



Under
A FALLING
STAR

JAE

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CHAPTER 1

AUSTEN TUCKED THE PHONE BETWEEN her shoulder and ear and wriggled into her sheer pantyhose. “I hate first days,” she said into the phone.

“Oh, come on,” her best friend, Dawn, said. “What’s so bad about first days? New chances, new beginnings...”

Of course, Dawn as a psychologist would see it that way. “Hey, I’m not paying you for your fabulous cognitive reframing skills, so please just let me complain.”

Dawn laughed. “Go ahead.”

“My first day of kindergarten, I hid in my mother’s closet so I wouldn’t have to go. First day of elementary school, I got sick all over the teacher.”

“Ugh. Sounds like the teacher didn’t have such a great first day of school that year either.”

“She sure didn’t. The poor woman smelled like a polecat for the rest of the day. My first days of middle and high school didn’t go much better.” It hadn’t helped that her family had moved all over the country because her father had been in the military. She had lived in eight different towns and had gone through eight first days at new schools. Each time, the teacher would inevitably get her name wrong and call her Austin. “Then, of course, there’s my first day at Kallhoff Consulting back in San Diego.”

“Nothing to write home about either?” Dawn asked.

“I got into a car accident on my way to work.”

Dawn sucked in an audible breath.

“No one got hurt,” Austen said quickly. “Or maybe I sustained some brain damage. That would explain why I started a relationship with the woman whose rental car I hit. Needless to say, it didn’t end well.”

“Don’t tell me...Brenda?”

“The one and only.” She took up position in front of the mirror in the bathroom and gave herself a stern look, remembering her promise to move on and forget about the past. “Maybe today will be different. How bad can a company producing kids’ toys be, right?”

“Right. Can’t be any worse than the last company you worked for, that’s for sure. So, what are you wearing?”

Austen chuckled. “Does your partner know you’re having this kind of phone call with other women?”

“You wish.”

They both laughed. Austen gave her reflection a once-over and grinned at herself in the mirror. In a beige pencil skirt ending just above her knees, a matching suit jacket, and a cream-colored blouse that brought out the reddish color in her hair, she was all set to make a great first impression. “None too shabby, if I may say so myself.”

“Good. So go get ’em, tiger.” Dawn let out a hiss and a roar.

“I’ll give it my best. Thanks, Dawn.”

“No problem—the bill is in the mail.”

When they ended the call, Austen felt ready to face this first day. She dabbed a touch of perfume to her neck and wrists.

A quick glance at her watch showed that it was time to leave. Better to take the early train, just in case. She wanted to arrive bright and early.

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On her way to the door, she blew Toby a kiss. “Wish me luck.”

“Fuck you,” the cockatoo warbled.

Austen groaned. “Thanks a lot for that heartfelt encouragement.” She’d kill her brother the next time he visited. Apparently, he had thