against mine.

Dakota takes my other hand, the grin on her face so damned obvious she might as well paint a sign on my face that reads, ‘Desperate and available’.

Although I wasn’t sure it was possible, the music gets even louder the closer we get to the dance floor. Body-spray meets my sister at the edge and reaches out to shake her hand.

“Hey, beautiful, want to dance?”

“Why do you think I’m here?” she asks sweetly then turns to me. “You good?” The way she asks it lets me know it’s her way of making sure I’m okay before leaving.

“Fine.” I smile even though I hate that my little sister feels the need to watch out for me the way she does.

“I’ll be nearby if you need me,” she says then squeezes my hand one final time before releasing it and wrapping her arms around his neck. Even before my ex nearly killed me, I wasn’t as confident as Dakota.

She’s always known exactly who she is and what she wants and is never afraid to go for it. It’s something I’ve always been jealous of. I imagine that even Jake couldn’t have stolen her light. Not like he did mine.

Dean leans in and whispers, “We can go back to the table if you want?” The feel of his hot breath against my skin sends a shiver of desire through me.

Watching my sister get lost in a sensual dance with a complete stranger just because she wants to has me shaking my head and turning toward my own handsome dance partner. “No. I want to dance.”

He grins, a lopsided smile that tilts my world on its axis, then grips my hips and pulls me closer. The feel of his hands on me sends my pulse racing, and even though my hands shake, I link them around his neck and start to move to the beat of a song I’ve never heard.

He moves in closer until our bodies are pressed together as we move. His breath is once again hot on my neck, and goosebumps flare to life along my body. I can feel the need for him all the way down to my toes. I have *never* felt a pull like this. A desire to have someone’s hands on me.

And thanks to the buzzing of alcohol in my system, I’m far more confident than I usually am. “Can we go somewhere quieter?” I ask.

“Of course.” The wicked grin is back, and before I know it, I’m offering my sister a tight smile and letting the

handsome stranger pull me off the dance floor and into a dimly lit hallway that leads to the bathrooms. “Is everything okay?”

His cheeks are flush just like I know mine are, his eyes so bright they distract from everything else around us.

I throw myself at him, arms around his neck, lips crashing to his. Dean spins me and pins me against the wall, his hands trailing up and down my body, his talented mouth pleasuring me with passionate kisses that have the voice in my head *screaming* for more.

More of his mouth.

His hands.

More of everything.

A door closes, and I open my eyes long enough to be surprised that we’re in a single-stall bathroom. Dean pulls back, breathing ragged. “This okay?”

“Yes.” I pull him in again, and his hands grip the bottom of my dress. He pulls it up, hiking it around my waist, and I throw my legs around his, pulling him in. The hard bulge in his pants presses against my core, and I moan, a throaty sound that feels like it’s coming from a million miles away.

“You are so incredibly sexy,” he whispers.

Everything around me becomes clear as those words essentially throw a bucket of cold water on me. I stiffen and push him back. My past hits me like a freight train, and fear is a dagger to my chest.

He sets me down and moves across the bathroom, shirt untucked and eyes glazed with passion. But he keeps space between us, not pressing forward. It’s respect and something I appreciate even now in my panic.

“We can’t,” I choke out.

“We can’t?” he asks.

“No.” I shake my head. “I can’t do this.” The image of two pink lines on a white stick comes to mind. A promise of help that never came through. “No.”

“Is everything okay?” Dean asks, moving in closer.

It’s only when he looks at me that I realize I have tears in my eyes. “I’m fine. I have to go.” I yank my dress back down and open the door then rush out into the crowded club. Dakota throws her head back and laughs at something the man beside her said, but when she sees me, that laughter dies.

Her cheeks turn crimson, her eyes hard as stone. “Where is he? Did he hurt you?”

“What? No. Not at all. I want to leave, though. Please, Dakota. I want to go home.”

“Of course.” Her gaze drifts over to the stranger. “Call me tomorrow?”

“Definitely. You okay?” he asks me.

“Fine.” I turn away and start toward the exit with Dakota on my heels, all the while mentally ripping myself a new one over the mistake I nearly made.

* * *

“So, you planning on telling me what that was about?” Dakota asks as we pull into my driveway. “And why you can’t come stay at my apartment like we’d talked about?”

“I want to be home,” I tell her. “And it was nothing. We kissed, I didn’t feel it, and I wanted to leave.”

Dakota narrows her gaze on me. “You’ve never been a good liar.”

The tears threaten to spill from my eyes, so I take a deep breath and face her. “I haven’t been with a man since Jake.” She already knows that but thankfully doesn’t point it out. “And tonight, when Dean and I were—” I close my eyes and take a deep breath, fighting the darkness that continues to try and drag me down. “When we were kissing, he told me how sexy I was, and it was like a flashback to the last time I was with Jake when he—”

“When he forced himself on you right before nearly killing you,” Dakota finishes.

The tears spill from my cheeks, and I wrap both arms around myself. “I don’t know how to forget. How to move on.”

“Kate.” Dakota leans across her center console and wraps her arms around me, holding me like she did that night I called her to the hospital after I’d been admitted. She’d held me closely, just before trying to leave and kill Jake. Thankfully, the cops grabbed him first. Otherwise, my sister likely would have been behind bars.

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be pathetic. Dean was perfectly nice. He stopped when I asked him to, but I just—”

“You are *not* pathetic, so stop that right now. And it’s good Dean was a decent human being, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t validated in how you’re feeling, Sis. You were violated in the worst possible way, nearly murdered, and still survived. That makes you stronger than anyone I’ve ever met.”

I shake my head then angrily wipe the tears away. “I’m so tired of living in his shadow. Even now. He’s still in jail, and yet I still struggle to move on. Do I not get that epic love, Dakota? Do I not get to be happy?”

She reaches forward and brushes the hair behind my ear. “When it is right, you will find that epic love you desire. Until then, I need you to remember that you are an amazing mom who is rocking raising a son by herself and going to college to finalize a degree. You’re basically a superhero.”

“Superhero.” I shake my head. “That’s so far from the truth.”

“No,” she says, “It’s really not.” After squeezing me one last time, she releases me and turns the car off.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m staying the night.” She climbs out of her car and shuts the door, prompting me to quickly wipe my cheeks and follow.

“You really don’t have to.”

“I want to.” Dakota wraps an arm around my shoulders and guides me into my house. After re-locking the door behind me, Dakota and I head straight up to my room. I shower quickly then change into a large, oversized shirt and sweatpants before leaving the bathroom for Dakota and making my way across the hall to Henry’s room.

The door to the guest room is open, and I catch sight of my mom sleeping soundly beneath a lilac comforter. I smile then close it slightly and step into Henry’s room. His sound machine is on, the sound of soft rain easing my anxiety dang near instantly.

He’s curled on his side, the dim light from a nightlight just enough that I can make out his features. Soft light brown hair, a rounded face...tears spring to my eyes, and I crawl under the covers alongside him, wrapping one arm around his waist and breathing in the scent of his fruity shampoo.

This is where I belong.

Not some nightclub where I’m trying to be someone that I’m not.

Right here, right beside the little boy who glued the broken pieces of my soul back together.

Chapter 6

Dean

“**U**nkle Dean!”

I turn just in time to catch my niece Aara as she launches herself into my arms. “Aara bug!” I give her a tight squeeze then pull back enough to look into her wide gaze. “You look different.” Scrunching my brows together, I study her, pretending that I don’t notice the new bangs on her forehead. “What did you do?”

She giggles. “Uncle Dean. It’s my hair! Momma took me for a haircut today!”

I beam at Rose as she carries the infant baby boy she shares with my brother Zander in her arms. She may not be Aara’s birth mother, but she treats the little girl like she’s her own flesh and blood.

Zander moves in behind her, every inch of his exposed skin covered in tattoos. Then again, what would you expect from someone who owns his own parlor? He looks at me. “Where’s Mom?”

“In her room. She spilled some strawberry glaze on her shirt.”

“Strawberry glaze?” Aara lights up. “Are we having strawberry shortcake for dessert?”

I kneel. “Looks like it. But shhh. Don’t tell her I told you.”

She squeals and throws both arms in the air. “Yes! My favorite!” Then, she whispers, “I won’t say anything.”

Chuckling, I straighten and take a swig from the bottle of beer in my hand.

“Can you help me get your brother in the rocker?” Rose asks Aara.

“Definitely.” The little girl skips off with Rose, leaving me and Zander in the kitchen.

“What’s eating you?” he asks, setting the diaper bag he’d been carrying down on the floor.

“What are you talking about?”

Zander goes to the refrigerator and grabs a beer of his own, opening it as he faces me. “Something’s off.”

“Nothing’s off. I’m fine.”

He shakes his head, and I don’t know why I bother trying to keep anything from him or my other brothers. The four of us might as well be mind readers when it comes to each other. Still, telling him I can’t get my mind off the gorgeous brunette from the club Friday night would be foolish.

I’ll hear nothing but how great it is I’m falling for one woman. Even though that couldn’t be further from the truth. Honestly, the way she’d paled so completely...she’d been terrified. But I can’t, for the life of me, figure out what she was scared of. And that’s why my brain can’t seem to focus on anything else. It’s why I went home without taking anyone up on their offer to take me home. And why I spent Saturday night lying in bed while my mind went over every moment of that night.

I hadn’t pushed her.

I’d offered to take her back to the table when her sister took off.

And she’s the one who asked me to go somewhere more private.

“Stop lying, asshole. What is it?”

I take a deep breath. “You’re going to read into it.”

“Read into what?” I look up as my other brother Axel and his fiancé, Kennedy, stroll in hand in hand.

“Where are my favorite kids?” she asks Zander.

“With Rose in the living room.”

With a bright smile, she kisses Axel noisily and slips out of the room.

“We don’t even get a hello anymore,” I joke.

“Nope. Kennedy’s got babies on the mind these days.” Axel himself looks pale.

“Oh? Babies before wedding bells?” Zander jokes.

“Nope. We decided to wait until after the wedding, but I mean—*right* after. She wants to start trying on our wedding night.”

“Six months, brother. You have at least six months before pregnancy,” Zander jokes. “You got this.”

He shakes his head. “Enough about me. What are you reading into?” he asks as he grabs his own beer from the fridge. The bastard is likely relishing the change of subject.

Zander reaches over and clasps me on the shoulder. “Something is eating at our little brother here, and he is being less than forthcoming.”

“Oh?” Axel arches a brow. “Could it be a woman?”

“Seems we arrived just in time.”

I groan as our oldest brother, Everett, and his new wife step into the room. Nova looks every bit a blushing bride, the expression on her sun-kissed face brightening up the room.

“Fresh from your honeymoon! We didn’t expect you guys this week.”

“Well, we couldn’t wait to see everyone.” Nova crosses over and hugs me then repeats the gesture with Axel and Zander before excusing herself to find Kennedy and Rose.

“How was Paris?” I ask, hoping the new arrivals will keep their attention off me.

“Great. Now what woman has you in knots?” Everett retrieves a bottle of water and leans back against the counter.

Axel and Zander grin like the idiots they are.

“I never said it was a woman.”

“You never said it wasn’t,” Axel corrects. “So, who is she, and when can we meet her? You getting married? How many kids do you want?”

Panic claws at my chest for no sensible reason. “Woah. Hold the damned phone. No marriage. No kids.” Sighing, because I know I won’t get out of this, I continue, “The woman in question is a complete stranger I met at a club, and you will never be meeting her because I won’t be seeing her again.” The moment the words are out of my mouth, I want to kick myself because my tone gives away the fact that she wasn’t just some *random stranger*. Or, at least, it didn’t feel like that. There was a connection there, even if I can’t understand why.

“Certainly doesn’t sound like that.” Axel crosses his arms. “So, what gives?”

Knowing there is still no way I’m getting out of this. I run a hand through my hair. “She was being groped by some asshole at the bar, and I overheard her sister reading him the riot act. I got involved and offered for them to come sit at my table. They did, she was cute. We were getting hot and heavy in the bathroom, and she bailed before things went further. That’s it.”

All three of my brothers feign shock.

“*The Dean Dorsey couldn’t close?*” Everett quips.

“She actually turned you down?” Axel adds.

Zander snorts. “About time someone put you in your place.”

“No one put me in my place.” I shake my head. “It was weird. She looked almost—scared of me?”

All of the humor vanishes from their faces at once. If I didn’t know them better, I’d think they rehearsed it.

“Why?” Zander asks.

“I don’t know. That’s the thing. She asked me to dance. I offered to take her back to the table. Then she asked me to go somewhere quieter. She kissed me, and then, before I knew it, she was shoving me back and sprinting from the bathroom like I’d just grown three more hands. It was wild.”

“Think she got spooked with the whole in-public thing?” Axel asks.

“Possibly. But this felt like more. I don’t know how to explain it, but it’s got me messed up, thinking I did something wrong.”

“Doesn’t sound like it. You backed off when you needed to,” Everett says.

“I know that, but—you should have seen her face. She was pale, eyes wide—I mean, shit, she looked like she was about to cry.”

“Maybe she’d just gotten out of a crappy relationship,” Zander offers. “Sounds like you were a rebound gone wrong.”

“Maybe,” I agree, even though I very much doubt that’s what it is. I’ve been a rebound before. Countless times, even, and it’s never gone like that before. “Anyway, like I said. I won’t be seeing her again, so it’s a moot point.” I down my beer just as my mom comes into the kitchen, wearing a new pink shirt. She sees my brothers and smiles then beams when her gaze lands on Everett.

“Honey! I wasn’t expecting you guys this week!”

I relax slightly because I know that the conversation has finally turned from me to my eldest brother.

“Hey, Mom,” he says as he wraps his arms around her. “We got in this morning. Hope it’s okay we joined you.”

She smacks him lightly on the arm. “You hush. You know you’re always welcome in this house. Where’s my new daughter?”

“In the living room with Rose, Kennedy, and the kids.”

“Then that is where I will be until dinner is done.” She checks the timer then turns to me. “When that goes off, stir and come get me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say with a smile as she rushes off to join the party happening in the living room.

* * *

Monday morning comes with what feels like lightning speed. By seven o’clock, I’m dressed in dark jeans, a white button down, and a grey vest, my messenger bag slung over my shoulder as I make my way into the college.

The coffee in my hand is already my third cup, but I still feel like I could use at least another two. It’s how I feel every first day, no matter how many times I do this. As the youngest professor to make tenure at this college, the pressure to always be at my best is intense.

I have to be early.

Stay late.

And make sure that every student who comes through my class feels enough pressure to do their best while not thinking I’m a complete and total asshat.

The way I see it, though, is there are so many people counting on me to fail; I can’t do anything but succeed. I can’t even begin to name all the professors here who were furious when I was awarded it and they weren’t.

They have decades on me, but the papers I publish for this place far surpass anything they’ve put up. It’s not arrogance, just fact. I round the corner toward my office, and my good mood takes an immediate nosedive when I see the woman waiting for me just outside my closed office door.

“Allison,” I greet. “What can I do for you?” After unlocking my door, I move inside and set my bag down on my desk before taking a seat behind it.

She shuts the door behind her and drops into the chair across from me. “Today has been a nightmare already.”

“Why is that?” I ask, only halfway listening as I unpack my laptop.

“First off, my hot water was out at my apartment, so I wasn’t even able to take a warm shower. Then, my coffee pot broke.” She pouts. “And then, as I was leaving, I stepped in a massive puddle from a leaking sprinkler and had to go back inside to change.”

“Sounds horrible,” I say half-heartedly.

“It was.” She takes a deep breath, and I take a drink of my coffee, hoping she’ll take my lack of attention as a hint and get the hell out of my office. “I knew you’d understand. You always do.”

A hand caresses mine, and I look up into her gaze. “Boundaries, Allison. You know I have them for a reason.”

“Oh, come on, Dean. Can’t you feel the connection between us?”

“There is no connection,” I tell her. “Just a working relationship.”

She rolls her eyes and pushes to her feet. “It’s a new year, Dean Dorsey. And I have a feeling, by the end of it, you’ll be singing a different tune.”

Chapter 7

Kate

With a travel mug full of coffee in my hand and nerves dancing in my stomach, I make my way through the halls of the college and toward my first class of the day. It's ten till nine, and I've been up since three, unable to make myself go back to sleep.

Thankfully, today's my light day.

History and English. Two classes with a three-hour break between. Plenty of time for a quick nap, food, and another pot of coffee.

All around me, students walk, most of them in groups of at least three. They laugh freely, their college days taking place before most of them have had a hard dose of reality. Every single one of them I pass looks younger than me, and I'm not the only one who notices.

I offer tight smiles to them as we pass, but based on the hushed whispers or uncomfortable half-grins, they're not looking to make friends with a closer-to-thirty-than-twenty-year-old single mom.

Perfect.

With my bag slung over my shoulder, I try to keep my gaze down and make my way into the history class. Students have already filed into the auditorium-style chairs lining most of the circular room. The whiteboard at the front of the room is completely blank, and it looks like the teacher has yet to arrive so I take a moment to drink my coffee and check my phone just in case Henry's school has called.

I don't know that I'll ever get used to him being in school, but he absolutely loves it.

A young man drops down beside me and sets his books down with a loud *thump*. I jump just enough that he notices.

“Sorry,” he grumbles. His dark hair is disheveled when he removes a backward baseball cap. Dark circles sit beneath his eyes, and he smells so much like tequila it makes my stomach churn just thinking about the night he must have had.

“It's okay,” I reply. “I'm Kate.” I offer him my hand.

He stares at it then grins. “Kaleb.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” He looks me up and down as one might survey a prized hog, so I turn my attention to pulling out notebooks and doing what I can to keep my focus away from him.

More students file in, and my nerves grow.

Final semester, I remind myself. I'll be done by Christmas.

“Morning, everyone.” A man walks in, his voice all too familiar though I can't quite place—and then he turns around.

My mouth dries, and my heart hammers.

Dark hair.

Bright eyes.

“I'm Professor Dean Dorsey, and this is your crash course on the past.” He grins, a lopsided smile that I haven't been able to get out of my head since that night at the club.

“No,” I blurt out then clamp a hand over my mouth as chuckles fill my ears. Those gorgeous blue eyes find mine, and the confusion on his face dissipates almost instantly. Replaced by recognition and—if I'm not mistaken—annoyance.

“Is there a problem, Miss—”

“Bennett,” I say quickly, my cheeks so hot I'm sure I'm about to burst into flames. “And no, I'm sorry. I just—I got a text and accidentally answered out loud.”

We both know I'm lying. Heck, I imagine *everyone* in this class knows I am, but he doesn't point it out.

"Well, try to keep your responses private going forward, Miss Bennett. Your personal business does not belong in this class."

Asshole. Can he not understand my shock? It then hits me that he might think I did this on purpose. Ugh. It would be just like an arrogant man to think I'm stalking him. That I'm so desperate I can't get him out of my head.

Why did I go to that club with Dakota?

The room is still laughing, and I do my best to breathe through it. Even the guy next to me is chuckling like an idiot.

"Will do," I say. "Sorry. Again."

Dean continues looking at me a moment longer then turns back toward the massive chalkboard while my cheeks continue to heat. Surely spontaneous combustion is right around the corner. Is my will up to date? Is my mom ready to raise another kid? Because if I die from embarrassment, she's who will take Henry.

"As I said," he starts again, "I'm Professor Dorsey. In this course, we'll be covering American History in great detail, as well as some European history toward the end of the class. You will be expected to be here for every lecture, and be prepared to turn in a detailed paper with proper citations in order to pass this class at the end of the semester." He turns back to us, his bright gaze finding mine once more.

I lose my breath.

The connection that passes between us is like lightning in a bottle. Barely capped and ready to pop off at any moment. I've never, in my entire life, felt anything this potent. I'd blamed the alcohol on Friday, but now I see that it is so much more.

And that terrifies me.

Does he feel it, too?

"Any questions?" he asks.

No one speaks.

“Great.” He grins that wicked smile that catches me completely off guard and makes me want to launch myself at him. “Then let’s get started.”

* * *

“Miss Bennett?”

I stop in the doorway and take a deep breath before turning. I’d nearly made it out. Almost managed to get free of this class without a direct conversation. “Yes, Professor?”

“Can I speak with you?” he asks, behaving as though he is completely unaffected by me.

“Of course.” I ignore the whispers as the final students leave the lecture hall, making my way over toward the table that sits at the very center. The closer I get, the heavier my legs feel. How am I supposed to come into this classroom every day? How am I to be expected to pay attention when all I can do is remember the way that mouth felt on mine?

The door closes and Dean levels his full attention on me. He might as well have removed all the oxygen from the room with how I’m struggling to breathe beneath it. “I didn’t realize you were a college student.”

“Older than the typical one,” I reply, almost offended.

“You are.” He doesn’t mean it to be offensive, that much is clear, but he doesn’t even try to lie. Why is it that I appreciate that even more than him placating me? “I make it a point not to fraternize with women who appear to be of college age.”

“Good for you.”

“Specifically, so I can avoid situations like this.”

“Like what?” I ask, venom lacing my tone. Is he seriously trying to accuse me of misleading him?

“Where a woman I was with is in my class.”

“Well,” I snap. “In case you forget, we didn’t hook up, *Professor*. And as far as me being older than the typical college girl, I got started late. I didn’t purposely mislead you, I just didn’t think it was necessary to give a stranger my life story. And if you’ve forgotten, you failed to mention the fact that you were a college professor.”

He glares back at me for a moment. “I didn’t see how it would be pertinent.”

“Which makes this as much your fault as it is mine.” When he doesn’t say anything, I start for the door. “Look, I’ll get myself transferred to another class. Maybe there’s another—”

“No.”

I turn. Dean is so close. Too close. My legs turn to jelly, and heat pools in my core. I can all but feel his breath on my face. “It would solve this problem.”

“There are no other classes like mine,” he says.

“I know, but—”

“Please don’t get transferred on my account.” Reaching up, he shoves a strand of hair behind my ear, and I shiver at the contact. Dean takes a step away. “You’re right. We didn’t hook up. So, this shouldn’t be awkward. Thankfully, you stopped it before—”

“You banged me in the public bathroom of a nightclub?”

His gaze shifts to mine. “I’m sorry. I thought—”

“No.” I hold up a hand, interrupting him, then let loose the breath I’d been holding. “It’s okay. I’m sorry.”

“We both seem to be rather apologetic.”

I smile. “I suppose we are.”

Dean offers me a hand. “Friendly acquaintances?” That crooked smile is back, and my heart thuds in my chest.

“Friendly acquaintances,” I agree, trying to ignore the jolt as his hand grips mine. “And I really didn’t mean to blurt that out earlier. I was just caught off guard.”

“You and me both. Sorry that I came off like an asshole. You were the last person I was expecting to see in my class.”

I laugh. “Well, I’m glad it won’t be awkward going forward.”

He nods. “I’m actually glad to see you again. I wanted to make sure I didn’t do anything the other night. You ran out so fast—”

“No, not at all.” I inwardly kick myself for not thinking about how it looked to him. “That was all me. I just, I don’t typically do that.”

He grins. “I figured as much. I just wanted to make sure I didn’t do something and not realize it.”

“You were great,” I reply. “I mean—” My cheeks heat, and I close my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

Dean laughs. “I do.”

My stomach growls, reminding me that I skipped breakfast this morning and making me want to crawl into a hole all over again. How many times can someone be mortified before they roll over and die from embarrassment? “I need to get going. Skipped breakfast. Tha—”

“Want to grab a bite? My next class isn’t for an hour.”

My knee-jerk reaction is to say yes, which is exactly why I don’t. “I don’t know that that’s appropriate.”

His expression falls, and I hate seeing that smile fade. “You’re probably right.” He slings his bag over his shoulder. “The cafeteria food is okay, but if you’re looking for a life-changing burger, then George’s down the street is the place to go.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the inside scoop.”

“Anytime, Miss Bennett. See you on Wednesday.” He turns and leaves the room, and I remain rooted where I am for a few seconds, staring after him. I can all but see him beneath the dim lights of the club.

Feel his hard body moving against mine while we danced.

Taste the passionate kisses shared in the dark.

Ugh, this is going to be harder than it should be.

* * *

“So, sexy club man is your professor?” Dakota asks as she plops down in a chair at the table. She plucks a blueberry from my muffin. “Talk about a turn of events.”

“I embarrassed the crap out of myself. You should have seen it. Everyone laughed.”

“I doubt that,” she replies with a smile.

“Then you’d be wrong. They *all* laughed. I mean, I blurted ‘no’ loud enough that the class next to us might have heard it.”

Dakota’s eyes fill with tears as she tries to hold back her laughter. “I can’t say I blame you. I mean, he was *insanely* hot and a respectable gentleman who backed off when you asked him to. But you did leave him rocking a hard-on in the bathroom while you ran off into the dark.”

“I had my reasons.”

“Not saying you didn’t,” she replies. “But seeing him again—especially teaching your class—would have been a doozy for anyone.”

“Yeah?” I ask, hopeful that I might not be as pathetic as I thought.

“Oh yeah. What did he say to you? Did he realize it was you?”

“He asked me if he’d done anything that night. He blamed himself for me running out.”

Dakota stares at me. “He actually said that?” When I nod, she continues, “And meant it? Like, he cared if he’d done something?”

“It certainly seemed that way,” I tell her truthfully. “And then he asked me to lunch.”

“Shut up!” she exclaims. “He asked you out?”

“Not like that. My stomach growled, and he asked if I wanted to grab some food. As friends.”

“He said as friends?”

“Not right then,” I admit. “But we agreed to be friendly acquaintances right before.”

Dakota grins and leans back in the chair. “My big sister, the straight-A’s all through high school, head of the debate team, has a crush on her history professor.”

Embarrassment heats my cheeks. “What? No.”

“Come on,” she says. “It’s okay. I get it. He’s cute, smart, and clearly into old stuff just like you are.”

“Old stuff?” I gape at her. “History is at the root of our very existence.”

“Sure it is. And that’s something he can appreciate, too.” She winks. “See how much you have in common?”

“Even if I were interested in a relationship of any kind—which I’m not—he’s off limits.”

Dakota laughs. “Dear, dear sister. That’s what makes it so wonderfully perfect.”

I roll my eyes. “You and your forbidden romantic heart. I am not going to date my history professor. I can’t afford to make any mistakes this semester. Not with Henry’s and my future on the line.”

Dakota smiles. “Fair enough.” She leans back. “Did I tell you that Paul called me?”

“Paul?”

“The guy from the bar. We’re going out tonight.”

“Yeah?”

My sister begins telling me about the dinner they’re planning as well as what she’s planning on wearing. I listen half-heartedly, though, my mind on a dark-haired history professor with eyes like ocean glass.

Chapter 8

Dean

“**Y**our student?” Axel throws his head back and laughs. “That’s a tough break, brother.” He takes a bite of the burger I brought him. A burger that I grabbed while at George’s because I half-expected Kate to show up.

Miss Bennett, I remind myself. Off limits.

Either way, I’d felt like such an idiot for waiting for her that I’d ordered food to bring to Axel’s mechanic shop.

“Not a tough break. We didn’t even get anywhere.”

“No, but you wanted to.”

“Sure. She’s gorgeous. Smart. But she’s also the type of woman who expects a relationship, and I’m not planning to give her—or anyone—that.”

“No, of course not. Because Dean Dorsey doesn’t do relationships.” Axel rolls his eyes. “Heard the speech, Brother, but I do not subscribe to the channel of bullshit.”

I pop a salty fry into my mouth. “It really doesn’t matter either way. It’s the truth.”

“You haven’t been able to get this woman out of your mind since you met her at the club.”

“Because I was worried I’d done something to upset her. Now I know I didn’t.”

Axel rolls his eyes again.

“You keep doing that and they’re going to stick that way.”

“Okay, *Mom*,” he shoots back.

We laugh, until the image of her that night in the bathroom assaults me again. “There was something in her eyes that night, Axel. She was scared. And it has been eating at me ever since. Even though I know it wasn’t me—”

“It’s still eating at you, not knowing why she was scared.”

I hate that he’s right. That there was something between us that makes me want to explore it. And I hate it even more that it’s now an impossibility. “She’s my student,” I remind him. “And that makes her completely and totally off limits.”

“Whose off limits?” Kennedy breezes in, carrying three coffees in a tray. She sets it down on Axel’s desk, kisses him noisily, then offers me the one with my name on it.

“That woman Dean’s been obsessing over is a student in his history class.”

Kennedy flips her blonde ponytail off her shoulder and gapes at me. “Seriously?”

“Yes. And I’m not obsessing.”

Kennedy steals a fry from my stack. “That’s not what Axel said. According to him, you’re one step away from joining us down the aisle.”

I shake my head with a laugh. “You guys are all by yourself on that walk. I’m happy to stand at the altar as best man, but no damned way am I taking a wife.”

“And why not?” Kennedy has never shied away from asking difficult questions. Honestly, it’s one of the reasons I absolutely adore her.

“Because most women are too high maintenance.”

“Most women?”

“Aside from you, Nova, and Rose. My selfish-ass brothers got the best girls and left me no one to settle down with.” I flash her a smile, and she pulls an Axel, rolling her eyes.

“Please, Dean. You say the word, and I can find you someone who will steal your breath away.”

“Sounds to me like he already has,” Axel retorts.

“That does sound like it’s the case,” Kennedy adds with a grin.

“Why do I tell you people anything?” I stand, offering her the rest of my fries, which she accepts without hesitation. “Now, I have to get back to school. My next class starts in an hour, and I want to avoid any more run-ins with Allison.”

“Allison?” Kennedy nearly chokes on her fries. “Who the hell is Allison? Another student?”

“If only,” I tell her.

“She’s another professor. Dean hooked up with her at a Christmas party, and she’s in love with him now.”

“I did not hook up with her,” I correct. “We made out.”

“You need to learn to keep it in your pants until you decide to get married,” Kennedy says. “Because it seems to me that you keep getting yourself into difficult situations when you let little Dean take the lead.”

Axel chokes on his burger and has to tap his fist to his chest to clear his throat. When he does, his eyes are full of tears, and laughter quickly replaces his coughing. “I love you so damned much, woman.”

She beams down at him. “I speak the truth.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep it in my pants. I’m doing just that when it comes to women at the school.” I sling my bag over my shoulder and grab my coffee. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go work a *real* job.”

Axel throws his head back and laughs again. “Call me when you break a sweat!” he calls out as I make my way out of his auto shop.

* * *

My final class out of the way, I roll my shoulders and step out into the hall. I pull out my phone and check my emails as I

walk, scanning to make sure I didn't miss anything important.

A body slams into mine, and papers fall everywhere.

"Shit! I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry, I—"

That voice. I look up and right into the eyes of none other than Kate Bennett. We're close, inches apart, and lust slams through me like a freight train. I swallow hard, trying to remember why I'm crouched on the floor and staring into the most beautiful eyes. Like green emeralds shining beneath the bright sun.

I could drown in them.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I wasn't watching where I was going, and I walked right into you."

"I did the exact same thing," I reply, snapping out of my stupor. After gathering her books, I stand and offer them to her. She takes them, and our fingers brush.

I try not to feel the shock that shoots through me at the contact.

"It's been a long day," she replies with a laugh.

"The first day usually is." I clear my throat. "Are you on your way out?"

"Yes. Finally."

"Me, too," I blurt.

"Really?" Her brow furrows. "Why were you walking this way then?"

"Force of habit," I lie smoothly. "I usually do office hours after class, but I don't have any today." To demonstrate, I turn and start walking the other way. She falls into step beside me, close enough that I can breathe in the floral scent drifting off of her body.

Shampoo maybe?

Either way, it's intoxicating.

I take a step away from her. If she notices, she doesn't say anything.

"How's your sister?" I ask, trying to break the silence between us.

"She's good."

"That's good." We reach the doors, and I smile at her. "Well, have a good rest of your day, Miss Bennett."

"Thank you, Professor. You, too." She pushes through the doors, and my gaze travels down her body even though I tell myself not to. Something I immediately regret, especially when she drops a book and has to bend over to retrieve it.

I force my gaze away and head straight for my car, without looking back again.

As soon as I've climbed behind the wheel, my phone rings. "What's up, asshole?" I ask as I answer.

"Never mind then," Zander replies. "Sorry, Rose! He doesn't want to come over for dinner."

"Wait, what? No. If Rose is cooking, count me in. The woman is a chef after all."

"She said you've been eating out too much."

"She's not wrong." I think of the takeout I was going to grab on my way home.

There's some rustling on the line; then a feminine voice fills my ear. "What your brother *meant* to ask is would you like to come over for dinner?"

"Absolutely." I chuckle. "Can I bring anything?"

"I won't complain if you grab a bottle of wine."

"Consider it done."

"Thanks, Dean." Rose pulls away from the line and Zander gets back on.

"See you about six?"

"Sounds good. I'll be there." After hanging up the phone, I pull out of the lot and head for the grocery store. It's a short

distance from the school and right on the way to Zander and Rose's place.

I park, grab my phone, and head into the store. I'm not in there two minutes when I spot a familiar brunette just ahead of me, scrutinizing two bottles of cabernet.

"We have to stop meeting like this."

Kate jumps and turns toward me. "Are you stalking me now?"

"Hardly." I reach forward and take a bottle from the shelf, one that matches a cab in her hand. "Going to my brother and his wife's for dinner. Can't show up empty-handed."

"Very gentlemanly of you," she replies, putting back the bottle that matches mine.

I smirk because I know it was a calculated move. "I can be one. What are your plans tonight?"

"Dinner, study, then wine," she replies as she sets the wine into the basket on her arm. It sits right on top of a couple of cans of spaghetti o's.

"Dinner of champions?"

"Dinner of single-mom life," she replies.

If ever there was anything that could shut me up, it's that. "You have a kid?"

"I do. A son. And he's hungry and waiting for me." She moves past me, and based on her expression, I can tell I've offended her. But I can't figure out why.

"Wait."

She stops and turns. "Yes, Professor?"

"I feel like I keep saying the wrong thing to you, and I can't figure out why."

"You didn't say the wrong thing. I'm just in a hurry." But her tone is clipped. She meets my gaze. "Is that all?"

"Sure."

Without another word, Kate turns and heads straight for the register. I stare after her, not needing anything else from the store but also not wanting to crowd her there, too.

Her ability to go from friendly to cold as ice is one I would appreciate if it weren't so damned frustrating.

Still, it's a good reminder that she is off limits entirely.

The fact that she has a kid is just another reason why. Not that I have anything against them. In fact, I love kids. But when it comes to relationships of any sort—they make things...complicated.

And complicated is the absolute *last* thing I want.

Chapter 9

Kate

Pain blossoms behind my eyes, so I pinch the bridge of my nose and take deep, steady breaths. The wine in my glass sits nearly untouched, and I'm forced to wonder why I bothered pouring it in the first place.

I *knew* I wasn't going to be able to drink it because I've been dealing with a budding migraine ever since I ran into Dean—*Professor Dorsey*—in the hallway. Seeing him kneeling in front of me, his eyes bright and full of heat, had done things to me that I would really rather ignore.

For a brief moment, I'd felt the rest of the world disappear around us. And that's far too dangerous a thought to inspect too closely.

"Ugh, this is hopeless." I close the book I was reading and press the tips of both fingers against my temples in an attempt to will the throbbing to stop. I cannot afford a migraine right now. Literally and figuratively.

School just started.

I have homework.

And actual work tomorrow afternoon.

Pushing to my feet, I make my way into the kitchen and pull down a bottle of ibuprofen before popping four two-hundred milligram tabs and washing it down with a glass of water.

My phone rings, the shrill sound making me kick myself for not turning it on silent after putting Henry to bed. I answer

quickly, without bothering to check the readout.

“Hello?”

“Katherine.”

And this is why I should have checked. I stiffen, my throbbing head now the least of my concerns. “Dad.”

“If you’re awake I would like to come inside.”

Adrenaline surges through me, and my stomach twists into knots. “You’re here?”

“On the porch.” The call ends, and I pull it away from my ear slowly, staring down at the screen as though he might jump through it.

I’ve never been afraid of my father. Not in the way that I worried he would cause me physical harm. Honestly, he was a great—albeit semi-absent—father when I was growing up. It wasn’t until I got pregnant and had Henry that he became distant.

When his grandson turned three, he decided that he never wanted to see us again.

Which begs the question: Why is he here now?

I set my phone down and make my way to the front door. After taking a deep breath, I disarm the alarm panel, unlock the door, and pull it open. The man standing on the other side might as well be a stranger.

His dark hair has gone full salt and pepper, the grey making him look even more distinguished. His eyes—the same shade of green as mine—are harder now if that’s even possible.

And the grim flattening of his lips tells me that he doesn’t want to be here anymore than I want him here.

“What are you doing here?”

“May I come in?” he questions, keeping both hands in the pockets of his black coat.

I don't answer, but I do step aside and gesture for him to enter.

My house isn't large. It's a single-story, three-bed with two bathrooms. It's older, the countertops a laminate rather than the granite that my mother has in her own kitchen. And the decorations are pictures Henry and I have drawn over the years.

But none of that has ever bothered me.

Until now.

Under the scrutiny of my father, I feel small now.

"What are you doing here?" I ask again then cross into the kitchen to retrieve my barely touched wine. Who knows, maybe adding it to the ibuprofen will make it work better. Thinking of Henry upstairs, I opt for water instead. The last thing he needs is me drinking an entire bottle of wine just because I'm stressed.

Which will inevitably be what happens if I start right now.

"I need to speak with you." His voice is deep. I used to love curling in bed and listening to him read me stories. Now, it's like fire biting my skin.

"You know," I say after taking a drink of water, "you could have come in the morning and seen your grandson."

A muscle in his jaw twitches. "This doesn't concern him."

"Nothing ever does when it comes to you." I put the water down and cross my arms. "What do you want to talk to me about that couldn't be said over the phone or in a politely worded email?"

"Jake is out."

The blood in my veins runs cold, every muscle in my body going rigid. "Excuse me?"

"He was released last week. I just found out two days ago."

"Released." The word comes out like a plea. A tortured whisper. "That's not possible. He was supposed to be in for ten

years.”

“I know.”

“Then why is he out?” I demand.

“Good behavior,” he replies. He glances at a picture of me and Henry in the park. Dakota snapped it when we’d gone there last fall. But his attention moves on so quickly that I’m not even sure if he really saw it.

“I can’t.” I take a seat at the table, trying to keep my tone neutral so my father doesn’t hear the terror in my words.

Jake nearly killed me.

It was early in the pregnancy when I thought he wanted to work things out. He’d called me to his apartment, and I’d gone like an idiot. When I got there, he acted so kind...until we were behind a closed door. He told me I needed to terminate the pregnancy. That it was a mistake I made and now he had to rectify it.

He’d raped and beat me. Would have killed me if it weren’t for his next-door neighbor coming home right as I screamed. If it weren’t for her, he would have succeeded and gotten his wish—Henry never would have been born. And I would be six feet under.

“I am here to take you and your son back to Texas with me.”

“Excuse me.” I look up at him.

“You need distance between you and Jake.”

“So, you want me to leave my life here, my mother and sister, and come to a state with a man I haven’t seen in four years? Seriously?”

My father swallows hard. “It’s for your safety.”

“You don’t give two shits about my safety,” I snap back. “Or Henry’s, for that matter.”

His gaze turns furious, and if I weren’t already so shocked over his news, I might have cowered beneath the ferocity in it.

“You cannot take this threat lightly, Katherine. If he manages to find you, he will do what he can to finish what he started.”

“Not if he’s a reformed citizen as they claim he is,” I retort, venom dripping off every word because I know there is no reforming a man like Jake. And had I not been so blinded by my teenage affection for him, I would have seen it coming.

“You and I both know he’s not going to stay away from you.”

“Then he’s my problem to deal with. You made sure of that when you bailed on me four years ago.”

He shakes his head. Henry Bennett never has had an issue hiding his anger. I only wish I would have known just how this was going to end up before I chose to name my son after a grandfather he would never know.

“You cannot handle him alone.”

“I can. And I will.”

“Stubborn,” he spits out. “Just like your mother.”

“And proud of it!” I shoot back.

“He’s going to hurt you. And that little boy.”

“He won’t get the chance,” I growl. “Because I will kill him before he can.”

My father takes a step toward me. “Kate. I am offering you a chance to start fresh. A new state. I will get you a bigger house, one where you have more space.”

“I don’t want a bigger house,” I reply. “And I have a life here. Henry’s school is here. His friends. My school, for that matter. I have one more semester of college before I’m done with my degree. Then, I can go anywhere.”

“Finish it somewhere else.”

“No. I won’t. Jake already stole more from me than I will ever get back, but I won’t let that bastard run me out of town, too.” Hot tears stream down my cheeks, and I don’t bother to hide them.

Because, for the first time in years, I see a hint of emotion on my father's face.

Fear, perhaps?

Pity?

“Momma?”

Both of us whirl on the hall as Henry stumbles down, half asleep. He rubs his eyes, so I quickly wipe my tears away and then force a smile onto my face. “Hey, baby. I'm so sorry I woke you up. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Are you?” He looks at my father, eyes widening. “Grandpa?”

“Hello, Henry,” my father stiffly greets.

“I knew it was you!” Henry exclaims as he rushes forward and throws both arms around his waist. “Auntie Dakota has your picture in her apartment.”

My father hugs him back, a soft smile on his face. “It is good to see you, boy. You've grown.”

“Where have you been all this time? I asked Momma, but she said you work a lot.”

My father looks over at me then turns his attention to Henry once more. “I do work a lot. And I'm sorry I was gone for as long as I was. Turns out I'll be in town for a bit longer this time.” His tone has completely changed, going from hard and formal to fatherly in an instant.

Like the crackle of a fallen line before it electrocutes you.

“Really? Can we hang out? Please?” My son looks so hopeful, and I open my mouth to try to ease the inevitable heartbreak coming his way.

But my father responds before I have the chance to utter a single word, “I would like that very much.”

“Awesome.” Henry turns to me.

“Go on back to bed, honey. Sorry we woke you. I'll come check on you in a few.”

“Okay.” He hugs my father one more time and then gives me the same embrace before going back to his room.

“He’s grown.”

“That’s what happens over the course of four years. Don’t bother sticking around, though. No need to make good on a promise that we both know was empty.”

“Empty?” my father questions.

“You want nothing to do with us. That’s been clear as a bell. So leave, go back to whatever life you’ve created for yourself in the Lone Star State, and leave us alone.”

“I’m not going back to Texas anytime soon. Not unless you both come with me.”

“What? Why?”

“Because Jake is going to come after you, Kate. And I plan to be around when he does.”

Chapter 10

Dean

This is a mistake.

A massive, potentially career-ending mistake. Yet here I am, standing on the steps of Kate's house, a folder in one hand, coffee in the other. After she didn't show up for class, I'd checked with her other professors just to make sure she wasn't avoiding me.

Turns out, she wasn't at school all day Tuesday either.

Missing days two and three of your first week in a semester is not a great start.

Before I can change my mind, I raise my fist and knock. Heart pounding, I prepare myself for her beautiful smile. Instead, I'm greeted by the frown of an older man as he pulls the door open and looks me up and down.

"Who are you?"

"Is Kate home?"

"Who are you?" he repeats.

"Dean Dorsey. Her history professor." I hold up the folder like it's my credentials.

"You make house calls?"

"Not typically. But I don't usually have students miss two days in the first week."

He narrows his gaze on me for a moment then steps aside and gestures for me to come in. The house is small but warm.

A house full of love, as my mother would say. Hand-drawn pictures line the walls.

Her son.

“Wait here. I will go get her.”

“Thank you.”

He grunts something then turns and leaves me standing in the foyer. Given that I have the feeling that he would gut me like a fish if I moved even an inch, I remain exactly where I am. Though, I definitely let my gaze wander over the pristine foyer. Gleaming marble tile contrasts with the pale grey walls, something that my interior decorator sister-in-law, Nova, would appreciate.

My gaze travels over pictures on the wall, landing on one of Kate hugging a smiling little boy. I narrow my gaze, risking moving closer so I can get a better look. I know I’ve seen him somewhere before—and then it clicks.

That day at school.

Kate’s son is the little boy who’d been sitting just outside the office. Which means the woman I’d been checking out—Kate comes around the corner, the man who’d answered her door staying just in view, but not following.

Dark bags sit beneath both eyes, giving me the impression that she hasn’t been sleeping. Her hair is in a messy bun, the sweater she’s wearing, tattered and stained and hanging off of one shoulder. Dark leggings hug her shapely legs, and both feet are bare.

“What are you doing here?”

“Are you okay?” I step closer to her, concern for her safety pushing all of my nerves aside. My gaze lands on the man. He remains in the kitchen, staring back at me as though he, too, is sizing me up.

“Fine. What are you doing here, Professor?” she asks again.

“You missed yesterday and today.” I offer her the folder. “Lecture notes from all of your professors.” I point to the

picture. “Is this your son? I met him—”

She opens the folder and stares down at the copies I’d taken for her. “Why are you bringing this to me?” she interrupts.

“I was worried you were sick and didn’t want you to fall behind.” Why do I feel like an idiot now?

“I had a migraine,” she replies. “But I’m better now.”

It’s a lie. “What’s going on, Kate? Are you safe?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“The man glaring at me from the kitchen can’t be reason enough?”

She looks over her shoulder. “Seriously, Dad?”

Dad? And then I notice the resemblance. Green eyes. Sharp nose. “Sorry, Sir, I didn’t—”

“Don’t apologize. It makes a man look weak. I’ll be just outside.”

Kate closes her eyes then pinches the bridge of her nose with her free hand. “Sorry about that,” she says.

“No need. What’s going on?”

“Look, I really appreciate you bringing these to me, but I watched the lectures online and have my own notes.” She offers the folder back to me.

“Kate—”

“Ms. Bennett,” she corrects. “Remember? Professional courtesy.”

“Fine, Ms. Bennett,” I repeat, anger making my tone clipped. “Are you safe?”

“Do I look safe?”

“No. Frankly, you look exhausted.”

She sighs. How do I get her to take these walls down? And how had I never noticed them before? “Look, I had a migraine.

My dad is here, helping with Henry, but we don't really get along."

"Answer my question."

"Which one?"

I glare at her. "You know which one."

"I. Am. Fine. Just tired—and frankly annoyed that you must have looked my address up in my file just so you could show up unannounced. My phone number is in that file, too."

But then I wouldn't have been able to see you. Something is wrong. Something that she isn't saying, and it eats at me. "Is your son home now?"

"He's at school."

"Then come have coffee with me. Please. Let's talk." The desire to get her out of the house is so strong that I can barely breathe.

"What part of keeping things professional don't you understand?"

"You can ask me about the lectures. We'll consider it out-of-office, office hours."

"Professor—"

"Please, Kate? Just an hour of your time?"

She glances back toward the yard. "Fine. I need to let my dad know and change. Wait in your car. I'll be out in a few."

I swallow hard but grip the handle and pull the door open. My heart pounds as I make my way over to my car. I don't climb in, though. Instead, I lean back against it and wait.

Minutes tick by until she opens the front door and steps out. Wearing jeans, a white shirt, and a black leather jacket, she looks absolutely stunning. After locking the door, she turns to face me. The circles are still there, but it's the darkness in her eyes that has me catching my breath.

She looks afraid.

Hurt.

But why?

“Where do you want to meet?”

“I can drive.” I walk over and open the passenger door. “I promise to bring you right back.”

She eyes me warily, her hand going to her pocket. After thumbing something I can't see, she shakes her head. “Follow me.” Then she climbs into the white sedan parked next to mine without waiting for a response.

It's a hit to my pride, but I ignore it and climb into my car. She pulls out of the drive, so I follow, letting her lead us out of the neighborhood and down three streets before pulling into the lot of a coffee shop I've never been to.

Not surprising since this isn't exactly a part of town I hang out in because my family and the college live on the other side.

The sign reads *Espresso Yourself*, and the second I climb out of my car, I can smell the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. “This looks neat.” The logo is a cartoon cup with coffee spilling out of the top.

A large window makes it easy to view the tables scattered inside as well as the purple-haired woman behind the counter.

“Your sister works here?”

“She owns it,” Kate replies as she moves toward the door. I have to practically sprint to pull it open before she gets there and does it herself.

The second we walk in, her sister and a man behind the counter both turn. Dakota's eyes light up when she sees me, a grin spreading over her face. That is until she takes note of her sister.

“You aren't sleeping again,” she accuses.

“I'm fine.”

“Again? Do you have trouble sleeping?”

Kate glares at Dakota a moment longer then turns to me. “I'm a single mom going through college. What do you

think?”

Because I sense pushing will only lead to me getting my balls handed to me, I turn to Dakota. “It’s good to see you again.”

“You, too, Professor. What can I get you?”

“A large white chocolate mocha, please. Extra shot of espresso.”

“Done. Usual?” she asks Kate, who nods.

“Awesome. Coming right up.” I pull my wallet out, but she shakes her head. “On the house. Go have a seat.”

“Please, let me pay.”

“Nope. Your money is no good here today, Professor.” She winks.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I turn to see where Kate wants to sit, only to find her sitting toward the back of the shop, her facing door. It’s something I notice only because it’s exactly what Axel has done ever since getting back from his tour overseas.

Before combat, he didn’t pay much attention to where he sat.

But after? He always faces the door.

Which makes me wonder just what type of fighting this woman has had to do. I cross over and take a seat across from her, angling my chair to the side so I can see out the front door as well. “So, your dad is staying with you?”

“So it seems.” She toys with something in her lap.

“And you’re not happy about it.”

“What gave that away?” she snaps. Then, before I can say anything, she takes a deep breath. “Look, I’m sorry. I haven’t ___”

“Been sleeping well.”

“Right.” She closes her eyes for a moment then opens them again. “As I said, my dad and I don’t have the best relationship. I haven’t seen him in years, and he showed up Monday night out of the blue.”

“Why?”

Something dark flashes over her face. “Apparently, he decided he missed us.” The lie is so smooth I *almost* believe it. But her eyes give it away.

“If something is going on, you can tell me.”

“We don’t even know each other,” she replies with a cool glare. “We literally met only days ago.”

But I feel like I’ve known you forever. “I know that, but we hit it off, didn’t we?”

“We drank and made out in the bathroom.”

“It was more than that.” Her words are a hit to my pride—like she’s cheapening a moment I haven’t been able to stop thinking about.

“I don’t know what you’re looking for, Professor—”

“Dean,” I correct. “We’re not anywhere near the campus.”

“We’re keeping it professional.”

“You can call me by my first name, and we can still keep it professional,” I snap, a bit sharper than I meant to. Before I can apologize, though, Dakota is setting our coffees down.

“So, what’s going on today? Is this a date?” She wiggles her brows at Kate, who looks more upset than anything.

“No,” I correct quickly. “Just office hours.”

“Office hours?” Dakota arches a brow.

“Outside of the office,” I reply. “I needed coffee, and Kate said she knew a great spot.”

“Uh-huh.” But Dakota is clearly not convinced. “Well, I’ll let you two get back to it then. Let me know if you need anything else.” She squeezes her sister’s shoulder then turns and heads back behind the counter.

“I don’t know why I agreed to this,” Kate mutters.

“Look. Did I do something to offend you? I asked if you were mad about Friday night—”

“You didn’t do anything.” Kate takes a deep breath. “But I can’t do friendships right now, Dean. I am up to my ears in a never-ending to-do list, my father is insistent on staying with me for the foreseeable future, and I have a son counting on me to keep it all together.”

“If you don’t want him staying with you—”

“I didn’t say that,” she interrupts.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No,” she replies. “It is all of my own doing, and eventually, it’ll work out.” She puts her head in both hands. “I’m just so tired.”

I glance back at Dakota, who is on the phone, talking seriously to someone. The knowledge that something more is going on has never been clearer, but pushing Kate won’t get an answer. That much I can see. “If there is some way I can help you, then please tell me. I meant what I said. I like you—as a friend,” I add quickly even though I’m pretty sure we both know that’s an outright lie. “And while we do need to keep things professional when it comes to the school, I am available to help as needed.”

“And what are you going to help me with?” she asks. “My laundry? Dishes? Dinner? What exactly is it that you, a history professor, can do to help ease my workload? And why would you want to do it?”

“I am great with laundry. Even better with dishes. And as for dinner, well, I’m a shit cook, but please refer back to dishes.”

That gets a slight smile out of her, and the effect it has on me is absolutely ridiculous. “Your sweet, and I’m being a pain.” She takes a deep breath. “Unfortunately, dishes, dinner, and laundry will not help right now. But I appreciate the offer.”

I lean forward, the darkness in her gaze eating at me. “Whatever is going on, you can tell me.”

“No,” she replies sadly. “I can’t.”

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, she’s leaving the coffee shop to go pick up her son from school. I remain where I am, staring after her like some lust-struck idiot. If only my brothers could see me now. Seriously, though, what the hell is wrong with me?

“She’s been through a lot.”

I look over as Dakota slides into the chair her sister just vacated. “I can see that.”

“I’m not going to tell you what because, frankly, it’s dark, and that’s her business. But I can see that you like her.”

“I do,” I reply. “As a friend.”

“Sure.” Dakota shakes her head but doesn’t call me on it. “If you care about her—friend or not—you’re going to have to work to get past the barriers. For her, they’re a necessity of survival.”

“Is your dad a danger to her?”

She shakes her head. “He loves her. Even if he’s too stubborn to tell her that.”

“She said that she hadn’t seen him in a few years and now he’s staying with her.” Which means something significant has changed in her life. But what?

“He’s coming back around, but their relationship is strained.” Dakota touches my hand gently. “Look, you seem like a decent guy, and it’s because of that I’m telling you this. Kate has had her walls up for years, and the only way you’re going to get through them is by not giving up.” Her gaze darkens. “But I will tell you that, if all you’re after is a notch in your bedpost, I know someone who will make you disappear. Seriously.”

“I’m not looking for anything,” I tell her. “If I wanted a notch in my bedpost, I could go get it somewhere else.”

“Then why do you care so much?”

My gaze lands on the door again. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Well, Professor, that might be the most real thing a man has ever said to me.”

Chapter II

Kate

“**W**hat can I do for you, Kate?” Principal Andrews sits down behind his desk as I take the chair across from him. His greying hair is styled perfectly, and the button-down shirt he wears boasts colorful animals.

He looks every bit like the elementary school principal he is. And the fact that this is the same school I went to growing up, back when he was the vice principal, makes this even harder. I take a deep breath, nerves eating at me. I wanted to avoid this conversation. In fact, I was *desperate* to. But brushing something under the rug doesn't make it disappear.

“I need to talk to you about my son's safety.”

“What's going on? Is there an issue with the school?” he questions, leaning forward and resting both arms on the desk between us.

“Not with the school.” I fidget with my hands, stretching my fingers and trying to ignore my nerves. “I trust the details of this conversation will not leave this office? I know you will need to talk to your staff, but the details stay between us. Henry does *not* find out about this.”

“Of course not, Kate. What's going on?”

“Henry's biological father, Jake Grimes, has been released from prison.”

Principal Andrews leans back in his chair, his expression turning furious. “Already?”

“Yes. Apparently, he was released for good behavior. Now, I don’t know what all you know, but Jake is incredibly dangerous.”

“Kate, I know enough,” he says. “You’re concerned he will come here?”

“I am. He never wanted Henry, but he has always wanted to hurt me. And he promised me that, if I testified against him, I would pay for it.”

“And they let him out?” he shakes his head in disgust.

“It would seem that way. Now, he’s made no attempt to contact us as of yet, but I don’t put it past him to try to see Henry here. I just—can you please make sure everyone is aware?” I reach into my purse and pull out a photograph of Jake’s mugshot. I hand it to him without looking at the image. I don’t need to. It’s branded in my brain. “You can keep this. Show it around. I don’t want that man anywhere near my son.” I level my gaze on him. “And if you see him—”

“We will notify you and the authorities.” He sets the image face down on his desk. “I swear to you, Kate, Henry is safe here. We will not let Jake anywhere near him.”

I close my eyes as hot tears burn in my throat. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Can I do anything for you? Do you need to talk to someone? Our counselor—”

“I’m fine,” I assure him with a forced smile. “As long as Henry is safe, I will be okay. What happened was a long time ago.” But even as I say it out loud, I feel as though it just happened yesterday.

“Henry is safe,” he says. “And if you do end up needing someone, we’re here for you. For both of you.”

* * *

Laughter fills my ears as Henry and I make our way into the house.

“Grandma?” Henry calls out.

“In here!” she replies.

After he drops his bag in the entry, he races down the hall toward her. I follow, trying to decide what it is I might be walking in on. But instead of finding her covered in my father’s blood after killing him, I find the two of them sitting at the table, drinking coffee together.

My mom’s hair has been braided down her back, and the colorful dress she wears pairs beautifully with her white cardigan. She dressed up.

For him.

My father’s cheeks are full of color, his eyes light. Henry hugs him, and he returns the embrace as though he’s never been absent a day of my son’s life.

“What’s happening here?” I ask.

“Your father and I are just having some coffee,” my mother replies. “There’s a fresh pot if you want some.”

“I’m not entirely sure I understand what’s happening here.”

“I felt the need to stop by and see your father,” she says. “Since he’s staying here and watching your house.”

“But why? You two hate each other.”

They exchange a look and smile. “We have always had a rather passionate relationship,” my mother replies.

“Gross.” I head into the kitchen and pour a mug of coffee.

“I apologized to your mother,” my father says.

“How nice of you.” I pour a large mug. “Henry, homework.”

“I only have reading to do.”

“Then get to it.”

He groans but rushes back toward his backpack. Then, he takes it and sprints down the hall to his room.

As soon as he's out of earshot, my mother's expression turns serious, and she asks, "Did you meet with Principal Andrews?"

"Yes." I slide onto a chair between them and take a drink. "Gave them Jake's mugshot, and they'll keep an eye out for him."

"Bastard. I still can't believe he's out." My mother shakes her head.

"We'll make sure he doesn't get anywhere near you." Gone is my father's laughter, his joy, replaced by the cool military façade I know all too well. "Why is your professor making house calls?"

"Professor?" My mother turns to me.

I groan. "He was worried I missed his lecture and was bringing me notes."

"Why? Since when do they do that?" my father questions.

"Since I made out with him at a club before I knew he was my professor," I retort with a glare at my father.

"Are you ever going to learn your lesson?" he demands.

"And what lesson is that, Dad? Don't have sex? Sorry, already screwed that one up."

"You *slept* with him?" he demands.

"No." I groan. "Contrary to what you seem to believe, I am not a whore."

"I never said you were," my father snaps. "But you don't have the best track record when it comes to your choices in men."

"Neither does Mom, and you don't seem to hold that against her." As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I groan. "I'm sorry, that was out of line." No one says anything, so I continue, "Look, I haven't dated since Jake. I went out with Dakota, kissed a stranger, and then called it a night. Unfortunately, said stranger just so happened to be the

professor of my history class. But he and I both agreed that we are keeping things professional.”

“Since when is a professor making house calls professional?” my father asks.

“Since he probably adores your daughter,” my mother replies, speaking up for the first time in a few minutes. She covers my hand with hers.

“It’s not like that,” I assure her. “He just wanted to make sure I was okay.”

“Honey, men don’t ask to take you out for a bit if they aren’t interested.”

“I’m not dating him,” I insist. “Especially not now with Jake back in society. My focus is on keeping Henry safe and finishing my degree.”

“As it should be,” my father says.

I down the rest of my coffee and get up to refill my mug.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t leave town for a bit?” my mother asks. “Your father said he offered to take you back to Texas—”

“I’m not leaving,” I reply harsher than I intended. “This is our home. Our life is here. And until I finish my degree, I’m remaining right where I am.”

“Then, after you finish,” my father says. “You can find a job in another state.”

“No. I’m applying here in Boston first.”

“Kate—” my mother starts.

“No, Mom. I’m not running. I’ll take precautions, make sure that we’re safe, but at the end of the day, I’m not letting that asshole have what’s left of me.”

Neither one of them responds. They just sit there shaking their heads as though they disagree.

“We just worry about you, sweetheart,” my mother says.

“I know you do, and I appreciate that. But I’m not nineteen anymore.”

“Seven years is not a huge difference,” my father snaps.

“It is when you’ve lived through the trauma I suffered,” I snap back. “I’m a survivor. Not a victim. And you will not treat me as such.”

“We’re not treating you like a victim,” my father insists. “But this is not a situation to be taken lightly. We need to—”

“Do I look like I’m taking it lightly?” I demand. “I’ve talked to the principal. I have a security system in the house. I’m letting you stay here and behave like a damned prison warden!”

“Prison warden? That’s what you think of me?”

“I am twenty-six years old. I have a son who, until a few days ago, you hadn’t seen in four years. I am living my life and taking care of myself, and yet you show up out of the blue, demand to stay in my guest room, and insist on knowing where I am and who I’m with at all times like I’m a child.”

“He is out there,” he says.

“And if I see him, I will handle it.”

“And if you can’t? If he hurts you? If he comes for Henry?”

“I’m not weak.”

“I never said you were,” my father snaps. “But you are still my daughter, dammit.”

My mind is assaulted with images of what happened the last time I saw Jake. Like the snapshots the police took, they flash through my mind. One bloody picture after the next. All while I was terrified I’d just lost my unborn son.

“You two never have been good at talking.” My mother reaches out and touches my arm then places another hand on my father’s arm. “Henry, our daughter is a strong, capable woman, and she wants you to see her as such. And Kate, your

father is just worried about you. He wants to keep you safe. We all do.”

“Well, insulting my ability to handle myself certainly isn’t the way to make me feel valued.” I glare at my father. “I need to get Henry ready for bed.” Turning, I make my way out of the kitchen and down the hall. Henry is seated on his bed, knees pulled up to his chest, silent tears streaming down his cheeks.

I’m on alarm instantly, rushing forward and checking for injuries.

“What is it? What happened?”

“Is Grandpa going to leave again?” he asks, his tone broken.

“What?”

“You guys are fighting. I hear it.”

“Honey.” My fear deflates, leaving behind a heavy dose of mom guilt in its wake. “We had a disagreement; it happens.”

“But you said he made you feel like this is a prison.”

I cup Henry’s face, stroking his cheeks with my thumbs. “Baby, what you heard was a disagreement. Your grandfather and I have those occasionally. And even if he leaves our house, I know he won’t be far.”

Henry snuffles. “Okay.”

He comes into my arms, and I hold him tightly, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. My pride is not worth either of our lives, and I know that. While I can’t stand the fact that I feel like my father is bearing down on me, I can still appreciate that he wants to protect me.

That he wants to protect Henry.

And for that, I can set my pride aside and accept the help being offered. For now, at least.

Chapter 12

Dean

“**M**om. What are you doing here?” I look up with a smile as my mother steps into my office, two coffees in her hands.

“Can’t a mother deliver her youngest son a steaming hot cup of coffee in the early morning?”

“She can,” I say, accepting the paper cup. “But you have an ulterior motive. What is it?”

“Guilty as charged,” she replies with a grin as she accepts my hug then sits down in the chair across from my desk.

“Well, out with it then. I have class in an hour.” Her cheeks turn pink, which gives away exactly what this impromptu coffee visit is about. “I am not going on a blind date with one of the daughters from any friend of yours.”

“She’s not a daughter,” she says. “A niece. And she’s beautiful, works as a first-grade teacher.”

“That’s sweet, not interested.”

“Dean, your brothers are all settling down and getting married. Can’t you, too?”

“Nope. Not in my blood, Momma.” I smile at her, though, for the first time, my answer feels hollow. And for whatever reason, Kate’s face pops into my mind.

“Oh, fine. But mark my words, Dean, one of these days I will find you a nice, sweet girl.”

“Unlike—” Someone screams.

I push to my feet and sprint into the hall, running as fast as I can toward the sound of it. I reach the end of the hall and turn the corner, adrenaline rushing through my veins. What happened? Was someone attacked? Did someone fall?

I round the corner again and see a tall, male student standing over someone. It only takes me another two seconds to reach them and even less time to realize just who he is standing over. Kate sits on the ground, face in her hands as she takes labored breaths.

Rage burns through me as I whirl on the student, prepared to take his damned heart right out of his chest for hurting her. Except, he looks just as terrified as she does. “What happened?” I demand.

“I came around the corner, professor. I wasn’t looking where I was going and ran right into her. She screamed and... I don’t know. I tried to help. I swear, I didn’t do it on purpose!”

“Fine, fine.”

My mother comes around the corner and starts shooing students away. Thankfully, it’s early, so there aren’t many in the halls.

“Kate,” I whisper. When I reach forward to brush her dark hair behind her shoulder, she jerks away.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Okay. Noted. Are you hurt?”

She sucks in a breath. “No.”

“Then let’s get you out of the hallway.”

“I don’t want you touching me.” She’s shaking violently, her body jerking.

My mother kneels beside us. “Hi, sweetheart.”

To my surprise, Kate looks up at her. Her eyes are wide and panicked, her face white as a sheet.

“Let’s get you on your feet, okay?”

Kate nods.

My mother reaches out and helps her up while I gather her books, both jealous that it's not me helping her and grateful that she's allowing my mother to do so. However, her not wanting me to touch her but is okay with my mother likely means—I piece it together with that night at the club, and it all makes sense.

Kate has been traumatized. Likely by a man.

Her father? I consider, thinking about the hardened man I'd seen at her house. But I shove that away. Kate had been mad, but not afraid. So who hurt her?

My mother guides her into my office and shuts the door. I set the books down on the table and move behind my desk, though I don't sit. The adrenaline pumping through my veins is far too potent.

“Are you okay?” my mother asks her.

“Getting there,” Kate replies. “I feel like a fool. It was just—I shouldn't have come back. Not now.”

“Kate, what's going on?” I ask. “Please tell me. I can help.”

“I already told you that you can't.”

“You two know each other?” my mom questions.

“She's in my class,” I tell her. “Will you go grab some water for her? Please?”

“Of course. Are you going to be okay if I step out for a few?” The fact that my mother is ensuring Kate feels safe warms me even if I'm frustrated that she has to when it's just me in here.

“I'll be fine. Thanks.” Kate offers her a forced smile before my mom gets up and leaves the office, shutting the door securely behind her.

“Kate.” I come around the desk and kneel in front of her. “Who hurt you?”

She breaks. A dam that has finally had too much pressure. Tears burst from her eyes, and she sobs right into her hands. I start to reach for her but recall the way she'd jerked back out of my touch. So, instead, I sit, waiting for her to feel comfortable enough to meet my gaze. "I should have known better. I got too comfortable."

"Kate."

She swallows hard and takes a deep breath. "I was in a relationship before, and he was abusive. He just got out of jail, and my father came back to town to warn me about it."

Every muscle in my body goes rigid. "This man hurt you?" I ask, keeping my tone as level as I can so I don't scare her any more than she already is.

"He nearly killed me," she whispers. "But I haven't seen him since he went to prison right before Henry was born."

"Your son."

"Yes." She takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry. It's just... I had to warn the principal at Henry's school yesterday. Then, last night, my dad acted as though I can't keep myself safe, and I spent all night re-living everything that happened." Her broken gaze shatters my heart. "I'm sorry. I just... when that man ran into me in the hall..."

"You had a panic attack." I reach up and brush the hair off her shoulder now, and aside from a slight flinch, she doesn't pull away.

"Yes."

"You're not hurt now? Has this man contacted you?"

She shakes her head. "He may not even care. I'm probably making a big deal out of it. But I haven't let myself feel any fear ever since he went away. I was so tired of it. And I thought ignoring it would make the memories go away."

"PTSD doesn't work that way," I tell her sadly.

"You?"

“My dad had it,” I tell her even though I have no first-hand knowledge of it since he was dead before I was born.

The door opens, and my mom walks in with a bottle of water. She takes one look at me kneeling on the floor in front of Kate, and her eyes turn misty. She offers her the water. “Here you go, sweetheart.”

“Thank you.” Kate takes the water. “I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“Mary Dorsey,” she says with a smile. “I’m Dean’s mother.”

Kate’s eyes go wide, and she looks from Mom to me. “Your mother?”

“Don’t hold it against her,” I say with a half smile.

To my absolute delight, that brings one onto Kate’s face as well. “I won’t,” she replies.

Because I can’t stand being this close and not being able to touch her, I get to my feet. “Do you have a picture of him?” I ask. “Something we can give security and show staff just in case?”

She nods. “Not with me, though. I gave my only printed copy to Henry’s school.”

“Stalker?” my mother questions.

“Abusive ex fresh out of prison,” Kate replies. With each passing moment, more color comes back to her cheeks.

My mother’s own gaze darkens. According to Everett, our alcoholic father had struck our mother just before he left for the tour that killed him.

“Can you get me a picture?”

She nods. “I can bring it with me.”

“I’ll follow you home today and get it.”

“No. You don’t need to do that.”

“I do,” I say. “We need security to be on the watch as soon as possible. When is your first class?”

She checks her watch. “In about fifteen minutes.”

“Then we’ll go after that.”

* * *

I follow behind Kate’s car as we head toward her house. After a Sunday dinner invitation to our house that was accepted because my mother invited Kate’s parents as well, I walked her to class in silence.

The weight of what she’d told me rested firmly on my shoulders, and I cannot get the image of her curled on that floor out of my head. How many times had that bastard put her in that exact position? How many times had he hurt her?

My hands tighten on the steering wheel as we turn into her driveway. And when I see her front door—wide open—my heart hammers.

“Dad!” she screams as she throws open the car door. Adrenaline surges through my veins for the second time as I rush out of my car, grabbing her before she can reach the front door. “What are you doing? My dad is in there!”

“Let me go in first. You stay right behind me and call the police.”

She starts to argue but pulls out her phone anyway. Seconds later, she’s giving someone her address.

Carefully, I make my way into the house, keeping my back as close to the wall as I can while I study the area.

The mirror in her foyer is smashed; the pictures that once hung on the walls litter the floor. A pair of feet stick out from behind the counter, so I rush forward. Her father lies unconscious in the kitchen, blood smearing the side of his head.

“Dad!” Kate yells, tossing the phone to the ground and falling at his side.

I check for a pulse, breathing a sigh of relief when I feel one—faint as it is.

I grab a knife from the block on her counter then stand guard over the two of them, too afraid to leave her alone to check the house, but not willing to get caught without a weapon of some kind.

We remain like that, frozen in the kitchen while she presses a kitchen towel to her father's head, until the sound of sirens fills my ears.

All I can do is think of all the ways this could have gone horribly wrong.

What if it had been her who had been home?

Or her son?

* * *

The police are the last to leave.

Kate's mother left with the ambulance, and her sister went to pick up Henry from school. She'd taken him back to her apartment so he wouldn't see the mess here. As soon as the last cruiser is down the street, Kate goes back inside.

I follow, locking the door behind her.

They'd found her bedroom ransacked, every drawer turned upside down, the contents spilled all over the floor. The asshole had even broken every dish in the house and shattered all of the photographs.

"Thank you for being here." She reaches up into the cabinet and pulls a bottle of wine down. Then, she uncorks it before taking a big drink straight from the bottle. "I'm sorry. It's been—"

"A day," I finish, retrieving a roll of paper towels from the floor. I kneel beside the pool of her father's blood and start wiping. Kate joins me, a spray bottle of cleaner in her hand. Soon, the floor is clean again.

"I can't believe he was here." She sits on the ground, pale-faced and shaking. "He could have killed him."

Her father came around right after the paramedics arrived and said that he'd been attacked from behind. He never saw who did it, but we all know who it was. The only person it could be.

I reach out and take Kate's hands. "He didn't. Your dad is going to be just fine."

She nods, tears streaming down her cheeks. "This is my home. The first real place I built for myself. How is this fair?"

"It's not," I tell her. "Not even a little bit. They'll find him."

"Maybe," she replies. "I need to pack a bag. Can you—"

"I'm not leaving until you do. And I will take you wherever you want to go. I do have a spare bedroom." The words are out of my mouth before I know well enough to stop them. "Just in case," I add quickly. "I can keep you both safe."

She smiles, the first unguarded one I've seen from her. "As much as I appreciate that, I don't know that it's a good idea."

"He doesn't know me, right? Which means he won't know where I live. It'll keep you, Henry, and your family safe because he won't know how to reach you."

"I don't know you very well."

"I know you don't. But I promise you, Kate, I only want to make sure you're safe. Just until they catch him."

To my complete and utter shock, she doesn't discount the idea right off the bat.

"There's a lock on the door, and we can add a deadbolt inside the bedroom if it will make you feel safer. But that's not who I am. I won't ever hurt you."

"The night in the bathroom proved that," she replies. After closing her eyes, she takes a deep breath. "I just—that's a big ask."

"It's a big offer. If you feel safer going somewhere else, then I understand."

“He hurt my dad today,” she says, eyes filling. “If it had been my mom or sister, he would have done much worse to them.”

She doesn’t have to fill in the blanks for me to understand, and it makes me want to hunt this asshole down and kill him with my bare hands.

“Let me keep you safe until they find him.”

“Why? Why do you care? You barely know me, and you’re offering to let not just me but my son into your home.”

“I may not know you very well, but I feel the need to protect you, Kate. Please.”

She swallows hard. “Fine. We will try tonight, but if it’s too much, you’ll tell me?”

“Absolutely. But it won’t be.” Relief floods me, mixing with something close to relief. Which, of course, makes me feel like a horrible person, given the circumstances. I pull Kate to her feet. “Go pack a bag, and we’ll go pick up your son.”

Chapter 13

Kate

Dean's apartment is absolutely, one hundred percent a bachelor's pad.

Aside from some photos of his niece and nephew hanging on the refrigerator, there is no personalization. No photographs of his life in frames, no artwork on the walls. They're light grey, complimenting the steel of his appliances and white marble countertops.

It feels far too pristine for a seven-year-old to even breathe in.

Henry is already tucked into bed, sleeping soundly, his noise machine just loud enough that I can barely hear it from where I sit in the living room. He was over the moon when he realized he'd apparently met Dean before—in the hallway of the college while I was taking care of my registration issue the other day.

They'd hit it off like old friends, making me feel both relieved and terrified.

Dean is in the shower, the water a steady noise in the background of my mind.

Because all I can focus on is seeing my father lying on the floor of my kitchen.

The image of Jake on top of me, slamming his fist into my face assaults me, and I whimper, drawing my knees up to my chest and trying to force a breath. One after the other, I focus on breathing and try to shove the panic out of my mind.

Thankfully, my father will make a full recovery, and my sister is staying with my mom until this is all over. He'll join them when he's released, and he'd been less than understanding about me staying with the professor of my history class.

But I'd explained to him what Dean said. That Jake doesn't know him. He won't think of looking for me here, which makes it the safest option for all of us.

"Hey, you okay?"

I look up at Dean. He stands in the doorway, hair still wet from his shower. He's changed into a white t-shirt and dark shorts, his feet bare. "I'm okay."

"Lie. But we'll let it slide. Want some tea? I've been told I make a great mug of hot peppermint."

"Peppermint?" I ask, surprised.

He shrugs. "Some people prefer chamomile at night; I like my mint."

"I will gladly take a cup," I reply as I get to my feet. "But I can help."

"No need." He moves into the kitchen, completely at ease in his space. He fills an electric kettle and places it onto the heating plate then scoops dried peppermint leaves from a mason jar, putting them in stainless steel tea balls.

After pulling down two mugs, he leans back against the counter and crosses his arms, his gaze leveling on me. "So, Kate Bennet, talk to me."

"About what? You already know most of it." *Another lie. But he doesn't have to know that.*

"I very much doubt that, but I'm not trying to pry into your past either. I just want to make sure I can keep you safe."

"Jake is a master manipulator," I tell him. "He had everyone fooled for years. Even me, to be honest. We met in high school. I thought I was in love, and when I was nineteen he tried to beat me so I'd lose the pregnancy he didn't want me to keep."

Fury flashes over Dean's expression. A bloodthirsty anger that would have had me recoiling if it had been on anyone else's face. But I trust him. Not just to keep us safe but to not be the one to cause us pain. "I don't have words, Kate. Aside from the fact that I'd love to kill him myself."

"I appreciate that, but it won't do anything but get you imprisoned. And trust me, he's not worth that."

"No," he agrees. "But you are."

Heat flushes my cheeks. "I don't understand why you're being so nice to me."

The kettle beeps, so he pulls it off and sets it on the counter, not pouring it into the mugs just yet. "Do you not think you're worthy of kindness?"

"Not from a complete stranger I met in a club."

"Why?"

"Because. You have no reason to do this. To accept me and my son into your home and life, risking yours because my psychotic ex has been released from prison. Do you not hear how insane that sounds?"

Dean shrugs. "I don't see a reason not to help when I'm capable of doing so."

"But don't you have—you know." I trail off, unsure how to word it without sounding jealous or judgmental.

"I don't know." He pours water into the mugs then empties the kettle into the sink.

"Women?"

"Are you asking if I'm seeing someone?"

"Or many someone's," I add. "I'm not judging, but we're going to cramp your style."

He leans in, close enough that I can see flecks of gold in his blue eyes. "I don't bring women here, Kate. In fact, aside from my mother and future sisters-in-law, you're the first one." He turns away from me to retrieve something from a cabinet, and my mouth falls open.

The first one? Seriously?

“Jumping right into the deep end, huh? Now you have a woman and a child in your home.”

He laughs, the sound deep and rich. “I don’t know how else to live, Kate,” he says. “I jump headfirst into everything I do. It’s worked out so far.”

Dean hands me a small ceramic container with honey inside, so I use the wooden drizzler inside to put some into my tea as soon as he’s removed the stainless-steel ball. He does the same then pulls out a bottle of brandy from the cabinet. “Want some?”

“Yes, please. Just a little, though.”

He puts a small amount in my mug then puts the lid back on.

“You’re not having any?”

“Not while I’m protecting both of you,” he says. “You can have mine if you don’t want the brandy now.”

“No,” I say. “This is great. Thanks.”

He nods then picks up his mug and heads into the living room.

I follow, both of us sitting on the couch.

“Why history?”

“Huh?”

“You know a lot about me; seems only fair you tell me something about you.” I take a sip of my tea and nearly weep with relief as peppermint dances on my tongue. There truly is something soothing about minty tea. Then again, it could be the brandy.

“I always had a fascination for the past, I guess. My dad was a soldier. He died before I was born, so that may have something to do with my desire to know what war truly was and why we fought in them. I developed a hunger for it at some point and studied everything from American history to the history of art.”

“Art?” I ask, honestly surprised.

“I can tell you if a painting is real or fake.” He grins at me over his tea.

“That’s impressive.”

“I get bored easily,” he says. “So focusing on something as intricate as the past does more to hold my attention than anything.”

I bet you get bored of one woman, too. I try not to let the disappointment register on my expression. I knew there was no chance of a relationship between us. I’m too broken, and he’s too out of my league.

“Your mother seems nice.”

“She’s great.”

“She come to the school often?”

“Not particularly. She was trying to set me up on yet another blind date.”

I laugh. “That sounds awkward.”

“You’re telling me. My brothers are assholes for getting married. It’s all their fault.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Three.”

“There are *four* of you out there?” I ask, the words slipping out before I can stop them. Four men as handsome as Dean walking down the streets of Boston? How is there not a pregnancy epidemic?

Dean chuckles. “I’m the best looking; let me assure you of that.” He winks, and my body warms. All of the stress from the past few days melts away, and I find myself relaxing into the conversation.

It’s as though we’ve known each other for years rather than a matter of days.

“Three brothers. And they’re all getting married?”

“Everett ended up marrying his secretary, Axel a yoga instructor, and Zander fell in love with Everett’s fiancé’s best friend.”

“That is a mouthful.”

He laughs again. “Yes, it is. Zander has a daughter by his first wife, and Rose is an excellent stepmother to her.”

“How old is she?”

“Five. And absolutely adorable.”

“You mentioned a nephew?”

“Zander and Rose’s son. He’s only about a month old,” he replies. “Everett and Nova are starting a family soon, too. They just got back from their honeymoon.”

“So everyone is settling down except for you, and your mother is looking to change that.”

“She absolutely is,” he replies.

“Why haven’t you?” I take a drink of my tea, avoiding eye contact.

“Honestly? I never wanted to settle down. It all felt like too much of a commitment. The idea of making someone happy for the rest of their life stressed me out.”

“I get that.” I swallow past the lump of unwanted emotion in my throat.

“But I’ve been thinking lately that, if I found the right woman, I might be open to it.”

* * *

“He likes you.”

I shake my head as though she can see it and reply, “You’re wrong.”

I can hear the frustration in her voice. “The man invited you and Henry to stay at his bachelor pad so he could keep you safe. Yet, you still can’t see it?”

“Dakota, he’s just doing what he thinks is right.” Balancing my phone on my shoulder, I apply a bit of mascara. She sighs like I’m the biggest idiot in the world. Who knows, maybe I am. “Besides, I’m not trying to settle down. Not when I have a son to protect and a future to build.” I whisper the reply, hoping that Dean is too occupied with Mario Cart and Henry to hear me.

“Don’t you think it might be nice to build that future with someone who will treat you right? Someone who will love both of you the way you deserve?”

“You’re a hopeless romantic, and I am not falling for it. He told me just last night that he gets bored easily. How long do you think it would take for him to get bored of taking care of a child that’s not his?”

“He doesn’t strike me as that kind of man.”

“You don’t even know him.”

“You’re right. We need to all have dinner together.”

“No,” I snap. “Absolutely not.”

“Come on, Kate. I’ll bring pizza over. Or, better yet, you guys can come over to Mom’s, and we’ll *all* eat together.”

“I can’t. Nope.”

“It’s Saturday, Dakota. What excuse do you have?”

“I’m working.”

“No, you’re not. You took today off.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because we both know you’re not letting Henry out of your sight until Jake is found. Not even by letting him hang out with Mom. Come on, Sis. Dad just got released. I’ll pick up pizza and bring it to Mom’s. We’ll eat, ask your guy some questions, then have a fun evening.”

“He’s not *my* guy,” I reply.

“You either come here, or we’re coming there. Your choice.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. No way will my sister let this go. Not for a single second. She doesn't even know Dean's address, and I know she'll find some way to track me down unless I concede.

"I will ask Dean."

"Great. See you at seven!" she hangs up the phone, and I study my appearance in the mirror. She was right in her assumption about me calling in. I did, letting them know that I'll be out for the next few days.

And yet, I'd still taken time to apply a bit of makeup despite the leggings and oversized white t-shirt I put on this morning.

Why do I care if Dean thinks I'm attractive?

Shouldn't I be completely turned off by the entire male species after my track record?

My phone dings.

Dakota: ASK HIM.

"Ugh." I carry my phone out into the living room, stopping just at the boundary. Dean is wearing jeans and a grey t-shirt, his arms outstretched in front of him as he drives via a fake steering wheel.

Henry is beside him, laughing like this is the best day of his life and slamming his virtual car into Dean's, knocking him into second place.

"Hey! You snuck up on me, kid!"

"Snooze you lose!"

Dean laughs, absolute enjoyment etched in every line of his face. Until he sees me standing in the doorway. He looks up at me, and that joy turns molten. Desire fills his eyes, and he loses all concentration on the game.

"Hah! You lose!" Henry jumps up and does a victory dance.

"Worth it," Dean replies as he turns to my son. "You kicked my butt, kid."

“Wanna go again?”

“I’m going to talk to your mom for a bit, then yes.”

“Can I play solo?”

“Of course. They might be easier to beat than I was.” He winks at Henry, who lights up like a kid on Christmas morning.

It warms my heart even as a voice in the back of my mind screams that there’s danger ahead. He’ll get attached, and then I’ll have to pull him away. Or, worse, Dean will shove us right out the door.

He joins me in the kitchen as I pour myself another cup of coffee. “Want one?”

“Always.”

I pour him a mug then slide it across the counter. “He likes you,” I say, gesturing to Henry.

“The feeling is mutual. He’s a cool kid.”

“I just want to make sure that he understands this won’t be permanent.” My walls are up, my nerves on overdrive.

Dean’s expression goes from happy to serious in the blink of an eye. “You’re worried I’m going to hurt him?”

“Not intentionally. But I don’t want him to get any ideas that we’re staying here with you for the long haul. He needs to know that this is temporary.”

“He knows it’s temporary. But that doesn’t mean you’re going to walk out of my life altogether, does it?”

I swallow hard, unsure if I should read between what appear to be thin lines. “No, I guess not. But—”

“Then leave it at that. I enjoy hanging with him. He’s fun. I also enjoy sitting with you. Can we not just enjoy the fact that we don’t all hate each other? It doesn’t have to be more than that.”

He’s hurt. I can see that. Likely offended that I brought it up in the first place. But I don’t let that bother me. My one and

only priority is Henry. And I won't have him suffer because I made a choice. Still, knowing we're on the same page brings me relief. "Yes. We can. I'm sorry."

Dean shrugs. "I get it. You have a kid to protect. Saw my brother go through the same concerns with his daughter. He refused to date out of fear she'd get hurt in the crosshairs."

"Your brother sounds like a smart man."

"You'll meet him tomorrow and can judge that yourself."

"Tomorrow?" I ask.

"Sunday dinner with my family. My mom asked you about it at the school, and since I'm going, I assumed you and Henry would come, too. If you're open to it? I can cancel. Stay here and—"

"No. That's good. Actually, I find it quite a relief that you asked."

"Why is that?"

"Because my sister asked if you'd come to dinner with my family tonight."

Chapter 14

Dean

As I stand on Kate's mother's front porch, waiting for someone to answer the door, I try to remember the last time I had dinner with a family that wasn't mine.

It's an easy thing to remember since it's literally never happened. Even when I dated in high school, I managed to avoid such instances as this. Moments that could go from enjoyable to messy in the blink of an eye.

Henry stands beside me, a wide grin on his face, while Kate is on his other side. She's nervous, barely said a word in the car over here. I can't decide if she's nervous on my behalf or hers. Who knows, maybe it's both.

The door opens and her sister grins at us. "Welcome, Professor. Come on in."

We move inside, and she shuts and locks the door behind us. The warm brownstone is pristinely maintained, every inch of it gleaming as we make our way into the kitchen.

Kate's father sits at the dining table, a bandage on his forehead. He watches me with hard eyes, but before I can say anything to him, Kate's mother is in my eye line.

She is the picture of aged beauty, a gorgeous woman with a bright smile that instantly disarms. "Professor Dean Dorsey. It is quite a pleasure to meet you." She wraps her arms around me in a tight embrace then releases me and steps back.

"Grandma!" Henry jumps into her arms, and she squeezes him back.

“My favorite grandson. How are you?”

“Good. Dean and I played Mario Cart all day.”

“Really?” She casts her gaze up at me, appreciation in her bright hazel eyes. “That sounds so fun.”

“It was.”

“Can I get you a drink? Beer? Wine?” Dakota asks.

“No thanks.”

“Kate?”

“I’m good.” She crosses over to her father. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” His curt response agitates me because I see the disappointment on Kate’s face. Whatever happened between them clearly still carries weight. Despite the fact that he was nearly killed when someone came for his daughter.

“Sir, it’s nice to finally meet you.” I offer him my hand, and he takes it, grip tight.

“Why have you taken such an interest in my daughter?”

“Come on, Henry, can you not be an ass for five minutes?” her mother demands.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind answering.” I pull my hand from his and smile at her before turning my attention back to him. “I like your daughter. I think she’s smart, funny, kind, and she deserves to feel safe. The world would be a darker place without her, which is why I mean to protect both her and her son until whoever attacked you is found.”

“You are her professor. Is that not an integrity issue?”

“Sure. But her safety is worth more than a slap on my wrist, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’d say, if anyone found out, you’d lose your job.”

“Unlikely given that I’m tenured. They’d move her out of my class, sure, but I wouldn’t be reprimanded past that.”

“Tenured?” he arches his brow. “You’re too young for that.”

“The youngest to ever make it here,” I reply quickly then turn to her mother. “Is there anything I can help with? I’m not a great cook, but my mother taught me how to follow instructions.”

She laughs then wraps an arm around my shoulders. “You are going to fit in quite nicely around here.” But instead of guiding me into the kitchen, she all but pushes me into a chair at the same table as Kate’s father—who is apparently also named Henry.

He turns in his chair to face me, and I don’t back down from his glare. In fact, I meet it head-on with a smile. “Mr. Bennett, Kate tells me you got to town recently?”

“I did.”

“Where are you living?”

“Texas.”

“Nice. My brother’s new wife and my other brother’s fiancé grew up near Dallas.”

He grunts but doesn’t respond.

“Ignore him,” Dakota says with a laugh. “He gets hangry. Add to that the concussion, and he hasn’t been super pleasant to be around.”

I expect Henry to reply harshly to his youngest daughter. Instead, he offers her a half smile as she pats him on the shoulder.

It just pisses me off even more.

Especially when I steal a look at Kate and find her staring down at her hands as she sits in a chair beside me.

“So, Dean, how many siblings do you have?” her mother asks as she stirs something on the stove.

“Three older brothers.”

“Four boys?” She arches a brow. “Your mother must have had her hands full.”

I laugh. “She did.”

“What does your father do?” Henry demands.

“Dad—” Kate starts.

“He was a soldier,” I tell him. “Died before I was born.”

Henry looks genuinely upset, which honestly brings me more satisfaction than it probably should. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you.”

“Any of your brothers single?” Dakota questions.

“Freaking-A. Can we not?” Kate asks, exasperated.

I laugh. “Actually, they’re all taken. I’m the only unattached Dorsey.”

Dakota grins at me, then casts a half glance at her sister. “Sure you are.” She turns to Kate. “Did Dad call you and tell you what Detective Andrews told us?”

“No.” She looks to Henry Senior. “You talked to the detective and didn’t call me?”

“You were coming here anyway.”

“You still should have called me!” She takes a deep breath and then turns to Dakota. “What did he say?”

“Jake has an alibi for the night of the break-in,” she says. “And his new girlfriend swears he was with her all night.”

Kate goes pale, and I reach under the table to instinctively brush her leg with my hand. My way of letting her know that I’m here. But I know exactly what she’s thinking. Either the girlfriend is lying—entirely possible. Or the break-in was not related to Jake at all.

Which means someone else is after her.

Question is: Who?

* * *

“Thank you.”

I glance up from the lesson I'm planning, surprised to see Kate standing only a few yards away. I'd been so focused on American History that I hadn't even heard her approach. "For what?" I take my glasses off and set them on the table in front of me. The steady music of my playlist fills the background noise, low enough that Henry can still get some sleep.

"For going tonight. For dealing with my dad's verbal abuse. For being kind to my mother and sister."

"You don't need to thank me, Kate."

"Yes, I do. We're not in a relationship. What we have barely constitutes as friendship given, we don't know each other all that well. And you still handled my family kindly."

"I'm not an asshole." For some reason, her thanking me for acting like a normal human being pisses me off.

"No, I know you're not." She moves in close enough that I can smell her lavender shampoo. It's intoxicating, even with a table between us. "I'm sorry, that came out wrong. It's just... you didn't have to put up with him."

"As far as I see it, you're the one who needs to be reminded you don't have to put up with being treated that way."

She stiffens. "What do you mean?"

"He talks down to you," I reply, irritation lacing my tone.

"We have a complicated relationship."

"Complicated or not, you shouldn't be treated as though you are incapable. Before your asshole ex got out of jail, you'd been working, raising a child, and going to college to get a degree. None of that needs to be de-valued."

She stares back at me, and I honestly can't read her expression. Not until she sighs and sinks down into a chair. "It wasn't always that way." Because I sense her need to vent, I don't say a word. "We were really close. But after I got pregnant—" She closes her eyes. "He was angry at first. He never liked Jake." She swallows hard and meets my gaze. "Jake told me to get rid of the baby." Kate keeps her voice low

even as her eyes fill with tears that she angrily wipes away. “I told my dad what he said, and he ordered me to stay away from Jake. He promised that he and my mom would help me and that I wouldn’t be alone.”

I put my hands into my lap, tightening them into fists to keep my anger in check.

“I didn’t listen. Jake called me right before I entered my third trimester. He begged me to meet with him. Promised that he’d changed and wanted to take care of me and the baby.” Kate leans back in the chair and closes her eyes. She refuses to meet my gaze, and I know it’s because she’s ashamed of what she did next.

Why? I can’t even begin to imagine. But I keep my mouth shut, and I listen.

“I spent so much time getting ready. Applying makeup and choosing a dress that showed the bump but was also feminine. I’d looked really pretty.” She begins to toy with the placemat in front of her. “When I arrived at his apartment, he’d greeted me on the front steps with a smile and a hug. He told me I looked so sexy, so beautiful, easing me into comfort. It wasn’t until he shut the door that it changed. He yelled at me. Screamed for not doing what he asked. He hit me. Kicked me. And when I was broken and bleeding on the floor. He forced himself on me.”

I explode out of my chair, and Kate flinches.

I keep my breathing as level as I can, pacing in a small circle while she continues. “The neighbor heard me scream and called the cops. If it weren’t for them, he would have killed me, and Henry never would have been born.”

I picture a million different ways I can kill the man. Imagining the mugshot she emailed me that I forwarded to campus security.

“My father never forgave me after that.” She snuffles, and I turn toward her again. “Things were never the same. He and my mom got divorced, and after Henry’s third birthday, he left town. I even thought naming my son after him would be an

honor, but he never saw it as one.” Tears stream down her pale cheeks.

She looks so broken.

So wrapped in her own nightmare.

And then it hits me why she bailed that first night at the club. “I’m an idiot.” I rush over and fall to my knees in front of her. “That’s why you ran out at the club. Because I told you that you looked sexy.”

She nods, shutting her eyes tightly. “I’m sorry. I know you didn’t know, but I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t get past the memory of what happened—” Her shoulders shake, so I wrap my arms around her, pulling her against my chest.

I hold on, pushing out every negative thought and focusing only on making her feel better. She’s been through so much. Felt so much. And all this time she’s felt relatively alone in it. The strength that Kate Bennett possesses rivals that of a gladiator.

That much I know without a doubt.

I push her back gently and cradle her face in my hands, remaining on my knees in front of her. Using the pads of my thumbs, I brush the tears from her cheeks. “None of that was your fault. None of it.”

“I promised I’d stay away from him.”

“He was the father of your son, Kate. You were young. How could you have known what he was capable of?”

“Because he’d hit me before. Twice.” She shakes her head angrily. “I’d told myself it was because he’d been drunk. Because I said the wrong thing. But I should have seen it.”

“You couldn’t have seen it.” I pull her forward and rest my forehead against hers. She doesn’t pull away though her slender fingers tighten on my wrists. “You are not to blame, Kate,” I tell her again. “Not for any of it. And I swear I will not let that asshole get near you.”

“What if he hurts you? What if he comes for your family to get to me?”

I pull back and stare into her gorgeous eyes. “I’ll make sure my brothers know there’s a risk, but I can guarantee that, if he has the balls to show up at their houses, he won’t be walking away.”

Chapter 15

Kate

Is this how Dean felt yesterday?

As we pull into the driveway of his mother's quaint farmhouse, right beside an older Chevy truck, my stomach turns into a pit of knots. Henry happily chatters away in the backseat, completely unaware that his mother is about five seconds away from opening the door and practicing the tuck and roll you see in action movies.

"You okay?"

I look over at Dean. Even in my nervous state, I'm still captivated by his aqua gaze. "Yep."

"Liar." He grins. "Will it help if I promise to fight any of my brothers who try and grill you?"

I can all but feel myself pale.

Dean chuckles as he puts the car in park then reaches over to cover my hand with his. "Kidding, Kate. It's going to be fun."

"Yeah, Mom! Chill out! It's going to be so fun!"

Dean climbs out of the car, and Henry follows. I watch as Dean affectionately tousles my son's hair, and the pit grows. How long can they keep this up before he becomes permanently attached to a man he never should have met in the first place?

"You coming?" Dean asks. "I can always crack a window for you."

Shaking my head, I'm unable to fight the smile that comes to my face. He has this innate ability to diffuse my nerves. Even with the potential danger of my ex lurking around,

I climb out and join them as they make the short trek up the drive. We pass by two other trucks before reaching the front door.

Dean doesn't even ring the doorbell; he just shoves the door open and moves inside, different then how my family does it. Laughter drifts toward us from somewhere in the back of the house, but we don't even make it that far before a little girl sticks her head out. She sees us and squeals. It takes me only a few seconds to realize that I've seen her before and even less time to realize where.

Outside the ice cream shop.

Which means that the tattooed man *does* have a brother... and he happens to be the very reason I'm here.

My stomach twists. Thankfully, the little girl doesn't seem to recognize us though, which hopefully means that, if I'd been gawking at him as much as I think I was, then hopefully, he won't remember me either.

"Uncle Dean!"

"Hey, bug!" He drops down and catches the little girl as she throws her arms around his neck and squeezes.

"Daddy said you might not chicken out and bring your girlfriend."

Once again, that pit grows. Dean looks back at me and laughs. "Kate is my friend who just happens to be a girl," he says. "And your daddy is a dummy. Did we decide that already?"

She giggles.

"This is my other friend, Henry." Dean sets his niece down and points to Henry, who smiles and waves at her.

"Hi!" she greets happily. "Do you want to see the chickens?"

Henry looks back at me. “Can I?”

I nod. “Go for it.”

“Come on!” The little girl sprints down the hall, and I watch Henry disappear after her, all while trying to keep my nerves at bay.

“They’ll be in the backyard. We’ll be able to see them from the kitchen.” He reaches back and puts a hand on my lower back. Heat spreads through my body at the contact, and even though my instincts tell me to pull away, that we keep pressing against a boundary, my heart and body say something entirely different.

The kitchen is large and open. Marie Dorsey offers me a wave and a wide smile as she cooks at the stove while another woman cradles a baby right beside her. A curvy blonde dices carrots, and a brunette rocking a huge wedding ring pours wine into glasses.

All eyes turn to us.

I freeze in place, knowing I must look like a deer in headlights.

“Kate, this is my sister-in-law, Nova; she’s Everett’s wife.”

The brunette is a stunner, her smile wide and bright as she offers me her hand. “So nice to meet you, Kate.”

“You, too.”

“This is Axel’s better half, Kennedy.”

“She does exist!” Kennedy offers me her hand, disarming me with a bright, happy grin. “We all thought you were lying, Dean.”

He rolls his eyes. “Axel is rubbing off on you.”

The women exchange grins, and I know an innuendo was just made, but I’m still far too nervous to point it out.

“I’m Rose.” The woman holding a baby boy holds out a free hand. “Zander is my Dorsey.”

“Zander, the one with the little girl?” I ask.

“That’s the one.” She beams at me. “I saw your boy run through here a minute ago. He’s adorable.”

“Thanks.”

Marie sets the spoon she’d been using aside and crosses over to pull me into a big hug. “How you doing, sweetheart?” she asks, pulling back enough to see my face, but not fully releasing me. It’s a warm hug. A happy hug. And for some reason, it brings tears to my eyes.

“I’m okay.”

“And your dad?” she asks. “Dean told us he was injured.”

“He’s fine. Thanks for asking.”

“I am so glad he’s doing okay.” She releases me and goes back to stirring.

“Come on and meet the brothers. We’d better get this over with.” Dean crosses over to the back door and pulls it open. We step out, and I find myself staring at three incredibly handsome men.

I recognize the one from the ice cream shop immediately. What I can see of him is completely covered in tattoos. His nose is pierced, as are both of his ears and eyebrows. If it weren’t for the wide smile on his face, he would be incredibly intimidating.

Another man with lighter hair and bright blue eyes stands beside him, tall and muscled in jeans and a white t-shirt. And another, with darker hair that is longer than the others, is the first to notice me.

“Well, well, well. Seems you owe me fifty,” he says, glancing back at the man with tattoos. He reaches out. “I’m Axel. You must be Kate.”

“Yes. Nice to meet you.” I take his hand, feeling the heat rushing to my cheeks. These men might lack the instant connection I felt with Dean, but the Dorsey brothers are rocking an epic gene pool. And I don’t think anyone with a pulse would argue that.

“Zander,” the man with tattoos says as he shakes my hand. “But I think we’ve met before?”

“Not really,” I reply, my cheeks heating. “I nearly ran face-first into you when I was taking my son for ice cream.”

He laughs. “Yes, that’s it! Nice to see you again, then.”

“You, too,” I reply with an awkward smile.

“Everett,” the other one introduces himself as he takes my hand the moment it’s free from Zander.

“It’s great to meet all of you. Dean has told me a lot about you.”

“Has he, now.” Axel grins at Dean, who shakes his head.

“All bad stuff,” Dean replies. “Making sure she knew exactly what she was walking into.”

“Yeah, yeah. It was probably all lies.” Zander laughs.

I turn my attention to Henry, who is currently holding a black and white chicken while the little girl beside him chats happily away. “That’s your daughter?” I ask Zander.

He nods. “My little Aara.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“Thanks.” Zander grins. “She’s pretty perfect.”

* * *

Dean’s family is absolutely the most amazing group of people I’ve ever met. And the meal was delicious. The brothers all rib on each other, but it’s happy and playful. Not the condescending, half-hearted insults that I’m used to my father throwing my way.

Marie is clearly in her happy place with her children, their significant others, and her grandchildren all under one roof. Honestly, it makes me wish I could be a real part of it. The thought is fleeting, though. Because, deep down, I know we don’t fit here.

Not in this happy place.

Henry? Sure. But me? I'm far too damaged. As it stands, I'm likely a risk to Dean just by staying with him.

"So, Kate. How is Dean as a professor?" Axel asks.

"Great," I reply. "I've learned a lot already."

"Really?" Everett arches his brows. "He doesn't just sit there and stare at the wall the whole time?"

I laugh. "Hardly. Honestly, I heard some of the students chatting on Friday about how difficult his class is shaping up to be. Plus, there's the college girls who can't stop giggling about him in the halls."

Dean laughs.

"You're making his already inflated ego even larger," Zander replies.

"It's the truth." My gaze meets his, and heat passes between us. I swallow hard, forcing myself to look away before anyone can read into it.

"Well. Would you ladies be interested in helping me plate dessert?"

"I wanna help!" Aara yells.

"Can I help?" Henry asks.

Marie leans in, a bright smile on her face. "You most certainly can, sweet boy. Come on." Marie pushes up, and the kids follow.

Rose checks on the infant who, despite the noise, is sleeping in a Pack 'n Play beside the table. Then, she stands and joins Marie and the others in the kitchen with Kennedy and Nova following. Not wanting to be left out, but also slightly terrified of leaving Dean, I stand and smile tightly at him.

He nods, so I get up and make my way into the kitchen.

"Do you know how to make whipped cream?" Marie asks me.

“I do.”

“Great.” She grins. “Do you mind whipping some up while we prep these? The heavy cream is in the fridge, sugar in the pantry.”

“Not at all.” Grateful to have something to do, I get to work prepping the whipped cream. As I pour it into the bowl of a stand mixer, I look up and meet Dean’s gaze as he and his brothers head out into the backyard.

I’ve always read about conversations that can be had without a single word, but I’d never understood how you could be so in tune with someone that it would be possible.

But right now? I can read everything on his mind.

He likes me being here.

Likes us being a part of his family.

And truth be told, so do I.

Chapter 16

Dean

Beer in hand, I take a seat on a lawn chair beside my brothers.

“So, tell us what’s going on.”

I look over at Everett then glance back to make sure the door is shut. The last thing I want is for Henry to overhear what I’m about to say. “I told you a bit of it on the phone. But it’s so much worse than we thought. This guy is a genuine danger,” I tell them. After giving them the Cliff Notes version of what Kate told me last night, I study each one of their faces.

Zander and Axel are both pacing while Everett looks ready to join the hunt and rip the bastard’s intestines out. “What do the cops say?” he asks.

“Not much. So far, they say he has an alibi. And a girlfriend who can corroborate his whereabouts during the attack on Kate’s father.”

“Do you think it’s him? Or could it have been a random break-in?” Zander questions.

“Not random. I saw the house. Whoever did it had something personal against Kate. They’d ripped all the drawings down, shattered the mirror, and destroyed her bedroom.”

“Asshole,” Axel growls. “What do you need us to do? I’ve got a few buddies on the force. I could ask around.”

“That would be great,” I say. “But, to be honest, I’m only telling you because me letting Kate and Henry stay with me

potentially makes me a target, too.”

“And you’re worried it paints a bullseye on us as well,” Zander finishes.

“Yes. I don’t want to put any of you at risk, but I can’t turn my back on her, either. I won’t.”

“We’re not asking you to,” Zander says quickly. “You protect the woman and kid, Brother. We’ll watch our backs. And if anything happens, we better be your first call.”

“I, for one, would love to get my hands on him before the cops do,” Everett says as he leans back in his chair.

“You and me both,” I reply.

We fall into silence, all of us contemplating what I just said. I still haven’t had time to fully consider everything she told me. But last night, I didn’t sleep. All night, I’d tossed and turned, imagining everything she must have gone through.

The pain.

The fear.

I’d gotten up and done some background on the asshole, using what limited search abilities I have. Unfortunately, I found nothing but a public arrest record.

“How is she doing?” Everett asks. “With everything.”

“Not great,” I tell them truthfully. “She’s trying. But I can see that she’s struggling, and it kills me that I can’t make it better.”

“You’re in love with her.”

My head whips over toward Zander so quickly that I’m sure I’ll get whiplash. “Excuse me?”

“You are in love with this woman,” he says.

“No. I don’t even know her.”

“You don’t have to know her,” Axel says. “I knew before I really knew Kennedy.”

“Same with Nova,” Everett agrees.

“Rose and I were supposed to just be a fling,” Zander says. “But I was a jealous idiot before we even kissed for the first time.”

“Love?” I choke on the word. “No. I worry about her. As a friend.”

Everett leans in closer. “Brother. Aside from that first night at the club, you’ve made zero attempt to sleep with her. Yet you are living with her and her son, risking your own life to keep her safe. That is a whole lot more than friendship.”

“I—” I trail off because I have no rebuttal. I never wanted a relationship. In fact, I was adamant that settling down wasn’t for me. But I haven’t even known this woman two weeks, and I’m already living with her.

How did that happen?

“Look at our little brother,” Axel says. “Speechlessly in love.” He laughs.

“Who would have thought that the big, bad, anti-relationship Dean Dorsey would settle down.”

A pit in my stomach expands, and I tighten my grip on the armrests of the chair. I feel completely and utterly incapacitated as I toss around that word in my head. *Love*. No. It’s impossible. I don’t know her well enough.

Sure, I like her, but love? Absolutely not.

As soon as we know this asshole has been caught, or at the very least is not a threat, she and Henry will move back into their own house, and we’ll all go back to our normal lives.

Love. Couldn’t be further from it.

Then why does the idea of her leaving make me feel like I cannot breathe?

“We’ve scared him.” Everett laughs. “Listen, I for one think it’s great.”

“You don’t understand.” I push to my feet and begin to pace. “I do not want a relationship.”

“Neither did I,” Zander replies. “And now I’ve got a second kid.”

“No.” I shake my head. “She’s only staying with me until we figure out who’s behind the break-in at her place and whether or not this Jake is a genuine threat.”

“Sure she is,” Axel says as he stands and pats me on the shoulder. “But just so you know, love isn’t the weakness you seem to think it is. And once you figure that out, you’ll be a whole lot happier.”

* * *

Coffee in hand, I make my way down the hall toward my office. I’m exhausted, thanks to a lack of sleep the last few nights. I’d been unable to disconnect from that despicable four-letter word ever since my brothers uttered it.

Bastards.

Kate took Henry to school and then was going to run by her sister’s coffee shop to get some studying done before coming here. And even though I know she won’t be alone, I still can’t bring myself to stop worrying about her. What if she gets hurt? What if Jake tracks her out to her car? What if—*Get it together, Dorsey.*

I take a deep breath and unlock the door to my office. I’ve no sooner set my coffee and bag down than someone is knocking.

“Yes?” I ask when a young, red-haired woman sticks her head in.

“Professor Dorsey? I was wondering if I might have some of your time.”

“Sure.” I gesture to the chair across from me, and she comes in, nervously toying with the strap of her messenger bag. “Catherine, right?” I ask.

“Yes.” She breathes the word, a flirtatious smile on her lips.

I try to hide my irritation. After all, college girls flirting with me is not something I am unaccustomed to, but lack of sleep combined with overall frustration has me on edge. “What can I do for you?”

“Well.” She reaches into her bag and withdraws a binder that is covered in stickers. “I wanted your thoughts on this.” After withdrawing a stapled packet of papers, she hands it across the desk toward me.

The title reads *A brief explanation on the effect history has on shaping our future*. “What is this for?”

“Just something I threw together last night.”

I flip through the pages. “You did this last night?” It’s at least fifteen pages long, and she’s indexed all of her sources perfectly. “This looks like it would have taken at least a week.”

“What can I say? I’m good.”

I continue scanning the pages, enjoying the overall take she has on the subject matter. “And what is this for?” I ask again.

“Nothing in particular. Though I was hoping you might give me your feedback.”

“I can do that, but it’ll take me a bit. I should be able to have notes back to you by the end of the day.”

She beams at me. “That would be great.”

I wait for her to get up and leave, but she doesn’t. She just remains sitting across from me, eyeing me like I’m the last Tootsie Pop and she wants to see how many licks it’ll take to get to my center.

I shift uneasily in my seat. “Is that all?”

“Well.” She leans in closer. “I was kind of wondering if you might be open to discussing your feedback over dinner? Or even coffee?”

“Listen, Miss—”

The door opens and Kate steps in. The air is sucked from my lungs as I drink in the sight of her wearing a strappy sundress made up of blue and white checkered fabric. She looks like pure sunshine, and try as I might, I can't see anything else.

"The professor and I are busy," Catherine says, her tone a bit snappy.

"Actually"—I clear my throat, regaining the ability to speak—"we were just finishing up." I turn to Catherine. "While I appreciate your invitation, I must remind you that I am your professor. Seeing each other outside of the confines of the halls of this school would be incredibly inappropriate. If you wish for me to give you feedback, I can do so at the end of the day, here in this office."

Her cheeks turn a bright red. "Yes. Of course. Thank you." After gathering her bag, she turns and glares at Kate, who steps out of the way to let her by.

"Come in, Miss Bennett." I gesture for her to close the door. She does, crossing over to take a seat where Catherine just vacated.

"That happen to you often?" she asks with a grin.

"More than I care to admit." I set Catherine's paper aside. "How did this morning go?"

"Good. Dropped Henry off then went home to grab some more clothes."

"You went home? Alone?" My stomach drops, fear, despite the fact that she's sitting right here in front of me, assaulting my nervous system.

"Not alone," she replies. "My sister and one of her employees met me over there. He went in first, and we followed."

I swallow hard. "I could have gone with you later."

"I know. And I appreciate that. But I needed more clothes for today. Wearing the same yoga pants and large t-shirts gets old after a while."

Nodding, I try to ignore the way that dress hugs her figure while allowing the faintest swell of her breasts to peek out the top. Add to that, the way the blue and white contrast with her dark hair, and I'm surprised I'm not a puddle in the middle of the floor.

"Anyway," she says, "I wanted to let you know that the detective came by my house while I was there and assured me that they've had patrol cars driving by every few hours just to keep an eye on things. With that and Jake having an alibi, I've decided to go home tonight."

"What?" Fear shoots straight through the desire, killing it with one blow. "Why?"

"Henry really needs routine. And, if we're not in danger, then I think we need to get back to our normal lives. I really appreciate everything you've done for us, but if we were to get caught, then you could get into a lot of trouble."

"What does your dad think?" I ask. "He going back with you?"

She lets out a breath. "No. He is going to be staying at a hotel."

"Kate—"

"Dean," she interrupts, green gaze leveling on me, "I want to go home. I want to sleep in my bed. I need—" She stops, and I get to my feet, remaining behind my desk because I don't trust myself to get close to her. "I need to put distance between me and the bad memories. And I'm not going to be able to do that if I'm hiding at your apartment."

"And if it was Jake? If he's just waiting for you to go home?"

"I have an alarm system to let me know if he shows up. Then, I will call the cops. I will be safe."

"Your dad wasn't."

"My dad didn't have the alarm set," she replies. "If it had been, he would have known someone was in the house."

I start to pace, worst-case scenarios running through my mind on repeat. “This is a bad idea.”

“And what if they never catch the person who broke into my house?” she asks. “Then we’ll just stay with you forever?”

Yes, I long to say, even though the word makes absolutely zero sense. I don’t want to get married. Don’t plan on having kids. And I certainly never wanted to live with a woman. So why can’t I be grateful that the danger might have passed?

Why can’t I be happy to go back to my normal routine?

Because it was empty.

The realization is like a baseball bat to the side of my head. Having Kate and Henry with me, even only for the few days they have been, has given me a sense of completion that I never realized I was lacking.

And it makes my stomach revolt.

“No, I guess you can’t,” I say, trying to keep my voice as level as I possibly can.

“I just... I wanted to thank you for what you’ve done. You’ve been a true friend, Dean.”

Friend. For some reason, the word is acid on my tongue. Before I can fully comprehend what I’m doing, I close the distance between us, grab the back of her neck, and slam my mouth onto hers.

Heat envelopes me. Singing me straight to the bone as she grips my biceps and holds on. She opens beneath me, her tongue sliding against mine. And when a soft moan leaves her lips, I pull back, releasing her to move across the office.

Kate stares at me, wide-eyed, a flush on her cheeks.

“I—” She starts then turns and leaves without another word.

Chapter 17

Kate

“**A**nd you just *left*?” Dakota demands as she sits at my kitchen table while I sweep broken glass off the floor.

It’s been hours since the kiss, and yet I can still feel the heat of Dean’s mouth on mine. “What else was I supposed to do?”

“I can think of *at least* three other scenarios.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “You would. Dean and I can’t happen, though. I have to get back to Henry’s and my routine. Back to normalcy.”

Dakota shakes her head, giving me a disapproving glare. “Normalcy is overrated. You deserve to be happy. Henry likes him, doesn’t he?”

“Woah.” Shaking my head, I stop sweeping. “You are getting way too far ahead of things. Even if I were to date, Henry wouldn’t meet the guy until I knew it was going somewhere.”

“Yet, he already lived with Dean.”

“That’s different, and you know it.”

“Do I?” she asks. “Because from what it sounds like, you’re purposely sabotaging what could be a spectacular end to your dry spell.”

Rolling my eyes, I continue sweeping. “Dakota, Dean is not relationship material. The guy lives and breathes no commitments.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I can tell. Can’t you just accept the fact that I walked away and move on?”

Dakota slides off the chair and retrieves a bottle of water from the refrigerator. Whoever had been in my house dumped all of the food on the floor. They destroyed a week’s worth of cold groceries and ruined every single thing I had in my pantry.

Thankfully, my sister had done some quick shopping before heading over to help, though she has yet to do anything but chastise me for walking away from Dean.

Even as I try to hide it, my gaze travels around my destroyed house. Thankfully, the blood stain is gone, and the drawings were the first things I’d picked up when I got here today. But there is still so much damage.

Most of it in my own head.

The violation I feel at knowing someone else was in my space, touching my stuff, doing who knows what else that I’ve yet to discover, is enough to make me feel incredibly uneasy in my own home.

Which pisses me off.

This is *my* place.

A house with walls that I painted. A bathroom I remodeled with my own two hands.

I *refuse* to not feel at home.

Dakota reaches over and touches my cheek. It’s only then I realize I’m crying. “Are you sure you want to stay here? If you don’t want to stay with Dean, fine. But you can always come to my place.”

I wipe the tears away. “Thanks, but I refuse to let them kick me out of my own space. It’s been days, and no one has returned, so I think we’ll be just fine. No, I *know* we’ll be fine.”

“The offer stands,” she says. “Want me to go grab Henry?”

“Do you mind? I’d really like to have all of this picked up before he gets here.”

“Don’t mind at all.” She kisses me noisily on the cheek. “I’ll even take him for ice cream afterward. You sure you’re going to be okay?”

“Positive.” I flash her a smile that I hope is convincing then go back to sweeping as I try to put my life back into place, piece by broken piece.

* * *

The sound of something screeching across my window rips me from sleep. I shoot up, my hand going for the 9mm on my nightstand. I close my palm around the grip and look to my left, making sure that Henry is still sleeping soundly beside me.

The curtains have been drawn closed, but a second screech fills my ears. This time from across the hall. I slip out of bed, grabbing my cell in one hand, keeping the gun in the other, and creep toward Henry’s bedroom.

A shadow shifts just outside, and adrenaline surges through my veins.

My heart pounds.

Turning back to the room, I shut and lock the door then shake Henry.

Glass shatters.

“Mom?”

“Get up, baby. We have to get up.” I half lift him then guide us both into my large closet. As soon as he’s tucked inside, I dial 9-1-1.

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?”

“Someone’s trying to break into my house,” I say, my voice shaky. “They might already be in here.” I rattle off my address, and the woman assures me they’re sending help.

Instead of staying on the phone, I hang up so I can keep my attention fully on the noise around me. “Take this.” I hand Henry my phone.

Tears fill his eyes, and his cheeks pale from fear. “Mom? Are we going to be okay?” he chokes out.

“Fine, baby.” I force a smile then peek out of the closet door. “Stay here. Don’t make a sound.”

He nods, clutching my phone like a lifeline.

I creep toward the bedroom door, keeping my steps slow and hugging the wall as I go. My gun is cocked and ready. As soon as I reach the door, it’s shoved open. A hard body slams into me, and I’m thrown backward.

My pulse hammers in my ears as I reach for the gun, but my attacker is fast. He rips me back by my ankle.

I twist, thoughts only on Henry, then kick out with my foot, slamming it into his face. Bones crunch. “Fuck!” he bellows, voice partially muffled from his ski mask. The voice is deep, but thanks to my adrenaline and the blood hammering in my ears, I can’t decide if I recognize it or not.

He pulls the mask up just enough that I can see the blood pouring from his nose.

Satisfaction fills me, and I try to scramble back toward my gun. He rips me back again and slams his fist into my face. I see stars as pain explodes along my cheekbone.

“Mom!” Henry screams.

The man stills, fist reared back again.

“No, Baby! Get back inside!”

Henry rushes back in and slams the closet door.

The man looks down at me, and I struggle to recognize anything about him, but the ski mask covers his face.

Sirens wail in the distance.

My attacker rears back and slams his fist into my cheek again then turns and sprints out of the room. I grab the gun,

ringing in my ears, and scramble back toward the closet. With a shaky hand, I raise it and wait.

“Miss Bennett!” A man calls out. “Boston PD!”

“In here!” My voice is a choked sob, and I don’t lower the gun until I see the uniformed officer come into view. Only then do I set it aside and slide it just far enough away that I won’t be seen as a threat.

He rushes over and falls to his knees, then speaks into his radio, calling for an ambulance.

“My son,” I tell him. “Henry, you can come out.”

“Kate!” A man roars my name.

The officer turns as Dean sprints into the doorway, eyes wide, hair a mess. He’s clearly panicked, and when Henry rushes out of the closet and straight into his arms, my question as to how he knew to come is answered.

My boy called him.

When he was scared, it wasn’t his grandparents or aunt he called. It was a man he barely knows.

“Who are you?” the officer asks him.

“A family friend,” Dean replies. “Dean Dorsey. Henry called me.” He lifts Henry and holds onto my boy as he carries him across the room and kneels beside me. “Shit, Kate.” He turns to the officer. “Did you catch the bastard?”

He shakes his head. “My partner is checking the perimeter, but the house is clear. Seems like they got away.”

“Again.” Dean shakes his head.

The call of shrill sirens fills my ears moments before footsteps echo through my house.

“In the bedroom!” the officer calls out.

Two paramedics come rushing in, and it’s a blur of light, machines, and questions before they clear me well enough to leave me be. By the time they’re done checking me, I’m

wrapped in a blanket and sitting on my couch, Henry in my lap.

Dean speaks to the officer in the corner, arms crossed, looking beyond pissed. And why wouldn't he be? He told me it was unsafe to come home. Then he had to come out in the middle of the night because I was wrong.

I look down at Henry. I was so wrong.

My throat tightens with emotion, and I try to take a deep breath. My pride and desire to be in my own space put both him and me in harm's way tonight. If I hadn't woken up in time—

Dean crosses over, interrupting my thoughts. "How are you feeling?"

"Not great," I admit.

"Do you want me to call your mom?"

I consider, but then brush it off. "It's late, and we're fine. I'd rather just tell her tomorrow."

Dean nods. "The glass on your front door is broken. It's likely how they got in. Tripped your alarm, but we can reset that. I can board up the window until you can get it fixed, but I don't think you should be staying here alone." Before I can tell him that he's right, he adds, "I can pack a bag and crash on the couch."

"You don't have to do that."

"If you want to keep to a routine, I understand and respect that. But staying here alone isn't safe. It can't be an option."

The idea of staying here after what just happened is terrifying, but I don't want to be chased from my house, either. No matter how badly I want to flee. "I know it's not. But that's asking a lot of you."

Henry launches himself up off the couch and onto Dean. He wraps both arms around the man's waist and holds on tight. "Please don't leave."

Dean rubs a hand over Henry's hair and meets my gaze. In the crystal depths, I see more than I ever wanted to. He cares for my son—deeply. And, if I'm not mistaken, he cares for me, too.

I swallow hard. "Okay."

"They're going to increase patrols in the area, and thanks to the blood splatter in your room from you breaking his nose, they think they might be able to ID your attacker."

Hope warms my chest even as I begin to shiver.

"Get Henry settled, and I'll get the window boarded up." Dean smiles at me, and Henry pulls away.

"Thank you," he says softly.

"Of course, little man. I'll keep you safe. I promise."

"And Mom?"

"Absolutely."

Chapter 18

Dean

There is not a single part of me that doesn't want to hunt that fucker down and kill him for what he did to Kate and Henry. The poor kid is terrified, as is his mom. Her cheek has already turned into one massive bruise, the blood vessels in her right eye popped from the force of his fist.

Rage burns hot through me as I finish prepping the tea.

"It's good to go." Everett comes into view, wearing sweatpants and a white t-shirt. He carries a toolbox, which he sets down on the counter beside the cups I've set out.

"Thank you so much."

"Anytime." Everett shakes his head as he stares at the board he just sealed to Kate's front door. "I can't believe some asshole came in here and did that."

"I should have insisted she stay at my apartment." I shake my head. "I'd freaked out and agreed that she should come back here." I meet the gaze of my eldest brother. "She could have been killed. They both could have been."

"But they weren't," Everett insists. "They survived."

"Henry was so terrified."

"You said he called you?"

I nod. "I'd been up reading, which is the only reason I was awake to answer the call." I place two tea bags into the mugs. "You sure you don't want one?"

“Nah. I have an early job, so I’ll be drinking coffee soon enough.”

I check the clock, surprised to see that it’s four in the morning already. “Shit, I didn’t realize the time. I’m sorry, man.”

“Don’t.” Everett shakes his head. “I’m glad you called.”

Wearing a baggy sweatshirt, Kate makes her way out into the living room. She stops in place when she sees Everett.

“Hey, Kate,” he greets.

“Hey.” She looks at the boarded-up door. “You fixed it?”

He nods. “I measured to order some replacement glass, but that’ll hold firm until we get it in.”

Her cheeks turn pink. “You didn’t have to—”

“It’s my job,” he says with a grin.

“He owns his own contracting company,” I remind her.

“That’s right.” She nods then crosses into the kitchen. “Thank you so much. If you let me know the cost—”

“No cost,” Everett replies as he lifts his toolbox. “I’m happy to do it.” He looks back at me. “I’ll let you know when I get the glass in, and you let me know if you need me to help hide a body.”

“Will do.” Chuckling, I move around the kitchen bar and head for the door.

“Thank you so much,” Kate says.

“Anytime. Nova told me that if you need anything, give her a call.”

“I will. Thanks.” She offers me a half smile as I pass by.

“Call me if that asshole shows up again,” Everett says. “And just know that me, Axel, and Zander can always stay over just in case.”

“I really appreciate that, but if luck has it, they’ll nail the bastard today. Kate broke his nose, and there was enough

blood splatter they thought they might be able to get an ID. If he's in the system, that is."

"And if it's her ex—"

"He's definitely in the system," I say as I open the door. "Thanks again, man. I really appreciate it."

"Anytime." Everett leaves, and I remain where I stand in the doorway as he gets into his truck and fires it up. It's not until he's pulling out of the drive that I shut and lock the door. While I don't think whoever attacked Kate is smart enough to go after Everett, I don't want to take any chances.

When I make it back into the kitchen, Kate is sitting at the table, her eyes full of tears. I finish prepping the tea, add some honey, and put a mug in front of her. "Henry get to sleep okay?"

She nods. "Having you here helps him."

"I'm glad he called me. I can't even tell you how fucking terrified I was to get that call, Kate. To know that you were being attacked."

"You got here fast."

"Not fast enough." I take a sip of tea. The peppermint burns my throat, but I welcome it because the bite helps curb the panic I still feel. "You could have died."

She reaches across the table and covers my hand with hers. The fact that she's so calm after such an ordeal speaks to the strength I sensed in her when we first met. I turn my hand over and link our fingers, enjoying the way her hand feels in mine. "We should have stayed with you."

"I should have insisted. Or offered to come here."

"You didn't ask for any of this, Dean. You barely know me, and you offered to take in both me and my son."

"I do know you." I meet her gaze. "You are the strongest woman I've ever met. You're selfless, independent, smart, loving, gorgeous, and above all, you're an amazing mother."

A tear slips down her cheek.

“I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind since that night at the club. You’ve haunted me.”

“Dean, I—”

“Let me finish, please.” I take a deep breath and continue, “I never saw myself getting into a relationship that lasted longer than a few weeks. Hell, days even. It just wasn’t in the cards for me. But then I met you.” I’m opening myself up, becoming more vulnerable than I ever have—even with my brothers. “And I want to get to know you better. I want to get to know Henry. I want to spend my days with you, Kate.” Heart on my sleeve, I wait. Declarations of love are not something I’m comfortable with, and based on her expression, it’s a good thing I kept that shelved.

“I have never had good luck with relationships. But you make me want to try.” She grants me a half smile, and I force myself to focus on the side of her face not covered in a bruise. Because the last thing I want is anger tainting this moment.

I push up from my chair and kneel at her feet. Reaching up, I cup her uninjured cheek. Staring into her green eyes feels like home for me. Like anywhere she is, is where I belong. Leaning forward, I press my lips to hers, keeping the kiss tender so I don’t cause her any pain.

Kate grips the front of my shirt and parts her lips.

I deepen the kiss, savoring every moment.

And then, we pull apart. I rest my forehead against hers, trying to catch my breath.

“Slow,” she says. “I need to take things slow.”

“I can do slow,” I tell her, even though I’ve literally never done slow in my entire life. Most of my relationships start in the fast lane.

Then again, they burn out just as quickly.

I can only hope my time with Kate doesn’t prove to end the same way.

* * *

I glance up from the book I'm reading and grin at Henry. He's seated sideways in a chair, his feet dangling off the edge as he plays on the Nintendo Switch I brought from my apartment. Since I'm between classes and Kate is in one, I offered to let him hang out with me in my office. The school had a teacher workday today, so it was this, or she was going to have to skip class.

I'd been worried that he'd be bored, but honestly, the kid looks even more relaxed here than he'd been at home.

"You want something to drink?" I ask.

He hits a button and sits up straight in the chair. "Soda?"

I grin. "Your mom told me no soda. But she did say juice, tea, or water."

"Man. She always knows what I'm going to ask before I ask it."

"Power of a great mom, my friend." Standing, I shove my phone into my pocket and grab the wallet and keys from my desk.

"Apple juice sounds good." He sets the switch in the chair as he gets up, and together, we walk out of the office. After locking it behind me, we start down the hall. Students coming and going from classes stroll down, barely paying us any attention as we make our way into the professors' lounge.

Unfortunately, we're not alone.

Allison looks up from the magazine she's reading and smiles brightly at me. "Professor Dorsey. Haven't seen much of you lately."

"I've been busy," I reply.

She looks at Henry who smiles politely and waves. "Hi."

"Hey there, cutie. Who is this?"

“The son of a friend of mine,” I tell her. “Keeping an eye on him while she’s in an appointment.”

“She?” Allison arches a brow. “Interesting.”

“Not really.” I walk over to the soda machine and insert a dollar then press the button for apple juice. It clunks down and lands in the cavity, so Henry reaches down to get it. “Come on, kid.” I sling an arm around his shoulders and guide him to the door. “See you later, Allison.”

“Bye, boys.”

The way she says it makes me cringe, but seconds later, we’re back in the hallway. By the time we reach my office, Kate is standing there, a wide smile on her face. The fresh bruises from her attack still mar her face, but they in no way dull her beauty.

She’s breathtaking.

“Mom!” Henry rushes over and wraps his arms around his mom.

“Hey, baby. You have a good day?”

“Heck yes. Dean just took me to get a juice.” He holds it up like a trophy.

“Good.” She looks at me. “Can you open the door so we can talk?”

I do as she asks, all the while wondering just what is on her mind. She seems happy, relieved almost.

“Go on inside, bud,” she tells Henry. “We’ll be there in just a second.”

Henry hands me his apple juice, so I open it and offer it back. He walks into my office, and I look to Kate. “Is everything okay?”

“More than.” She beams at me. “They got him.”

Chapter 19

Kate

Wearing my comfiest pair of sweatpants, I carry a bucket of popcorn into the living room and plop down on the couch. A glass of wine sits on the table beside me, a cheesy rom-com waiting on the TV.

Tonight is a night to relax. To enjoy my home again because the threat against me has passed. Thanks to the blood splatter in my room from the broken nose I gifted my attacker, the police were able to confirm that the man behind the mask was, in fact, Jake. Now, he'll never see the outside of a prison cell.

Or so they say. Either way, he's locked up now. Which means tonight I get to unwind for the first time in well over a week. Henry is at Dakota's for an epic sleepover, leaving me to nurse my bruised face while indulging in far too much junk food.

The doorbell rings, and I groan as I open my phone and check the camera. Dean's handsome face comes into view, and my heart jumps. It's unnerving how he affects me after such a short amount of time.

On my way to the door, I stop and check my reflection in the new mirror Dakota brought over today, replacing the one Jake shattered when he broke in the first time. I groan again. I have no makeup on, and the tank top I'm wearing has a hole in the stomach.

Oh well.

I run my hands through my hair and pull the door open, doing my best to smile despite the aching in my face. He grins back as he eyes me up and down like I'm the most attractive woman in the world.

"I brought dinner." He holds up a brown bag that smells gloriously like Asian food then hands me a gift bag that had been in his other hand. "And this is from my mom."

Taking the gift bag, I step aside so Dean can make his way into my house. As he shuts and locks the door, I reach inside and withdraw a framed photograph of me and Henry sitting on her back porch swing. A sticky note that says, "*To replace some of the broken, here is a happy memory. Love Marie,*" is stuck to the glass.

Tears fill my eyes.

"Are you okay? Shit, was that bad? Too soon?"

I hug the picture to my chest and look up at him, my heart swelling as I fall in love, not just with the man—but with his family, too. Everett replaced my glass. His mom gives me this beautiful gift. Both Zander and Axel offered to stay at my house and help keep us safe...what did I do to deserve all of this? "This is wonderful."

Relief floods his expression. "Good. She was insistent that I give it to you tonight."

"Thank you." I carry the frame into the kitchen and set it on the counter so I can see it every morning as I get coffee. Then, I turn to Dean. "What did you bring me for dinner?"

"Sushi. Dumplings. Fried rice. Egg rolls. Honestly, I probably bought way too much, but I'm starving." He grins, flashing dimples in the corners of his mouth. My knees all but turn to jelly.

"It's a good thing I am, too." I get up to my tip-toes and press my lips to his in a quick kiss. But I linger a second longer than is safe. I slam my mouth back to his and wrap my arms around his neck. In the background, I hear the food fall to the counter seconds before Dean's hands are on my ass.

He spins and lifts me, setting me on the table and moving up between my legs. His hands are in my hair; his body presses against mine. I'm lost in this moment—in him. Heat scalds my veins and churns in my belly, my desire for him shutting off all logic that rushing things might be a mistake.

Dean's hands slide down my back and beneath my shirt. His fingers stroke my skin, and I moan. "Tell me to stop," he says against my lips. "And I will."

My answer is easy. "No."

I've been dreaming of him ever since that club bathroom, wondering just what it might feel like to be cherished by him. And now I'm determined to find out. In the back of my mind, a voice creeps in, warning me that, if I do this, he'll be gone tomorrow. After all, I'm not good enough for a man like this.

But I shove it aside because, right here, right now, Professor Dean Dorsey is mine.

He lifts me, and I wrap both legs around his waist as he begins walking. The bulge in his jeans presses against me, spurring my desire to near-destructive levels. Every second it takes him to get to my room is pure torment.

The mattress is soft at my back as Dean covers my body with his. He presses into me, grinding his hips against me, and I moan against his lips again, need shooting straight through me.

He pulls back, arms caging me on top of my bed. "Are you sure?" he asks.

"Yes. Please, Dean."

Dean smiles and leans down. He pushes my tank up just enough to press his lips to my belly. His lips are feather soft as he trails them over my skin, and when he grips the top of my sweats and tugs them down my body, I nearly lose all rational thought.

Cold air dances across the apex of my thighs, only to be replaced by the heat of Dean's breath as he pushes my legs apart and covers me with his mouth. I cry out, arching off the bed as his tongue strokes against my clit.

Over and over again, he tastes me, driving me up and over the edge of complete and utter bliss.

I come. Hard. My release rocketing through me with the force of a hurricane.

Dean pulls away and strips out of his jeans and shirt. His body is solid muscle. A display of complete and absolute perfection. Every ridge of muscle hard as though he was sculpted rather than born.

He shoves his boxers down, and his erection springs free. I swallow hard, staring at the massive length as he closes the distance between us and pulls my tank over my head.

“You are stunning,” he whispers, dropping his mouth to my breast. He pulls a pebbled nipple into his mouth, sucking gently. Pleasure sears me all over again. Every touch of his capable hands, every stroke of his talented tongue, drives me closer and closer to the four-letter word I’ve been trying to avoid.

“You make me feel like I am,” I whisper back.

Dean settles between my legs and tears open a condom wrapper. Tossing it to the nightstand, he rolls the latex over his hard length then settles between my legs. He drops down and presses a kiss to my lips then slides into me.

I cry out, pain and pleasure mixing together as Dean fills my body. He’s massive, and it takes a few minutes for me to adjust to him. But soon, that pain recedes, leaving only the pleasure.

“I’ve been dreaming of being inside of you since that night at the club,” he whispers against my lips. “Wondering what it would look like when you came.” He pulls back and slides into me again.

I grip his biceps, squeezing the muscles as he pulls back and thrusts again and again, each time increasing the tempo.

My release shatters me, breaking me apart into a million tiny pieces before putting me back together. Stars dance in my vision as Dean continues.

“Yes, baby,” he whispers as he drops his face and presses his lips to the hollow of my throat. He sits back up and slams into me over and over again, increasing the speed until I’m sure I can’t take anymore.

And then—“Fuck yes.” He comes, stilling inside as his dick throbs deep inside of me. We remain like this, joined together, for a few moments before Dean pulls back and climbs off the bed, disappearing into the bathroom.

Once again, that voice creeps into my head. Reminding me of the c-section scar on my lower abdomen. Of the imperfections of my thighs. I try to ignore it, but my hands reach for the blankets anyway. Tears prick the corners of my vision, and I try my best to ignore feeling used in the way Jake used to do.

Dean is different. That’s what I tell myself. But when he doesn’t return right away—

He steps out of the bathroom, the light illuminating me on the bed. “What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?” Dean rushes over to the bed and sits beside me.

I shake my head. “I’m sorry. I don’t—”

“What’s wrong?” he demands. “Kate. Did I hurt you?” His expression is panicked, which only mortifies me more.

“No. It’s not you.” I take a deep breath and force myself to sit up against the headboard, all the while clutching the blankets to my chest. “I just—I haven’t had sex since Jake—”

“Fuck. Kate.” Dean climbs beneath the covers and pulls me into his lap. He strokes my hair, pressing tender kisses to the side of my face. “I was rough. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“You weren’t rough. It’s me. I’m being pathetic.”

“No, you’re not.” He presses a kiss to my temple. “I’m sorry if I did something.”

“You didn’t,” I reply as I listen to the heavy beating of his heart. “It’s just been a while.” I brush the ugly truth under the rug, not wanting him to see my insecurities or know just how

used I'd been back then. How my body was worth nothing aside from what pleasure it could bring.

Instead, I wipe my tears and push away from him, grabbing a long night shirt out of my drawer as I go. "That food is going to get cold," I say with a forced laugh.

Dean doesn't buy it, but thankfully, he doesn't press either. "I don't know that I'd trust the sushi," he adds as he pulls on his boxers and stands.

"Then we forego the sushi and focus only on the dumplings."

* * *

Morning comes too soon, and I unwrap myself from Dean's arms. He's still sleeping soundly, his hair a dark mess that contrasts perfectly with my stark white pillowcase. I take a moment to study him, bathing in the perfection that is Dean Dorsey.

And then that voice is back. *You can't keep him. He'll get bored.*

I close my eyes and turn on my heel, leaving the room behind in hopes that distance will shut it out.

After prepping the coffee pot, I cross over to the patio doors and quietly pull them open to step into the yard. It's small, just barely large enough for the swing set I bought Henry last Christmas. But it's mine.

It's home.

And you know what? It's missing a dog.

Wouldn't Henry like that? An animal that would be his companion? And they serve as great protectors, don't they? If you get the right breed.

I can all but see Henry and our future dog playing fetch out here. Running back and forth while Dean and I—*Dean*. I don't even know if he's planning on staying around now that we've slept together, and already, I'm planning a future with him?

How pathetic am I?

As though my pity party called out to him, Dean wraps his arms around my waist and kisses the back of my neck. Goosebumps flood my flesh, and I lean back into him, despite the war going on inside my head.

“Morning,” he greets.

“I think I want a dog,” I blurt.

Dean is quiet for a moment then chuckles. “Okay. What kind of dog.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had one before. But I want something that will be playful and protective.”

“Everett has a German Shepherd, and he’s great. Protective and great with a game of fetch.”

I turn in his arms. “Really?”

“Yes.” He smiles down at me then leans in and kisses my lips. I all but melt into him. “Coffee?”

“Already made.” Moving around him, I head inside and pull out two mugs from the cabinet before filling them with dark, steaming liquid.

Dean grabs his cup before I even get the creamer, and I finish fixing mine while trying to ignore how gorgeous he looks standing shirtless in my kitchen. In the light of morning, I can make out each individual ridge of muscle that makes up his abs and chest. How is this man real? And why is he interested in me?

That voice is back, reminding me that I was someone who told Dean no. And now that he’s had me, he’s going to leave.

“What are your plans for the day?” I ask him.

“I have a day of classes then a staff meeting later tonight. After that, it’s poker night with my brothers and likely bed.” He laughs. “It’s going to be a day.”

So no room for me.

“You?” he questions.

“Classes. Then picking Henry up. Homework, dinner, bedtime, the usual.” I force a smile. “Sounds like a busy day for the both of us.”

“Definitely.” He takes a sip from his coffee then sets the mug aside. “I’m not good at this.”

“At what?”

“The morning after.” He runs a hand over the back of his neck. “I haven’t spent a full night with a woman since—shit—ever, I think.” His awkward smile would have tugged at my heart if I wasn’t in the process of erecting every wall I could around it.

“You’re doing just fine. And listen, last night was fun, but if you don’t—”

“Hold up.” Dean’s expression gets serious and he puts up a hand. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You just said that you don’t do the morning after.”

“No, I said that I didn’t know *how* to do it. Not that I didn’t want to. You are different, Kate. What’s between us is more than one night.”

“I just don’t want you to feel pressured. We’ve been through a lot over the last few weeks, and it’s bound to leave a mark.”

“First of all, you’re the one who’s been through a lot. I had the best time of my life with you and Henry. Even if I do feel a bit guilty of that, given how much you both suffered.”

“I just don’t want to set unrealistic expectations.”

Dean crosses his arms. “Unrealistic expectations. For who? You or me?”

“Both of us. You are likely used to women who come with less baggage, and I have an entire hotel of it. And I am used to men who either walk out or use me for as long as they see fit before discarding me.”

Dean’s cheeks flush with color. “I am not one of those men.”

I step forward and lay a hand on his arm. “I know you’re not. I’m just saying that I understand if this gets to be too much and you need to walk away. I’m not expecting you to stay around.”

“And if I want you to expect it?” Dean demands. “If I want you to count on me being there morning, night, weekends...all the damned time?”

I take a deep breath. “I can’t, Dean. I’m sorry, but I’m not wired to expect things like that.”

Dean unfolds his arms to snake a hand around the back of my neck. He pulls me in close and presses his lips to mine. “I guess I need to re-wire you then,” he says. “Just like you’ve done me.”

I laugh. “That’s a lot of work.”

“I’m up for the challenge.” He kisses me again.

Pressing a hand against his chest, I push him away just enough to look up at him. “Then I need to ask you for a favor.”

“Anything,” he replies without hesitation.

“I want Henry to only see us as friends for now. That way, if things don’t work out, he’s not heartbroken too.”

Dean’s hurt is clear on his face, but he tries to mask it. I hate asking, hate putting that wedge there, but it’s the only way I can protect my son. He’s already been through far more than he should have gone through. “I understand.”

“You do?”

“My brother Zander was the same way until he met Rose. I just need to convince you that I’m not going anywhere, just like she convinced him.” He winks and wraps both arms around me, lifting me against him. “Now, how about I start by starting your day off right?”

Desire warms me as lust sends my heart racing. Dean carries me into the bedroom and shuts the door before laying me back on the mattress. “I am going to convince you, Kate,” he says as he pushes my nightshirt up, baring my body to him. “One way or another—” He trails off and presses his lips to

my breast. "I am going to make you see just how much I care for you."

I want to believe him. To fall heart-first into what he makes me feel.

But the voice is back, telling me that he is lying so he can use me as he pleases. And that, when he's done, Dean Dorsey will discard me like the trash I am.

Chapter 20

Dean

“**D**amn. She’s had it rough. Fold.” Zander sets his cards on the table then takes a swig of his beer.

“No shit.” Axel shakes his head. “Is it bad that there’s a part of me who wishes we could have gotten to the bastard first?”

“No,” I reply. “Because I do, too. Fold.” I set my cards down as well and stand to get myself a beer. “She’s so untrusting, and I get why, but I feel like I’ve proven myself over and over again.”

“You guys just slept together,” Everett tells me. “If she’s used to guys running out on her, then she’ll figure out you’re different if you just keep showing up.”

“Listen to your elder,” Axel quips. “He is wise in his years.”

Everett chuckles and shakes his head. “I’m not that much older than you, asshole.”

“Still older.” Axel reaches in and takes all the chips. “Yet, I kick your ass almost every week.”

“Maybe I feel bad for you.” Everett gets up and grabs a bottle of water from Zander’s fridge. Ever since he opened the place, our poker games have been held in the back room of his tattoo parlor nearly every week.

“Oh, Everett, where’d you get Aldo?” I ask.

He turns to me, surprised. “You’re planning on getting a dog?”

“Kate wants one. Thought I’d point her in the right direction.”

My brothers exchange grins, all of them clearly ready to rub it in my face that I am apparently the marrying type. It would have bothered me before, but with Kate, I can see it. A wedding. More kids. Sitting on the back porch and watching the kids play.

It’s clearer than it’s ever been.

“I can get you the name of the woman I got him from.”

“Great. Thanks.” I stand. “All right, assholes, I need to get home. Early classes tomorrow.”

“You’re not going to Kate’s?” Zander questions.

“Not tonight. She’s already asleep, and Henry’s there. She wants to keep things with him separate just in case.” I try to keep my tone level because, on some level, I really do understand. Even if I hate the distance.

“I get that,” Zander replies with a nod. “She’ll let you in all the way when she’s ready, brother. Count on it.”

“I am,” I reply as I head for the door, my mind on all the ways I can prove to her that I am in this for the long run.

* * *

Like a terrified teen about to pick up his prom date, I make my way up the front steps of Kate’s house. A dog leash in one hand, a bag of take-out in the other, I seriously hope I’m not crossing lines that need to remain between us.

I knock and wait a few seconds before she pulls it open.

As soon as she sees me, she smiles. A grin that broadens when she sees the puppy standing beside me, his tail wagging a million miles a minute. “Who is this?” she questions, dropping down to her knees.

The dog launches himself at her, all fur and tongue.

“Whoever you want him to be,” I reply.

She looks up at me, fingers already buried in the dog's brown fur. "What?"

"He's yours. If you want him. I got him from the same woman my brother got his dog from. Aldo's great, so I figured this one would be too. He's already house-broke and just turned four months old." I'm rambling. Rambling out of insane nerves.

"You bought me a dog?"

"If you want him."

"I—"

Henry comes darting in. "Dean!" he exclaims then sees the dog and loses all interest in me. "A puppy! Is this your puppy? He's so cute!"

"Apparently, he's ours," Kate tells him.

Henry looks up at me, eyes widening. "Seriously?"

"If your mom says it's okay." I realize what a mistake I've just made, bringing a puppy to a little boy without checking with his mom first.

"Is it okay, Mom? Please?"

"It is absolutely okay." She stands. "Come on in, Professor." Kate steps aside, so I carry in the food and hand Henry the leash.

"What's his name?" Henry asks.

"Whatever you want it to be," I tell him.

Henry studies him. "You look like a Max. Doesn't he?"

I swallow hard, emotion burning in my throat. "I think Max is perfect."

Henry beams. "Can I take him into the yard, Mom? Please?"

"Go for it." She grins as Henry races out, the puppy awkwardly running after him.

As soon as he's out of earshot, I turn to her. "I am so sorry if that was a mistake. I didn't realize that I should have

checked with you before until—”

She stretches up on her tip-toes and presses her lips to mine. I sink into the kiss, drowning in the feel of her, and very nearly lose my grip on the take-out bag. “Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome.” I stare down at her, this woman who has completely captured my heart, and wonder just how I ever made it a single day without her. “There’s a crate, food, a bed, bowls, and some toys in the back of my truck.”

“You are too good to us.” She takes the food and carries it into the kitchen. I can’t help myself—I let my gaze drop to her shapely ass and the way the denim hugs it so perfectly. There is literally no world in which I will get enough of her.

Of that, I’m sure.

“You deserve all the good,” I tell her as soon as I’ve regained the ability to speak.

Kate starts unpacking the food, and I look out at the backyard. Henry is lying in the grass as the puppy plays tug-of-war with his sweatshirt. “How did poker go last night?”

“Good. Got my ass kicked so pretty much normal.”

She laughs. “Maybe don’t go to Vegas then.”

“Been once. Have no plans to go back,” I reply with a smile as I watch her. She’s braided her dark hair down her back and is dressed completely casual in jeans and a white t-shirt. I realize just how badly I want this.

To come home to her every day.

To be the man she tells about her day, the one who helps tuck Henry in at night.

But then I remember the other night and her desire to go slow. Shoving everything I feel down is difficult, but I do. For now.

Zander’s words ring true in my mind, and I focus solely on them now. “*She’ll let you in all the way when she’s ready, brother. Count on it.*”

“What are you thinking about?” she questions.

I realize I’ve been staring straight ahead. I run a hand through my hair. “Just the other night.”

I don’t miss the unease that passes over her face. “What about it?”

“How much I enjoyed being with you.”

Color flushes her cheeks. “You keep talking like that, you’re going to have me thinking things.”

“Like what?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “Not important.”

“It is important,” I insist. “Talk to me.”

She stops messing with the food and turns to me. “Dean, I told you that I wanted to take things slow. That I *need* to do that for me and for Henry.”

“I know that.”

“Then why do we have to talk about it when you know what it is I’m thinking? I care about you. More than I ever thought I could care about anyone, and I’m sorry that I’m not ready to jump into anything more serious just yet. Not until I am confident that you aren’t going anywhere.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Kate closes her eyes. “The last thing I want to do is let Henry start thinking that you’re going to be around long term and then have you bail.”

“I’m going to prove to you that I’m not going anywhere.” I step forward and even though I long to reach for her, I respect her wishes for Henry to just believe we’re friends. “But I want to make sure I get that chance.”

“You brought me a puppy, and I didn’t slam the door in your face. Isn’t that proof enough?”

I grin. “Fair enough.”

As she turns away to set the containers of food on the table, I move in closer, standing just behind her. So close that I

can breathe in the scent of her shampoo. Kate turns and freezes in place, her lips parting.

“Dean—”

“It’s so hard to be so close to you and not be able to reach out and touch you.”

She sucks in a breath.

“To have to keep my distance when all I want to do is pull you against me and feel your mouth move against mine.”

“I feel the same.”

“Do you?” I ask.

Her gaze darkens. “I’ve never felt for anyone what I feel for you,” she replies. “After dinner tonight, I’m going to ask you to leave so I can put Henry to bed. But I’m going to also ask that you not go far.”

I lean in just close enough to whisper, “Kate Bennett, you have yourself a deal.”

Chapter 21

Kate

With a smile on my face, I make my way into *Espresso Yourself*. Dean came over before his last class of the day, and we spent an entire afternoon in bed. Between that and the fact that I'm absolutely *rocking* each of my courses this semester, Jake is no longer a threat, and Henry is doing fantastic in school, I'm feeling better than I have in weeks.

"Mom, can I get a frozen hot chocolate?" Henry asks.

"Go for it."

"Sweet!" He races forward, sliding to a stop at the counter.

"Hey, bud! What can I get for you?"

"Mom said I can have a frozen hot chocolate!"

"Then that's what you'll get," Dakota replies with a grin. "Usual?" she asks me.

"Yes, please." I take my seat at a table in the far corner and then set my books down. I have a couple of quizzes to study for as well as a test coming up in Dean's class, but I'm not the least bit stressed.

Dakota says it's because I'm getting laid on a regular basis, but I really think it's more. Over the last month, Dean and I have spent nearly every free moment together. Between classes, after Henry goes to bed—we sit and watch TV or chat about history and all the places we'd like to see someday.

Honestly, I feel like a family, and I'm not quite sure how to handle that.

As Henry pulls out the Nintendo Switch Dean lent him, I open the first of my books and start scanning pages, taking notes as I go.

“Ready!” Dakota calls out.

“I’ll grab them.” Henry sets his game console aside and rushes over to the counter.

When he doesn’t immediately return, I glance up and see him chatting with a leggy brunette. Every mom-radar in me goes off and I push to my feet, rushing over to him. I step up to his side. “Can I help you?” I ask the woman.

She cocks her head to the side. “You’re a student at Boston U.”

“Yes.”

That grin spreads. “I met your son here when he’d been with Professor Dorsey. How do you know him?”

Everything about the woman grates me the wrong way. “My son or the professor?”

“Funny,” she retorts. “Professor Dorsey.”

“I’m in his history class,” I tell her.

“And he babysits as part of that?” she asks sweetly, though venom drips from her words.

“I had no one to watch Henry, and since he had no class, he said he didn’t mind.”

“Professors aren’t supposed to get involved with their students’ personal lives.”

“He’s not involved in my personal life,” I shoot back. “It was one day.”

“One day.” She looks down at Henry, who has gone slightly pale. “Your boy said you see Professor Dorsey a lot.”

“At school, yes,” I reply, adrenaline pulsing through my veins. What is this woman’s game? “And you should know better than to engage a young boy in a private conversation.”

The woman's expression turns feral. "As I said, we know each other. I was simply saying hi."

"Yes. To a child. Go on and sit down, honey." I gesture toward our table, and Henry rushes off. As soon as he's out of earshot, I cross my arms. "You made my son uncomfortable."

"He seems perfectly fine to me. Tell me, what is the nature of your relationship with Professor Dorsey?"

"Professional," I reply. "He lectures; I listen. What about yours? An obsessive prior student?"

The woman laughs. "I teach at Boston University, and the professor and I have a personal relationship that is none of your business."

"Ahhh, you must be Professor Andrews. Allison, is it?"

"And how would you know that?"

"There's a rumor amongst the students that you have a thing for Professor Dorsey," I lie. Because telling her that Dean has given me all the insight I need into her would be betraying the truth of our relationship.

"And just what does this rumor say?" she growls out.

"That you have a thing for him and he's not interested." I fake a pout. "Seriously unfortunate since you two would make a dynamite couple."

Allison Andrews smiles. "Rumors are just rumors," she replies. "I have no interest in a man who can't keep it in his pants longer than a day. Besides, Dean tires of women easily. It'll be no time at all before he's back."

I swallow hard. *She knows*. Every voice in my head screams it, but I plaster the smile all over my face. "Good for you then, I guess. As I said, he's just my professor, and I appreciated not having to skip classes the day he watched Henry for me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have tests to study for. Truly great meeting you, Professor." I force my legs to carry me back to the table then sit down and stare at my books, though my attention is strictly on the fact that I'm pretty sure a

woman who has every reason to hate me knows information that would get me expelled.

And, despite his assurances, get Dean fired.

* * *

“I have food!” Dean calls out as he walks into my house with two big pizza boxes. The puppy barks happily, his tail going a million miles a minute.

Henry jumps up and rushes toward Dean, throwing both arms around his waist. “Yes! This is why you’re my favorite.”

Dean grins at me. “See, I’m a favorite.”

I smile even though my insides are twisted. In no time at all, we got a dog, my kid loves him...it feels like all we’re missing is the white picket fence. All before we’ve had the chance to talk. And I can’t get over this feeling that he’ll run the other way as soon as he realizes just how close we are to getting caught.

“You okay?” he asks as he sets the boxes down.

“Henry, grab some plates and get yourself some pizza. You can eat in the living room tonight.”

“Seriously! Score!” He rushes off, completely oblivious. Max barks and runs after him, clearly ready for a chase.

“Kate, what is it?” Dean shrugs out of his jacket and takes a seat at the table across from me. We’ve agreed to take things slow for Henry’s sake, but the desire to step into his strong arms and lose myself is so strong I have to physically root my feet where I stand.

“I went to *Expresso Yourself* this afternoon with Henry to study.”

“Okay,” he replies, gaze locked on mine.

“And Allison Andrews was there.”

Dean’s expression turns serious.

“She recognized Henry, and I think she—” I trail off, tears burning in my throat as I picture just how furious he’s going to be. “I think she knows about us.”

Dean reaches across and touches my hand. “She can’t know.”

“She does, though. She kept saying all these things about how you’ll get bored and come running back to her. And how Professors shouldn’t get involved in their students’ personal lives. With you watching Henry, she’s pieced it together.”

“Kate.” He reaches up and cups my cheek. “Calm down.”

“How can you be so calm? You could lose your job!”

“You’re worth the risk, Kate. I’ve always known getting caught was a possibility, but you’re worrying about something that likely isn’t even the case. Allison is toxic, sure. But she’s not going to assume I’m sleeping with a student. Not when I’ve made it really clear that I don’t fraternize with people I work with.”

“You weren’t there,” I insist. “You didn’t see the way she looked at me.”

“Kate.”

Just the way he says my name calms me. “I’m so sorry if I ousted us.”

“You didn’t.” He leans in and presses his lips to my forehead. “Seriously. I promise you that it’s okay. I saw her this afternoon as I was leaving the school. Trust me, if she suspected anything, she would have called me on it right then and there. Allison is not overly known for her patience.”

Relief floods through the fear. “Really?”

“Really. And tomorrow morning, I’ll make sure I cross paths with her just so I can put your mind at ease. But everything is fine, I promise.”

“And if it’s not?” I ask.

“Then we’ll deal with it then.” He smiles and releases me, getting to his feet. “Now, I haven’t eaten all day, and I need

food. Pizza?”

Feeling more relaxed than I have since running into Allison, I smile. “Yes, please.”

We eat in near silence while watching a cartoon with Henry, and by the time I’ve gotten him bathed and in bed with Max curled up with him, Dean is waiting for me in the kitchen with a glass of wine.

“You know, a girl could get used to this.”

“What?” he asks with a grin.

“Having a handsome man bring her pizza and pour her wine.”

He glances down the hall then reaches out and cups my cheek with his free hand. I set my wine down just before he steps forward and presses his lips to mine, all while the pad of his thumb strokes my face.

I moan softly, dang near swooning right where I stand. Everything about this man feels too perfect.

Too good for me.

Old thoughts surge forward, so I shove them back as I retrieve my wine and take a seat at the table.

“Tell me something about you,” he says. “Something I don’t already know.”

“What do you want to know?” I ask.

“Anything.”

I chew on my bottom lip and then take a deep breath. “I’ve always been into history, ever since I can remember. My favorite color changes with the season, and I love rock and roll.”

He arches a brow, a boyish grin gracing his handsome face. “Rock and roll?”

“One hundred percent.” I lean in. “You’re a classical music kind of guy, aren’t you?”

“Guilty-ish. Though, my taste in music shifts with my mood.”

“Oh?”

“Most definitely,” he replies. “What is your favorite food?”

“I have no idea.” I laugh. “All of it? Is that an answer?”

“A more than acceptable one,” he replies with a smile.

“How was it growing up with four brothers?” I ask.

He leans back in his chair. “Honestly, it was pretty great. Though I’ll deny it if you tell them I said it. When our dad died, Everett took over a lot of responsibilities, leaning on Axel and Zander for support. I grew up with the three of them watching over me, so I never really felt the absence of a father.”

“That’s so great.”

“It was,” he replies. “Everett put me through college and funded both Axel and Zander’s startups, and that was after making all of his own money with his blood, sweat, and tears.”

My appreciation of the eldest Dorsey brother grows knowing that. What a man he must be to set all three of his younger brothers’ futures up that way. “That is amazing.”

“Don’t tell him that. His ego is already big enough.”

I laugh and shake my head.

“We all paid him back, of course, but he argued with us when we did. Something my mother also did when the four of us went in and paid her house off.” He grins. “You should have seen her face. The shock when she opened the envelope with all the documents.”

“Dean, that is—”

“It wasn’t anything,” he says quickly. “She sacrificed a lot for us. Honestly, it was the least we could do.”

“You brothers are a rare breed,” I tell him.

“Eh, we’re fairly ordinary. Stubborn as they come, though.”

Based on the way he chased after me, I figured that much out for myself. “Do you think this is going anywhere?” I ask, gesturing between us.

“I hope so,” he replies. “Because I’ve never felt this way before, Kate. Not about anyone.”

My heart warms, and I smile. “Me neither. Thank you for taking things slow.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Kate. There’s not a damn thing I wouldn’t do for you.”

Chapter 22

Dean

I've just finished going over my lesson plan for the day when there's a knock at the door. I glance up and call out, "Come in."

Kate peeks her head in, and the mere sight of her sends my heart racing. My stomach twists, and my body reacts as though she's already naked and not fully dressed. Though, the sundress she wears certainly doesn't help. "Do you have a minute?"

"For you? Always." I close my laptop and set it aside as she comes in and closes the door. Still not quite sure where we stand, I remain sitting. The last thing I want to do is freak her out by moving faster than she's ready for.

Even if the very heart in my chest beats for her.

The bruise on the side of her face is a deep yellow, the center still a nasty purple. Even knowing the asshole is behind bars, I still want to kill him for everything he's done to her.

"How did you sleep last night?" I ask. Since I had an early morning, it was the first night they slept in the house alone since Jake was caught and stuffed into an eight-by-ten.

"Henry slept great."

"You?"

She smiles softly. "Me, not so much." She drops into the chair across from me. "It seems like I might need a bit more time to get used to the fact that we're safe."

"Understandable."

“Did you run into—”

“I did. And everything is fine.” While Allison had been in a poor mood, she’d given no indication that anything was off.

“Whew. Good.” Kate smiles. “Henry asked about you this morning. He wanted to know if you’d be open to dinner tonight. Just the three of us? If you can’t—”

“I’d love to,” I interrupt, a smile on my face. Kid is my superhero. “What time, and what can I bring?”

“Six? And nothing. Just yourself.” She stands, and I follow suit, wanting so badly to get close but afraid that, if I do, she’ll bolt. “Thanks. It’ll mean a lot to him.” She starts for the door.

“Just him?” I ask before I can fully comprehend the weight of the question.

Kate turns toward me, her expression serious. There’s something else in the deep green of her eyes, an emotion I can’t quite put my finger on. “It’ll mean a lot to me, too.”

“Same.” I move around the desk, slowing before I reach her. “I don’t know where we stand, and it’s killing me.” Vulnerability is something I’m not great at. To be honest, I don’t know that I’ve ever been good at being open and honest. But since I don’t see myself ending up with Kate by continuing to hold all the cards, I lay it out. We’ve yet to have *the* talk, and I’m tired of waiting.

She reaches out and puts her palm against my chest. The feel of her hand on me stirs every emotion I carry for the woman. How does she not see the power she holds over me? The weapon she wields with just the touch of her hand?

“I’m trying to figure it out, Dean. I promise.”

“We’re great together.”

“We are,” she replies. “And we’re just seeing where things go, right?”

“Is there a reason we can’t say things are getting serious? That we’re a couple?”

“I’m scared, Dean.”

“Of me?”

“Of what you walking away will do to me.”

“Then how do I convince you that I’m not going anywhere? That I want a future with you. With Henry?”

“Just over a month ago you were a bachelor with consistent booty calls,” she replies with a light laugh. “And now you’re telling me that you’re ready to be a family man? Besides, if our close call with Allison tells us anything, it’s that we really shouldn’t—”

“Yes.” My reply contains no hesitation. “If it’s with you, then absolutely. And as for Allison? I told you, she doesn’t know anything.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“Which part?”

“Both?” she replies with a half laugh. “You were a bachelor, Dean. Happy to be alone.”

I move in closer, snaking an arm around her waist and cupping her cheek with the other. I pull her in, tucking her against my chest. Her plush lips part on a gasp, pupils dilating. I can all but hear her heart hammering, and I know it’s because of what she feels for me. I just don’t understand why she fights it.

“I never expected this. To feel this way.” I lean down and brush my lips against her cheek. She lets out a soft moan, so I trail feathery kisses along her jaw. “But I can’t get you out of my mind.”

“Because it’s new,” she manages. “Once it’s not anymore, I will lose my luster.”

“The fact that you think of yourself like that irritates me.”

“What?”

Pulling back just enough that I can see into her eyes, I reply, “Like you’re someone not worth a lifetime.” I slam my mouth to hers, tightening my hold on her as I do. She drops her bag to the floor and wraps her arms around me. Spinning

us, I pin her against the door then manage to somehow have the forethought to reach down and flip the lock.

She wraps both legs around my waist, clinging to me in this moment of desire, and I let myself drown in her. Kate is everywhere. In my head. My lungs. My heart. And I never want to spend another moment without her.

I turn us, carrying her over and setting her on my desk. Shoving the skirt of her dress up, I reach down and run my fingers over her wet heat. She bucks against me, moaning as her fingers grip the front of my shirt. She undoes the buttons quickly then slides down and reaches for the front of my jeans.

Stepping back just long enough so she can shove them down, I'm right back between her thighs in the span of a heartbeat, and still, the separation feels too long. I grip her underwear and tear them from her body then slide her to the edge of the desk and drive into her. "Shit, I forgot a condom."

"I don't care." She falls back on my desk, eyes heavy and full of lust as I drive into her. She surrounds me, everything about her calling me like a moth to flame.

Her slender fingers grip the edge of my desk at her head while mine dig into her thighs. I slam into her, over and over again, my breathing ragged. She comes—shattering around me and biting down on her bottom lip to keep from crying out.

I continue thrusting, faster, faster, until I feel my own release. Then, I pull back, falling into the chair and pumping myself until I come in my palm. Silence surrounds us, the only sounds, that of our ragged breaths.

Minutes tick by this way, with her lying across my desk and me sitting in the chair.

Someone knocks.

I jump up and wipe my hand on the inside of my sweater as Kate pulls her dress down and straightens the front of it. "In a meeting," I call out as I frantically button my shirt. I run both hands through my hair then reach down and retrieve Kate's torn panties from the floor and shove them into my pocket.

She covers her mouth on a laugh and then starts for the door. I pull her in and kiss her once more, already desperate for her again.

I open the door and see Allison standing just outside, an annoyed glare on her face. “A meeting, huh?” she questions, her glare turning feral. “I *knew* it.”

Anger burns through me even as the realization of what I’ve just done hits home. I just had sex with a student in my office. And we were just caught.

“What are you implying?” I question, narrowing my gaze on her. Surely, she won’t take this to the dean just because she’s jealous. Surely, she must have more sense than to accuse me of something she can’t outright prove.

“You know what I’m implying.” She arches a brow and crosses her arms then turns to Kate. “Such a shame these girls think they need to sleep their way into a passing grade.”

“Excuse me?” Kate snarls and lunges forward.

I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her back. “You are way off base,” I snap.

“Am I? Let’s go speak with Dean Chester and find out, shall we? I’m sure he will rather enjoy your explanation just as I’m sure I will.”

Kate turns to me. “Dean?”

I can’t bring myself to look at her. It’s not even just my job on the line. Kate could lose her ability to go to school here. And she only has one final semester before graduating and fulfilling a dream she’s had since she was a child. “Go back to class, Miss Bennett. I will make sure this gets cleared up.”

Chapter 23

Dean

Dean Alastair Chester is an older man, his silver hair always perfectly gelled to the side. Shielded behind thick black-rimmed glasses, his grey gaze misses absolutely nothing when it comes to his school.

So, as he stares at me, I know he sees just how guilty I am. The question is: What is he planning to do about it? I could lose my tenure, job, and any hope I have of ever working for any college again. He could expel Kate, send her packing when she's so close to graduation.

All because I couldn't keep it in my fucking pants until we were out of the school.

"These are serious allegations, Allison," he says as he removes his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"They aren't allegations if they're true, Dean Chester." She turns to me, hatred in her gaze. "And I know they are. He was spending time with her kid, too. Had him in his office while she was in class. Which makes me think this has been going on for quite some time."

Dean Chester turns to me. "Allison, get out."

"But—"

He shifts his gaze back to her. "Leave my office. You may wait outside, and I will call you in when I am ready for you again."

She looks from him to me then shoves up from her chair and leaves, slamming the door behind her.

Dean Chester sighs and slips his glasses back on. “Dean Dorsey. How long have we known each other?”

“Since I went to school here,” I reply.

“And why must you insist on giving me even more grey hair? Is what she is saying even remotely true?”

I could lie.

Could insist that Allison misunderstood what she saw.

But lying is not something I am good at and never an option for me. If I am willing to do something, I am also willing to face the consequences.

“I met Miss Bennett at a nightclub before I knew she was a student. We engaged in an intimate moment, though it did not originally lead to sex. When I realized who she was, I told her we needed to keep things professional.”

“And did you?”

“No. I discovered she was in danger and allowed her and her son to stay with me until the police caught who had attacked her.”

“The black eye she’s been sporting.”

“Yes, sir.”

He groans. “Is she still staying with you?”

“No. But we are seeing each other on a personal level outside of this school.”

“And today? In your office—”

“Yes, sir,” I interrupt. “Allison is correct in what she believes she saw.”

“Son of a bitch, Dean.” He pushes up from his seat and begins pacing. I remain seated, my mind running through all the worst-case-scenario outcomes. Did I seriously just screw up Kate’s entire future? Did I throw my career down the damned drain?

All those years of hard work. The money Everett fronted me so I could go through college without following our

father's footsteps and joining the service. Was it all in vain?

"You are the most brilliant young historian I have ever met. How did you get yourself in this position?" I don't answer because nothing I can say will change anything. "I'm not sure what to do here," he says finally.

"Whatever penalty you are prepared to lay down, let it all fall on me." I stand. "She is my student; I should have known better."

Dean Chester glares at me. "You are both nearly the same age, Dean. Therefore, it's not as though you seduced some young, naïve girl fresh out of high school."

"Still. Don't make Kate pay the penalty for this. Please. She is so close to finishing her degree. So close to being able to build the future she desires for her and her son."

He narrows his gaze at me, letting the words hang between us. "What exactly are your feelings for this girl, Dean?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is it a fling? Something more serious? Undetermined? I'm afraid I can't be any clearer than that."

I swallow hard. "It's serious. I cannot imagine my life without her in it."

The dean continues staring at me then nods and re-takes his seat. "Allison catching you makes it to where I cannot simply ask you to have no contact and let this go. You know that, don't you?"

I nod. "I do."

"Then here is my offer. And, Dean, before you hear it, just know it's this, or you both lose everything."

* * *

The beer in my hand is empty, as it has been for the last five minutes. I can't bring myself to get up from my table, nor say a word to either of my brothers, who have all gathered in my

apartment after Zander delivered the news I wasn't quite sure I could tell.

On the counter of my kitchen is a box with all of the important things from my office. The rest remain there, ready for when I finally get to return.

Unpaid leave for the semester. It seems like a small price to pay. But the hammer he dropped was telling me I am not allowed any contact with Kate until she graduates. Otherwise, I will lose my job, and she will lose all credits from the semester and be removed from Boston University altogether.

“Another?” Zander asks.

I nod.

He pulls the bottle from my hand and slides another toward me. I lift and down the liquid.

“Was it worth it?” Everett questions.

I look at him and don't hesitate. “Yes.”

“Because you love her.”

“I do.” Doesn't seem much sense in hiding it now. Not from the only other people in my circle who likely understand where I'm coming from. Everett and Nova were forbidden by a set of rules set in his company—and the fact that his largest stockholder was the father of his ex-wife.

Axel and Kennedy were a fake engagement turned real relationship. Though it wasn't forbidden, both tried desperately to fight it.

Zander is a single dad who won a bet over spaghetti. His prize? A kiss from Rose that turned into an entire lifetime together.

And me? I'm the professor who fell in love with his student. Out of all of us, I'd say that's the shittiest luck.

“Have you told her yet?”

“No.” I take another drink. Someone knocks on the door, and I push up from my seat. I check the peephole in the door and groan, resting my forehead against the door.

“It’s her, isn’t it?”

I turn and glare at Axel.

He chuckles and stands. “Let’s go hang out on the patio and give them some privacy.” All three of my brothers head outside, and once the door is shut, I open mine to reveal a furious-looking Kate.

“Seriously, Dean?” she demands, pushing past me.

“You can’t be here,” I tell her, trying to ignore the way the mere sight of her heats my blood.

“Then you should have answered your damn phone,” she yells. “I’ve been calling and texting you all afternoon.”

I try to breathe, to do anything but feel the heart-splitting pain in my chest.

“What happened?” she asks, her tone softening.

“You’re good to keep going to class,” I tell her.

“I got the email that says I have a new professor,” she says. “That you’re going on leave to deal with a personal matter.”

Sensing that she’s not planning on backing down, I close my door and cross my arms. Her gaze flicks to my brothers, who have all had good enough nature to keep their backs turned toward us as they lean against the railing and stare out at the night sky.

“Did they fire you?”

“No. It is what it says. I’m going on leave to deal with a personal matter, and they’re momentarily replacing the professor of my class with someone else. I’ll be back once the semester is over.”

“And I’m graduated,” she replies. “Did you do this to keep me out of trouble? Was there no other option?”

“It’s the best outcome, isn’t it? I got caught sleeping with a student, Kate. That typically ends with one’s career going up in flames. We got lucky.”

“Then why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you come tell me?”

“Because we aren’t allowed to see each other while you are still a student at that school.”

She stiffens. “So, even though you aren’t teaching there, we can’t have any contact?”

“No.”

“And if we do?”

“Then I get fired, and you are expelled with no credits.”

She steps back from me and shakes her head. “This is bullshit.”

“This is the best-case scenario,” I remind her.

“But I don’t understand. You’re not working there anymore. Why can’t we see each other? How can they control that?”

“I’m on unpaid leave, Kate. It’s a punishment, not a fucking vacation.” I snap the words, my tone harsh, and she steps back as though I’ve struck her.

I hate that I put even a hint of fear on her face—as though she’s comparing me to that asshole Jake. “Why am I not being punished?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a deep breath. “Can you just let it go, please?”

“No. I want to know why I’m not in trouble too. It was both of us in that office, both of us in this relationship. So why are you the only one in trouble?”

“Because that’s how it goes, Kate. You’re the student. I’m the professor. Out of the two of us, I should have known better.”

“Really? That’s what you’re going with?” She’s furious, and the urge to reach out and pull her against me is stronger than I care to admit.

Stepping back, I put distance between us. “You need to leave. I’m already being penalized; I don’t want to lose my job, too.”

Her glare is hard as she stares at me. “And what are your plans after I graduate?”

“I’m hoping to still have a job,” I snap. “Haven’t much thought past that.”

“So whatever was between us is over then?”

“I guess so.” Those three words are razors against my heart. And even though I want to take them back, to tell her that we can do long distance, the look on her face crushes that thought.

Tears fill the corners of her eyes. “So that’s it, then?”

“I just walked away from a career I’ve been building for the last decade, Kate. Do you seriously think I can even begin to process what’s happened with us?”

She continues staring at me then nods. “Fine. You know where to find me when you finally figure it out.” The door slams behind her, and I deflate, damn near falling over. The slider opens, and my brothers file back inside.

“You screwed that up, didn’t you?” Axel says.

“Don’t worry, little brother, we’ve all been there, and we’ve got your back.” Zander wraps an arm around my shoulders and guides me back to the table. But my mind is with Kate. With whatever story she’ll have to tell Henry.

And with the future I’m pretty sure I just let walk right out the door.

Chapter 24

Kate

“I just don’t get it.” Tears roll down my cheeks as I sit on my sister’s couch. Henry stayed the night at my mom’s since I genuinely couldn’t bring myself to face him and his questions about Dean.

When is Dean coming over?

Can Dean stay the night?

Mom, I really like Dean.

I blow my nose and think of all the ways I’d like to tell Dean right the hell off.

“I wish I had an answer for you,” Dakota replies sadly. She shakes her head. “It sounds to me like he is between a rock and a hard place, Kate. Like, maybe he had no other choice.”

“It’s selfish of me, especially knowing what he gave up so I could finish my degree, but what about after I graduate? Am I not worth waiting for?” I blow my nose then bury my face between the knees I’ve pulled up against me.

Every muscle in my body hurts. Like I fell down three flights of stairs and then was hit by a semi. But I’ve had no physical injuries. My chest aches; my stomach is in knots... how am I supposed to show up to that class every single day and *not* see him? How am I supposed to just move on like nothing happened?

“You are absolutely worth waiting for,” Dakota tells me. “Dean’s just—I don’t know.”

“Why are you so bent on sticking up for him?”

“I don’t know,” she replies. “He just seemed like such a good dude. Like he could be the husband you deserve and the dad Henry does.”

“Henry,” I choke out. “He’s going to be just as heartbroken as I am. He adores Dean. Dammit, I messed up big time.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“If I’d just avoided his office. If I’d not—”

“Look, I’m not going to say I’m not proud of you for banging one out in his office, but it was a pretty risky move for the both of you. He knew what he was doing, too. And because of him, you’re not being expelled. That’s a good thing.”

“He’s on unpaid leave,” I remind her. “As in: living on his savings account.” I pale and nausea returns. “Oh, Dakota. What if he loses his apartment? What if he loses everything because of me?”

“Kate.” Dakota scoots across the couch and takes my hands. “Stop. Breathe. Dean is a grown man. His decisions are as much his as yours are yours.”

“But, Dakota, look at everything he did for us. He let us stay with him to keep us safe. He took care of us; his brother fixed my damn house.”

“Because he *wanted* to do all of those things.”

“And now I might have cost him everything.” I know I’m being whiny, that I keep re-hashing what he’s lost, but I can’t get it out of my head. The expression he wore tonight was so different from the man I came to know that it caught me off guard.

He must hate me for this.

“Kate Bennett. Stop.” Dakota gets up from her chair and plops down on the couch, turning to face me. She takes my hands into hers. “You *both* screwed up. He took the heat for you because that just seems to be the type of guy he is. Now, I can’t tell you why he broke things off permanently, but he told

you that he hasn't had time to process what was between you, right?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe you just pushed him. Maybe, space is exactly what the guy needs. Cut him some slack, Kate. He was a certified fuck boy before you two met, and then he was ready to settle down and have a relationship with not just you—but Henry."

Her words ease the knot in my chest, just enough that I can fully breathe. Maybe she's right. Maybe all Dean needs is time to process. Maybe, given enough time, he'll come around, and this will all just be a story we tell.

"Better?" she asks.

"Yeah. Thanks. Plus, it's two and a half months until I graduate. Not a long time at all. I was celibate for what seven years?" I try to joke with a half-smile.

Dakota smiles. Someone knocks on her door, so she squeezes my hands one more time before getting up. "You'll be just fine. Promise." She pulls the door open. "Hey, Dad. Everything okay?"

"Is Kate here?"

"Yeah." Dakota steps aside as I'm quickly wiping my tears.

"What's wrong?" he asks, rushing over to the couch.

"Just emotional today," I reply with a forced smile. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just wanted to have a few minutes alone with you if that's okay?" He glances at Dakota who throws her hands up.

"I'll go shower."

As soon as she's out of the room, he lets out a sigh and takes a seat on the opposite side of the couch. "I owe you an apology. No," he says, shaking his head, "I owe you mountains of apologies."

“Dad—”

“Please, Kate. Just let me get this out.” He stares down at his hands. “From the moment you brought Jake home, I had a bad feeling about him. He seemed lazy and untrustworthy. I tried to say something, but your mom told me that if I pushed the issue, you’d just rebel and continue seeing him out of spite.”

“Which I probably would have done,” I admit.

He nods. “Your mother has always been so intuitive when it comes to you girls, and I’ve always felt like a fish out of water.” He swallows hard. “When you told us you were pregnant, all I could see was your dreams vanishing in a puff of smoke. I saw your future, your career, your life—all tied to that asshole, and it infuriated me.”

The lump in my throat grows, but I don’t interrupt.

“And when you told us he wanted nothing to do with you or the baby, that he wanted you to get rid of it, I snapped.” Now, my father meets my gaze. “I got into the truck and drove to his apartment. I called him a worthless piece of shit and told him that he had better be ready to help financially support you and the baby because, even though you weren’t together, he was still partially responsible.”

A vise tightens around my heart, and I draw in a breath. The words he’d spoken to me as he’d had me pinned to the ground begin to make sense. He’d told me that he wouldn’t be held liable for my mistake. That I should have made him wear a condom. That I needed to get rid of the baby, or he’d do it for me. “Dad—”

Tears flow from my father’s eyes. “It’s my fault. What he did to you that day. All the pain he caused you. Nearly losing Henry—it’s all my fault, Kate. And I didn’t know how to tell any of you that I had caused it.” He closes his eyes as his shoulders shake. “We got the call you were in the hospital, and I wanted to die. I begged God to take me instead. To let you and the baby live.”

“Dad.” I scoot closer to him and take his hands into mine.

“My actions that day drove a wedge between your mother and me, but it demolished my relationship with you. You even named your boy after me, all the while not knowing that it was my fault you carry the wounds you do. The memories of what that bastard did to you—”

“Dad. You were trying to protect me.”

“I was trying to make him face what he had done. What he had stolen from you. And he nearly took your life, too.” My father pinches the bridge of his nose. “I will never forgive myself for that.”

“You have to. Because I’ve already forgiven you.”

“I abandoned you, Kate. You and Henry. I ran clear across the country because I couldn’t stomach hearing you call him my name after what I had done to you. I never deserved that kind of honor.”

“You leaving was shitty,” I say. “I won’t pretend it didn’t hurt, but even knowing what I do now, I don’t blame you, Dad.” I lean into him, and he wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Jake did what he did because of who he was. Even if you hadn’t gone over there, chances are he still would have done it. But I’m stronger now because of it. And my relationship with him gave me the coolest little kid.”

“Henry is amazing,” he says.

“Just like his grandpa.” I smile and lean into my father as he wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Did you tell Mom all of this?”

He nods. “Tonight. Before I came over here.”

“And she told you, you needed to come clean?”

He laughs. “She did. She called me a jackass.”

I pull away. “You kinda have been.”

The smile on his face soothes some of the broken in me. “Tell me why you were crying. When I came in.”

I tell him everything. Unpacking all the events—even if I do leave some of them PG-13—and confiding in my dad in a

way I haven't since I was a small child. By the time I've finished, he's nodding right along.

"He gave it up for me."

"He did what a good man does," my father replies. "He took responsibility."

"But it was my fault, too. I thought about going to the Dean tomorrow, about telling him—"

"You do that and you'll both end up in trouble. Honestly, the consequences are not nearly as bad as they could have been."

"I'm just worried that he's going to lose everything. I mean, he will have no income until he can go back to work."

"You have to trust that he knows what he's doing," my father says as he pats my hand. "Dean seems like a man who has a good head on his shoulders. Let him handle this the way he wants to, and once the dust settles, maybe he'll realize just what he had with you."

I smile even as tears blur my vision. "Thanks, Dad."

"Anytime, baby girl."

I lean into him, and he wraps his arm around my shoulders again. I'd expected him to be furious. To tell me what a huge mistake it was and lay into the fact that Dean should have been fired.

But he didn't do any of that.

Instead, he was a listener. A supporter.

And I'm not entirely sure what to make of that even though I appreciate it more than I can say.

"Movie night?" Dakota calls out as she slips into the hallway, not at all looking like she just took a shower.

"Do you ever not eavesdrop?" my father asks.

"Nope. I learn the best things when I do." She winks and sits down beside me.

Chapter 25

Dean

The whiskey in my glass is a pathetic Band-Aid for the ache in my chest. But it'll have to do. With my brothers gone home to their wives and fiancés, it's all I can do not to climb into a car and drive as fast as possible to Kate.

I am helplessly head-over-heels, stupid in love with her. And now that I can admit it, I honestly think I have been since the moment we met in that damned club and she complimented the book I was reading.

Axel suggested that some distance might help me separate how I'm truly feeling and whether or not it's a side-effect of all the near-death experiences she had while Jake was out, but truthfully, I don't need space.

I know what I want.

I know that she is exactly who I've been waiting for. Even if I can't quite decide how I am going to move forward, given our current circumstances.

Someone knocks and my heart jumps at the very real possibility it's her. I jump up and set my glass aside before pulling the door open. Then, I immediately want to kick myself for not checking the peephole. Especially given that I didn't bother to put a shirt on after my shower.

"Dean." Allison pushes in like she owns the place, running her sharp nails along my chest as she does.

"Get the fuck out," I snap as I turn to face her.

“That’s not the way to treat a lady.” She pushes the jacket off her shoulders, revealing a dress with a plunging neckline. It’s so tight it might as well be painted on her. My body has absolutely no reaction, not even when she saunters toward me, lips in a pout.

“Get. The. Fuck. Out,” I repeat.

“Listen. If this is about what happened at work, I couldn’t help myself. I’ve been trying to get you to notice me for years, and then you choose some Plain-Jane college student. I was hurt. Mortified.”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“She is a single mom,” she replies. “Her bastard kid doesn’t even—”

I step forward, hands balling into fists as fury saturates me. “You ever speak of her like that again and I will make you pay for it.”

Allison laughs. “You’re not going to hit a woman.”

“No,” a feminine voice says from behind her. We both turn. “But I will.” Dakota rears back and slams her fist into Allison’s jaw. The woman falls to the ground with a scream and skids across the tile of my foyer. “Hey, Dean.” Dakota smiles at me as she rubs her hand.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” I say instantly.

“I know it’s not. I overheard the whole thing. Eavesdropping is my superpower.” She moves in further and retrieves the coat from the floor then throws it at Allison who has scrambled to her feet.

“You just assaulted me!” she screeches.

“Dakota Bennett,” she replies, jutting out a hand. “Feel free to press charges. But if you don’t get out, I’m going to assault you again, and it’s bound to get messy. I’m a scratcher,” she whispers loudly.

Bruise already forming on Allison’s jaw, she glares at me. “You’re going to let her treat me this way?”

“The way I see it, you were trespassing, and I asked you to leave. You refused. And my friend came to my defense. Get out, Allison. I literally couldn’t be any clearer.”

With a glare at me and a massive side-step of Dakota, she scrambles out of my apartment, and I slam the door—flipping the lock as I do.

“Ice?” Dakota asks.

“Freezer.”

“Right.” She turns on her heel and starts searching through my cabinets until she finds a plastic Ziplock bag. Then, she fills it with ice and presses it against her knuckles. “Thanks.”

“I—What are you doing here? Is Kate okay?” Panic overtakes my shock as I conjure dozens of horrible situations.

“She’s fine.” She rolls her shoulders. “Upset, but fine.” She eyes the drink on my counter. “I see you’re not doing any better.”

Reaching for it, I down the contents and grab another. After that run-in with Allison, I could use the whole damned bottle. “You could say that.”

“Listen. I came by for a couple of reasons, one of which is to say thanks.”

“For what?”

“You took the heat when you likely could have just pinned it on my sister, gotten her the boot, and moved out.”

“You think that was an option?” I ask.

“I know it was. You’re a tenured professor. I imagine they would do anything they could to protect you and their reputation. Plus, you’re the man. Usually, in these types of circumstances, you come out looking like a hero while the woman is labeled a slut.”

I chuckle. “I wish I could say you’re wrong about the offer. But it was never an option. Not for me, anyway. Kate deserves to finish her degree.”

“She does,” Dakota replies. She sets the bag aside and reaches into her back pocket, withdrawing a piece of paper and handing it to me. I unfold it and find myself staring down at a check for ten grand.

“What is this?”

“Hopefully enough so you don’t lose your apartment while you’re out of a job.”

I stare down at it, shock and confusion mixing with appreciation. “You’re trying to give me ten grand?”

“It’s not from me,” she replies, tapping the top of the check.

I read the name. Henry Bennett. “This is from your dad.”

“It is. He would have come himself, but he’s working through some things. So, I offered to come by.”

“I don’t need this.” I give it back to her. “I have plenty of savings. I’ll be fine.”

“Is that why you didn’t mind taking the heat?”

“I would have done it even if I was broke and had to live in my fucking truck.”

She takes the check and puts it back into her pocket. “That’s what I told my dad. Truth be told, it’s what he thought, too. He likes you. Which is a massive surprise,” she replies with a laugh.

I arch a brow. “I didn’t get that impression.”

“Don’t take it personally. After all, you know what the last guy my sister was with did to her.”

Just the mention of it has me nauseated. “How is she? Really.”

“I told you. She’s upset. Doesn’t understand why you walked away.”

“I didn’t walk away. Or, I didn’t mean to. I just—”

“Needed time to process.”

“Yes.”

“But you told her you were all in.”

“I was. I still am. I just—” I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “I never wanted a relationship, Dakota. It wasn’t in the cards for me. But Kate—”

“Is awesome.”

“She is. And Henry is great. I want to be in their lives. I just don’t know how to fix it.”

“Well, Dean Dorsey, you start by taking all the time you need to figure out just where you stand. Kate deserves consistency, and Henry needs stability. You aren’t just breaking her heart. If this goes sour, Henry is at risk, too.”

“I know that.” I run a hand through my hair. “I just—this is all new to me.”

“If it helps, it’s new to her, too.” Dakota reaches out and squeezes my arm gently. “Now, Professor. Some of us have work tomorrow.” She winks and takes the bag of ice as she walks toward my door. “The next time you see Kate, have it figured out, okay? We’re all rooting for you.”

Chapter 26

Kate

While Henry sleeps soundly down the hall, I sit at the kitchen table, staring blankly at notes from a history lecture today. One that Dean should have been giving and, instead, was given by a seventy-five-year-old woman with a voice like gravel in a blender.

She'd been nearly impossible to follow, and if the last two pop quizzes are any indication, I'm going to be lucky to pass her damned class. Not that I deserve it, anyway. Three weeks after Dean was put on an unpaid vacation, I still can't get past the guilt I carry for the part I played.

It should have been both of us getting in trouble, and instead, he carried the weight of it. Sacrificing his career to get me off the hook. Something that other professor—Allison—has not failed to point out each and every time she sees me.

I get to my feet to refill my wine glass but stop when someone knocks on the front door. Adrenaline hits my system, fear slipping up the back of my spine as anxiety has me imagining someone kicking it in.

Max barks at the door until I call him back to me.

I go for my phone to open the camera app for the security system my father installed for me. All fear leaves in a rush of emotion when I see Dean standing on my porch. Both hands tucked into the pockets of his jeans, he's staring straight ahead, waiting for me to answer the door.

Which I do, in record time.

Nearly falling over my own feet, I sprint for the door, pausing for just a moment to catch my breath before opening it.

Dean's gaze locks onto mine, and something in my heart slips into place.

Something I've been denying to myself and everyone around me. But, in this moment, it becomes painfully clear that I've been living without a piece of myself since the moment I met the man before me.

I love him.

I think I have since that night at the club.

"Can I come in?"

"Of course." I step out of the way, letting him into the house. After I've locked the door behind him, I make my way into the living room.

"Is Henry asleep?"

"He is."

Dean nods but doesn't take off his jacket or sit down. He's uncomfortable and he doesn't even pet the dog who is thrilled to see him, which makes me terrified of what he came here to say.

"How are you?" I ask. It's a ridiculous question. After all, he damn near lost his job for me.

"Fine. The last couple weeks have given me the chance to do some thinking."

"Oh?" I swallow hard.

"How are you?"

"Fine. Though, the new history professor is not quite as easy to look at as you are." I try to make a joke, but it falls flat.

"Can't say I'm upset about that. Henry?"

"Good. I told him you had to take a trip. He's been asking about you."

The corners of his lips turn up in a half smile. “I miss the kid.”

“Just him?”

His gaze locks on mine, and the air between us charges with what feels like lightning. “No. Not just him.” He runs a hand over the back of his hair and looks away, breaking the connection.

“Aren’t you supposed to be staying away from me?”

“I never wanted a relationship.” He ignores my question and meets my gaze.

My stomach twists. “Neither did I.”

“I invited you and your sister to my table that night because you were absolutely stunning and I was hoping to sleep with you. Just one night and never see you again.”

I swallow hard, unsure where this is going, but knowing that after tonight, whatever was between us will be irrevocably changed. “And here I thought you were merely being a gentleman.”

He moves in closer.

My heart hammers.

“There was nothing about me that was gentlemanly,” he replies. “I had hook-ups. An understanding that I wanted nothing more than a quick, physical release.”

“Then why did you ask for more with me?” Tears burn in the corners of my eyes because I’m sensing that this conversation is a wrap-up. An end to what had once been between us. Or rather, what I thought was between us.

“I thought at first it was because you’d turned me down. Because you were the first woman to turn me down. Which is arrogant of me to say, but it’s true. I’ve been sleeping around since right after high school, focused only on myself, and not at all interested in finding anything lasting. Honestly, I went out of my way to avoid all attachments.”

Every word he speaks causes the fissures in my heart to widen, ripping open the old wounds that tell me I'm not good enough. That I'm not worthy of the love of a good man. "And now that you've had me, you're not interested? You could have just sent me a text, Dean. Or, better yet, not reached out at all." A tear slips down my cheek, but Dean doesn't back down.

"I couldn't do that," he replies.

"Why is that?" I demand. "Did you want to see the look on my face when you broke my heart? Is that what gets you off these days, Dean Dorsey?"

He moves in closer, standing only a few inches from me now. So close I can make out the flecks of gold in his gorgeous eyes. "I wanted to be able to see your face when I tell you that I fucking love you, Kate Bennett. I love everything about you. I love your son as though he were my own flesh and blood. I didn't realize how hollow my life was until I stopped seeing you two every day. These past three weeks, I've been trying to find out if what I feel is real; it's why I've stayed away. Why I haven't reached out. Because I wanted to see what my life would be without you in it."

"And?" I somehow manage despite the lump in my throat.

Dean reaches out and cups my cheek with his hands. With his thumb, he wipes away my tears. "Marry me," he whispers.

Shock cuts through the ticket of emotion in my system. "What did you just say?" Stepping back, I put some distance between us.

Dean grins and reaches into his pocket. He withdraws a small velvet box, and my heart stops beating. "Katherine Ann Bennett, will you do me the absolute honor of becoming my wife?" He drops to one knee, and the tears I've been unsuccessfully trying to keep inside fall free. "Will you allow me to spend the rest of my life loving you and Henry? Please, Kate." He opens the box, and I find myself staring down at the most beautiful diamond ring I've ever seen.

"Please, Momma?"

I turn and see Henry peeking around the corner, eyes wide and hopeful, with Max wagging his tail standing next to him. “You’re supposed to be in bed,” I say with a smile. He doesn’t respond, just stares back at me, a cautious smile on his face.

The cracks that had been forming in my heart close, and for the first time since in what feels like forever, I feel as though happiness is right in front of me.

I turn back to Dean. He loves me. But better yet, He loves my son. “Are you sure? You’re going from bachelor to dad.”

Dean pulls the ring from the box and takes my hand. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my entire life,” He replies. “I’ve spent the last three weeks living without you both, and I don’t want to do it anymore.”

“Come on, Mom! He wouldn’t have asked if he wasn’t sure!”

I laugh and nod. “Yes, Dean. I will absolutely marry you.”

His smile turns radiant, and he slides the ring onto my finger. Then he stands and picks me up, spinning me around in a slow circle before stopping and holding out an arm for Henry. My boy runs over and wraps his arms around Dean’s waist.

Every bad memory.

Every painful situation.

Every day I wondered if I would survive to see the sunrise led me to this moment, and as I hold on to my future, I finally feel the weight of my past slipping away.

Epilogue

Kate

I wake to someone gently stroking my cheek. The first rays of sunlight warm my face as I yawn and stretch. Before I've even opened my eyes, I catch the fresh aroma of coffee and groan. "You are my hero."

I open my eyes and sit up, smiling at Dean, who sits at the edge of the bed, two paper cups of coffee in hand.

"And I will live my life being just that," he replies as he offers me one. Dean leans in and kisses me gently before pulling away.

"Where's Henry?" I ask, taking a drink. The warm, sweet liquid hits my tongue, and I groan again. "That's amazing."

Dean chuckles. "He's on the balcony. We went to grab coffee and pastries, but he's been really looking forward to going out."

I push the covers off and swing my legs over, but my gaze catches on the diamond ring on my left hand. *Wife*. I'm someone's wife.

Not just someone's—no—Dean Dorsey's wife.

Kate Dorsey. Has an epic ring to it.

Our honeymoon has consisted of insane connecting flights and a lost suitcase, but there will be no complaints spilling from my lips. With a reluctant Dakota watching over Max, everything has been beyond perfect.

With a smile on my face, I join Henry on the balcony and stare out at the gorgeous city of Rome.

History is laid out right before me while my future stands tall at my side.

“Morning, baby,” I greet Henry, kissing the top of his head.

“Mom, this place is amazing! I never want to leave.”

“Yeah, but then you’d miss our trip to Jerusalem, Spain, and Morocco.”

“Okay, fine.” Henry beams at Dean. “Then, after we visit all those places, I’ll pick my favorite, and we can go back.”

“Done.” Dean laughs and joins me in overlooking the city. “Well, Mrs. Dorsey, where do you want to go first?”

“The Colosseum,” both she and Henry reply at the same time.

“Done,” he replies with a laugh. “What do you say we wait out here while your sleepy-headed mom gets dressed?”

“Sure thing, Dad,” Henry replies as he plops down on a patio chair.

Dean remains frozen in place, his eyes wide, and when he turns to me, they’re full of tears. “Dad?” he mouths.

“Happy honeymoon, my love,” I whisper as I lean up and press my lips to his. Not many men would have been okay with Henry coming along, but Dean had insisted. Claiming that seeing the world was as much his right as it is ours.

It made me love him even more—and I hadn’t thought that possible.

The three of us make a family. And now that I’ve graduated—with honors—our relationship is no longer an issue. Something that absolutely infuriates Allison each and every time Henry and I visit Dean at Boston U.

Which, of course, I do fairly frequently these days.

“I’ll go get dressed, and we can get going.” I pull away and slip inside but keep my gaze on the patio as Dean takes a seat beside Henry.

The two of them begin chatting about something I can't quite make out, and while they do, my heart absolutely soars. For so long, I felt unlovable.

Like I wasn't worth anything.

I worried that Henry would never have a father.

And now, I have the love of a great man. My husband. And Henry has the father he has always deserved.

A man who loves him as though he is his own flesh and blood.

Dean glances back at me and smiles, and in that moment, I let myself sink into the promise reflected there.

For better or worse.

For richer or poorer.

Dean Dorsey is mine. Just as I am his.

Forever.

* * *

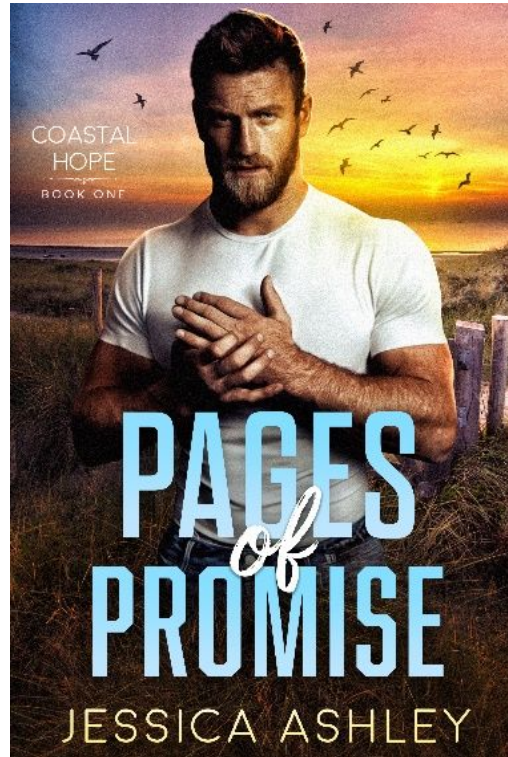
WHEW! What a ride! I had so much fun writing this one and I hope you loved it as much as I do! Thank you so much for reading!

If you haven't caught up with the other Dorsey Brothers, take a peek at the sneak peek of Severance Package to follow! You can also find Dirty Service (Axel) and Illicit Ink (Zander) on Amazon!

While I don't have any new spicy romances on the horizon, I am launching a brand-new series beneath my new pen name, Jessica Ashley!

Like the Dorsey brothers, this will be a series of interconnected standalones, though they will not be spicy. These are clean, Christian romantic suspense novels that follow a security team as they try to keep those they love safe.

If you love protective heroes, strong heroines, and an overall message of hope and faith even when things get hard—then please check *Pages of Promise* out! Turn the page for a special preview!



A stranger with secrets. A hero with unshakable faith.

After a rough ending to a nightmarish marriage, I'm ready for a new life.

Hope Springs is my fresh start. A place for me to put down roots and finally find a way to heal.

But it's not long before strange things begin happening.

They start off small. Creepy notes in the mailbox. Phone calls in the dead of night.

When the danger escalates, I turn to Lance Knight for help. The ex-soldier runs a private security firm, making him my only hope for staying alive.

He also happens to be handsome, honest, and spends every Sunday in a church pew.

My bodyguard has made it his mission to keep me safe. But when the tables turn, and he's pulled into the crosshairs right alongside me...who will protect him?

The tropes in this one include:

- Enemies to lovers (they seriously cannot stand each other at first!)
- A hero with strong faith in God
- A heroine who is trying to heal herself
- Second chances
- Swoon-worthy romance
- Sizzle without the spice

Turn the page for a sneak peek! Then, stay tuned for a look at Severance Package, Everett and Nova's story, available now!

Pages of Promise Chapter One: Eliza

I have this recurring nightmare where I'm lying on a set of train tracks in the dark. I can feel the chill of the steel beneath my body as a light breeze blows across my face. Even the deep booming of the train horn is deafening as the lights grow brighter and brighter the closer it comes.

Even as the vibrations grow stronger, I do not move.

I just lie there. Waiting for an end to a life that I don't feel I ever really lived. My therapist believed it was because I felt as though I had no control over my life. No real purpose besides being arm candy to my husband. Then again, she also thinks my divorce was strictly to gain that control. Likely because, as it turns out, she's one of the nine other women he was having an affair with.

Truth be told, I knew my marriage was over even before I found out about his infidelity. But it wasn't until those affairs were made public that I had the courage to leave. It's pathetic, but I was more concerned with what the public saw than what went on behind closed doors.

You're not there anymore, Eliza, I remind myself.

For the first time in ten years, I'm free.

Whatever that means.

I shove the past where it belongs and focus on what's right in front of me. The sign for Hope Springs is straight ahead. The population number worn down so much that I can barely make it out.

My windows are cracked, and through them I can smell the salty sea air and even though I've lived near an ocean my entire life, I'm still giddy to get my toes in the sand. Because here, in Hope Springs, Maine, I am getting my fresh start.

No cheating husband.

No abuse.

No pitied onlookers who knew it all and chose to do nothing to help.

Just me. My computer. And blissful silence.

With a smile on my face, I guide my car back onto the road and head into town. Main street is just how I imagined it based on the images my realtor sent me. Small, aged buildings line both sides. A hardware store with a freshly painted sign.

A small movie theatre.

A diner with happy people in the windows.

A church with a single steeple.

A school with a playground full of laughing children.

It's perfect. Even for a jaded soul like mine.

After following the road as it winds around through town and back out the other side, I get the first look at the out of service lighthouse that will serve as my new home. Its tall tower is wrapped with faded red and white stripes, and its light may have gone out years ago, but I was able to pay cash for it thanks to a hefty divorce settlement.

Making it all mine.

I pull down the gravel drive and climb out. Closing my eyes, I breathe in the salty sea air, a smile on my face. This is home. This is where I can recharge and find myself again. This is where I heal.

Rushing toward the sagging iron fence, I stop and stare out over the cliffside at the ocean ahead. White waves crash against rocks below me, but its turquoise waters as far as the eye can see. Beautiful, peaceful, serene.

Turning, I head back toward the car and grab my purse, then make my way up the steps. How sliding a key into a lock can feel so good, I'm not sure, but it does. With each move I make toward my new destiny, I feel like I gain back time lost in a marriage that tore me apart.

Stale air greets me, as does the sight of furniture covered in dusty white sheets.

The floor is aged brick, but I can all but see it gleaming once it's been cleaned. A metal spiral staircase encircles the interior, but I don't head up just yet, opting to inspect the small kitchen instead. It's a far cry from an entertainer's space, but given that I want to avoid all people for the foreseeable future, it's perfect.

Aged wooden countertops can be sanded and sealed, and the sink may be coated with dust, but it's a good size for just me. The appliances are long gone, but I already have new ones on the way to be delivered along with my furniture later this afternoon.

I turn and head for the staircase, following it up to a single bathroom and bedroom. Just off the bedroom, a balcony waits for new iron railing, but I can already picture myself sitting out there having coffee first thing in the morning.

After heading back downstairs, I begin pulling sheets off of wooden furniture that has likely been in this place since it was built in the early nineteen-hundreds. A rocking chair, splintering coffee table, and a couch with torn and dusty cushions set atop a cracked wooden frame.

Still, I smile. Because this tiny lighthouse feels more like home than the three-thousand-square foot house my ex-husband kept ever did.

Someone knocks at the door, so I cross over and pull it open. I'm expecting my realtor, or possibly the furniture delivery service here early, so when I'm greeted by a too-handsome for his own good man wearing a tight white t-shirt and dark jeans, I'm instantly put on edge.

His hair, a dark auburn, is longer on top and short on the sides, and a neatly trimmed auburn beard has threads of gold woven in it. Freckles give his face character, while also managing to somehow make him look even more masculine.

Or, perhaps, that's the light coat of dirt on his tanned arms and the tool-belt around his waist.

"Can I help you?" I demand, realizing with complete mortification that I've been staring.

"Possibly." He smiles and holds out a hand. "I'm Lance, and I believe I'm supposed to be installing a hot water heater out here today? That is, if you're Eliza Pierce."

The way he says my name puts me even more on edge—if that's even possible. "No. Felix Bishop with Hope Hardware is supposed to be coming."

The man smiles and my insides warm, irritating me even further. Haven't I had enough of handsome men? Men who come in and charm you, then turn out to be literal walking nightmares? "Felix had to watch his granddaughter today. He sent me over to get it installed for you, Ms. Pierce. However, if you'd like to go a night without hot water, then I'm sure he can get it done for you tomorrow."

The idea is tempting. But since I've been living on the road for the past few days, I decide that waiting another night just because the new installer is handsome is likely a childish way to handle my fresh start.

"Fine. You can do it."

"Thanks." He grins and moves inside. The man takes up space in a way you only ever read about. Even movies can't quite do it justice when showing the presence some people simply have.

And Lance—whatever his last name is—has a presence about him. An authority that unnerves me.

"I need to go out to my car."

"No problem. I know my way around this place." He smiles again and heads through the small living area, until he

reaches a back room and disappears inside. I move outside and take a deep, steadying breath.

You're fine, I tell myself. Erick is halfway across the country and has no idea where you are.

The mantra is something I've repeated to myself over and over again for the past few weeks, ever since our divorce was finalized. Yet right now, it doesn't seem to do much to quell my nerves.

Lance comes back out of the house and heads straight for his truck—a white Chevy—parked just behind my car. He reaches into the back and pulls out a box that seems far too small for a water heater, before setting it on the ground and retrieving a toolbox.

“What is that?” I demand, pointing to the box.

“A tankless water heater,” he replies. “Felix said it's what you ordered?”

Feeling foolish, I breathe a sigh of relief. “Yes. Thanks.” I cross my arms over my chest and step back as he passes, keeping a wide berth between us.

“Great. Do you mind grabbing my toolbox for me?” Without waiting for a response from me, he lifts the box and starts inside.

With a groan, I lift the heavy toolbox and follow him through the house and into the back laundry room. There's no old tank, just a spot where it once sat along with a bunch of fresh copper piping that looks like It's only been in there a few days.

He flashes another grin at me. “Thanks.”

“Seems like I'm paying you to install, not have me carry things for you.” I take a step back, annoyance that my words did nothing but brighten his smile, settling over me.

“Doesn't hurt to shave a few minutes off the install time, does it?” he asks as he pulls out a knife and starts opening the top of the water heater box. The muscles in his arms flex with each movement, and my attraction for him begins to grow.

Which, of course, only irritates me further. I cross my arms. “So you work for the hardware store?”

He chuckles. “No. I ran into Felix at the diner and he asked for help. I wasn’t doing anything this afternoon, so I stepped up.”

I stiffen, alarm bells going off in my head. “You’re not a licensed plumber?”

Lance stops and looks up at me. “As it so happens, I am. I just don’t do plumbing as my day job anymore.”

“So you’re out of practice, yet feeling the need to what—fill a nice guy quota for the month?”

Lance cocks his head to the side and studies me. “All right, Big City, how about you fill me in on just what I’ve done to offend you in the mere minutes since we met?”

“No offense,” I reply coldly. “But you’re not the man I hired for the job. And not only that, you’re not even a practicing plumber.”

“Practicing plumber?” He laughs. “I’m not a doctor, Ms. Pierce. And installing a water heater is hardly surgery. I don’t need to be actively practicing in order to do the job properly. And, if it makes you feel any better, I just installed one of these last week for Mrs. McGinley down at the library.”

“Since I do not know Mrs. McGinley, nor can I follow up on your claims, it doesn’t make me feel better.”

Lance cocks his head to the side once again, like he’s sizing me up. I step back. “Again, I will ask, if you would prefer Felix to do the work, I can gladly have him come over once he’s done watching his granddaughter.”

I should say yes. Should insist on it.

But the idea of a hot shower calls to me.

“No. Just do the job.” I turn on my heel and march out onto the porch. All the while feeling angry at him and furious with myself because he didn’t actually do anything to deserve my attitude.

An aged mini van pulls into the drive and a woman wearing a brightly colored floral sundress climbs out. Her flaming red hair is a dead giveaway and I find myself smiling as I cross down to greet her.

“Mrs. Eliza Pierce,” she says with a bright smile.

“No Mrs. anymore,” I reply. “Just Eliza. It’s nice to finally meet you in person Breanna.”

“You, too. Get in here!” The realtor I’ve spent the last few months going back and forth with wraps her arms around me and pulls me in for a hug.

I pull back as quickly as I can without being rude.

“Well?” she asks. “What do you think? Is it everything I told you it would be?”

“Yes. Complete with a not-plumber installing my water heater.”

Her smile fades just a bit. “What do you mean?”

“A man named Lance is in there. He said he doesn’t work for the hardware store, but was doing the owner you recommended a favor?”

That smile broadens. “Ahh yes. I heard Felix is on grandfather duty today. Lance is good people. He moved here about seven years ago I think? Come from Boston.”

“Boston.”

“Yes. Handsome as God makes them, isn’t he?” She wiggles her brows like I’m supposed to giggle and flush with color like some sort of school girl.

“Arrogant, too,” I reply.

“Really?” Her brows draw together. “I’ve never gotten that from him.” She looks past me toward the porch and smiles brightly. “Hey, Lance! I see you’ve met our newest resident.”

“Something like that.” Just the sound of his voice has me on edge. It washes over me like warm rain, and I don’t care for it. Not even a little.

I force a smile and turn toward him. “Taking a break already?” I ask, venom lacing my words.

“Hardly,” he replies. “It’s done. Pleasure meeting you, Miss Pierce.” He shifts his attention to Breanna. “Tell that husband of yours I’m up for some fishing next week.”

“Will do. See ya, Lance.” She waves him off, then turns back to me. “What exactly happened between you two?”

“Nothing. He showed up and wasn’t what I expected, then informed me he wasn’t a practicing plumber. I voiced concerns, he dismissed them.”

“Practicing plumber. Is that a thing?” She asks. “Never mind. Come on, let’s go see your new home!”

She tugs me toward the house, but I can’t fight the urge to look back over my shoulder at the truck backing out of my drive, and the infuriatingly handsome man behind the wheel.

A man like Lance is dangerous to a woman like me.

I just need to remind myself of that.

[Check it out today!](#)

Severance Package Chapter One: Nova

Pain shoots up my leg as my knees slam to the ground, but thankfully, both hands keep me from fully face-planting. “Bastard son of an ass face!”

I would bruise the shit out of my knees today. That’s my luck.

“Not before I have coffee, Nova!” my friend calls out from the kitchen.

I groan and pick myself up from the floor then rush into the bathroom to run a brush through my tangled brown hair. Thanks to late-night chats with a friend I haven’t seen since she moved from Texas seven years ago, I have maybe thirty minutes to make it to my first day. Thirty minutes or I may not have the job anymore. And wouldn’t it be something to get fired before I even manage to unpack my computer?

After dressing quickly and brushing my teeth, I all but sprint down the short hallway and into the kitchen.

“You look stressed,” Rose says with a smile as she holds out a breakfast burrito and a travel mug full of coffee.

I take the coffee but eye the burrito. “Tell me that isn’t what’s left over from last night.”

She looks at it again then back to me and grins. “Okay, I won’t.”

“Rose, we got those at two this morning from a damn food truck. And, I’m pretty sure we didn’t put it in the fridge.”

“College rules, Nova. If it’s less than twenty-four hours, it’s fine. Besides, it’s not like you have time to stop.”

My stomach chooses this exact moment to growl—loud enough that Rose shoves the burrito into my hand.

“Trust me, I’m a chef. Now go, don’t be late. I hear your boss is a massive douche.” She winks, knowing all too well that the rumors dictate that he absolutely is, then slaps me on the ass as I rush out into the hall.

The carpet below makes my steps near silent, but as I reach the end, all that changes. “Hold the elevator!” I all but screech when I see the doors start to close.

A hand goes to the crease, and I stumble inside, nearly tackling the only other occupant like I’m a linebacker for the Cowboys.

“Shit! Sorry!” I right myself and meet gorgeous almond eyes. He smiles at me, a wide grin that brings color to my cheeks.

“No problem at all, Miss—”

“Nova.”

“Nova,” he repeats. “I tend to enjoy starting my days with beautiful women crashing into me.”

“Oh, happen often?” I ask as I take a bite of the burrito. And then have to choke down said bite because it tastes like absolute ass. Not that I know much about what ass tastes like. But a girl can imagine.

Trust me, I’m a chef.

Psht. Love her or not, Rose is now on my shit list for the day.

“Not as often as I’d like,” he replies. “First floor?”

“Yes, thanks.” I cover the burrito again and shove it into my purse, stomach already rolling. It’s then I make my third poor decision of the day and take a massive swig of burning hot coffee.

I sputter, coughing as coffee pours from my nose and mouth.

“Shit, you okay?” Stranger’s hand goes to my back. He pats gently, and I struggle to regain even a shred of dignity as coffee burns my throat and nose.

“Hot,” I choke out.

“I can see that. Here.” He reaches into his pocket and offers me a handkerchief. “It’s clean.”

Who the hell carries handkerchiefs anymore? Still, can’t exactly complain when I’m literally bent over at the waist so the coffee spewing from two of my orifices doesn’t get onto the one and only work shirt I have unpacked. “Thanks.” I finish wiping my chin as soon as the elevator reaches the bottom floor. It dings, and the doors slide open, so I make a mad dash for the lobby, hoping to avoid further embarrassment.

“You sure you’re okay?”

Stopping, I turn toward Stranger. “Totally. It’s my first day, so I’m frazzled.”

He grins. “You did just move in, then. I knew I would have recognized you.”

“Not moved in, just staying with a friend,” I reply. “And I am so late for my job—”

“Oh, go! Don’t let me hold you up. See you around, Nova.” He walks past me and disappears through the sliding glass doors leading toward the parking garage.

Since driving my car will take longer than I have, I rush outside, jogging down the sidewalk in two-inch heels that will likely be the death of me.

My heart pounds, but at least the weather is cool enough there’s no sweat. At least, not yet. Cars honk and people call out for taxis all around me, but I ignore the sights and sounds of Boston as I turn another corner.

Dorsey Inc. sits straight ahead. An impressive building made of brick and mortar, it houses the largest name in Real

Estate this far north. Since I'm trying to remodel my grandmother's old house all by myself at the same time I'm attempting to build a name as an interior decorator, there is no other place I wanted to work.

While Dorsey Inc. focuses on new builds and renovations, they have an impressive design department that will look amazing on my references when I do finally open my company to clients. And the potential connections for my own re-model will be priceless. That is if I don't show up super late and end up fired before lunch.

I make a mad dash across the street and reach the side at the exact moment my stomach rolls. *Shit*. Sweat beads on my forehead now as cramps I can only describe as blades sawing me in half nearly drop me to my knees.

Fucking burrito.

This cannot be happening.

"Ahh, there you are!"

I look up at the curvy grey-haired woman rushing toward me. "I vouched for you Miss Thomas, and yet you're nearly ten minutes late on your first day!"

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Kael. There was a coffee incident and —" I trail off, not wanting to offer any more excuses. Not when the truth is entirely self-inflicted. It had been seven years since I'd been in the same city as Rose, so naturally, we spent last night talking and going out for burritos at two in the morning.

Smart move.

My stomach rolls again as my mouth fills with saliva.

"What is wrong with you, girl? Dammit, tell me you're not hungover. Mr. Dorsey will not tolerate binge drinking on work nights."

"No. Not hungover," I insist. "My now ex-best friend gave me a bad burrito."

And, like the dumbass I am, I chose to run here.

“I’ll be fine.” I force myself to stand upright even though my entire body feels like it’s on fire.

At that exact moment, an older but restored steel-colored Mustang pulls up at the curb.

“You better stand up, girl.” Mrs. Kael grips my arm as the sexiest man I have ever laid eyes on climbs out. His light brown hair is curly and just long enough a girl can daydream of burying her fingers in the thick strands.

The stubble on his face is the perfect length. The navy-blue suit he wears is an absolutely perfect blend for his olive-tone skin. Then there are his eyes. A bright bluish-green gaze levels on me before shifting to the woman beside me.

“Mrs. Kael,” he greets, voice deep and gravelly.

Fuck me.

“Mr. Dorsey, this is our newest hire—” She doesn’t even get the words out before I bend at the waist and the contents of my stomach completely evacuate—all over his shiny shoes.

“Oh no!” Mrs. Kael squeals. “I’ll go get a rag.”

But I’m not done. I fall to my knees and continue to hurl all while he stands there, completely still.

My throat burns as I heave, eyes filling with tears until finally, my body seems satisfied with the fact that I now want to die. Seriously, point me to the nearest building, and I’ll hurl myself off of it just like the vomit now covering Mr. Dorsey’s leather loafers.

I use the handkerchief that Stranger gave me and wipe my mouth. “I am so sorry, Mr. Dorsey. So sorry.” I try to wipe his shoes with it, but he steps back.

Chunks of egg and peppers cover his shoes and the bottom of his nice pants. And let’s not even discuss the pungent odor. *Why me?* One bite! I had one fucking bite!

“I don’t tolerate excessive drinking on work nights,” he says. “So as you probably can imagine, you’re fired.” He moves past me, and I scramble up.

“Wait! I didn’t get drunk last night! Please, it was a bad burrito! I swear!” I call out after him, but he doesn’t even bother turning around.

When I rush forward, a man wearing a security uniform steps into my path. He offers me a kind smile, but there’s no trace of pity in it. “You’re done here. Go home.”

“No, please, I need to explain.”

“Sweetheart, he’s not going to care,” he replies, his expression one of pity. “Since you have no personal belongings in the building, you can just leave. Save what little dignity you have left.”

I’m mortified. Pissed off. Tears burn in my eyes. How the hell is this fair? For the last two years, I’ve been getting nothing but shit on. In my personal life, my professional endeavors...nothing but steaming piles of shit hitting me square in the face, one after the other.

So why am I surprised?

Head hung low, I turn on my heel and march right past my now ex-boss’s muscle car. The urge to drag my key across it is stronger than I care to admit, but since there is no world in which I can afford to pay for it, I fight against it and make myself cross the street.

Someone honks, but I don’t give a shit.

They can mow me down for all I care. That would be a hell of a lot easier than being bent over and raw fucked by circumstances well beyond my control. Granted, if I hadn’t stayed up late last night, I might have been up early enough to make an actual breakfast.

Then, I never would have hurled on the boss’s shoes.

Never been fired.

And I wouldn’t be walking back to my friend’s apartment, covered in sweat, my stomach spasming.

This was supposed to be my fresh start. A chance to put myself first for the first time in my entire life, and yet, here I

am, doing yet another walk of shame. Different state. Different city. Same fucking outcome.

* * *

“I am so unbelievably sorry!” Rose rushes over to wipe my forehead with a cool cloth. Wearing a baggy t-shirt and no pants, I’m sprawled out on the couch, unable to move. She thinks it’s only because I still feel like shit.

I mean, it’s definitely that. But it’s because I have nothing left to live for, so I’m simply hoping the cushions absorb me into them. At least, then, I’ll serve a purpose. At least, I’ll be holding up the asses that keep shitting on me.

Without a job, I can’t remodel my father’s childhood home, which is the only thing I have left of the man who raised me.

Without *that* job, I cannot even hope to begin building a business that relies solely on clients who wouldn’t know how to pick me out of the slew of other designers out hunting them like sharks on chum.

“It’s not a big deal,” I tell her. “I’ll figure something out.”

“I gave you that damned burrito.”

“You ate the other one, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“And you didn’t hurl on your boss’s shoes.”

“That I did not do,” she replies. “But that’s because I am the boss.”

“And you have a stomach of steel, apparently.”

She kneels in front of me, wearing black pants and a white shirt, the uniform for the upscale Italian restaurant she owns and operates. “Are you sure you don’t want me to stick around? I can call Jesse. He can cover—”

“No. You and Mr. Perfect spend the evening making sex eyes across the kitchen. Don’t mind me in my misery. And I

promise to be out of your hair come tomorrow morning.”

“First of all, you are not in my hair. I told you to stay as long as you want. And second.” She blushes. “He is pretty damned perfect.”

“Yes, and we’re all happy for you.” Groaning, I cover my eyes with my arm. “Leave me to die.”

Rose slaps me on the leg. “Fine. You can mope while I’m at work. But tonight we’re going to get drunk and forget all about today.”

“Drunk? Really? Did I not just hurl everywhere today?”

“You’ll be better by the time I get home. Drink some ginger ale!” she calls out as she slams the door behind her and leaves me to my own devices. I know she’s right, though. I’ve never been one to complain.

Not when my dad was dying and I was his sole caregiver.

Not when my ex-boyfriend decided to fuck around with my father’s hospice nurse.

And certainly not when my father died, leaving me completely and utterly alone last year. So, that in mind, I get to my feet and grab a ginger ale from the refrigerator.

One plus side of emptying my stomach? It doesn’t hurt anymore.

“Let’s see what Boston has to offer,” I say as I open the classified ads and take my first sip. But, try as I might, I cannot get the image of Mr. Dorsey from my mind. I take another drink then slam the can down a little too hard. Ginger ale bubbles over the surface but doesn’t spill down the sides of the can.

Who the hell fires someone for throwing up? He didn’t even give me the chance to explain.

Eye candy? Abso-fucking-lutely. I just wish he wasn’t such a massive dick.

About the Author

Carmen Bishop is the author of over forty fantasy and contemporary romance novels. The former of which she writes as Jessica Wayne. During the day, she slays laundry and dishes as a mom of three, and at night her worlds come to life on paper.

She runs on coffee and wine (as well as the occasional whiskey!) and if you ever catch her wearing matching socks, it's probably because she grabbed them in the dark.

She has always believed in the power of true love and soul mates, even if sometimes we have to work a little harder to find ours.

She lives in Texas with her husband, kids, three German Shepherd's, and an orange cat who thinks he's a dog.

[Join her Facebook group today!](#)



Also by Carmen Bishop

DORSEY BROTHERS

SEVERANCE PACKAGE

DIRTY SERVICE

ILLCIT INK

BEHIND THE BADGE

THEY'RE BEING HUNTED AND THE ONLY WAY TO COME OUT OF IT ALIVE, IS TO PUT THEIR BADGES ASIDE.

CORRUPT

DECEIVE

CONCEAL

LONG ROAD HOME: *COMING HOME WAS ALWAYS PART OF THE PLAN. HE WAS NOT.*

HOME FOR SUMMER: *HE THINKS SHE'S A SPOILED BRAT. SHE THINKS HE'S A STICK IN THE MUD. TURNS OUT, THEY'RE BOTH WRONG.*

WAY BACK HOME: *FACING YOUR PAST IS ALWAYS THE HARDEST PART OF MOVING FORWARD. ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'VE KEPT A SECRET FOR FIVE YEARS.*

HOME AT LAST: *RULE #1: NEVER GET TIED DOWN. LEO SMASHED THROUGH THAT LIKE IT WAS A PANE OF SUGAR GLASS AND HE'S AN ACTION STAR WHOSE MISSION IS TO TAKE ME DOWN...REPEATEDLY.*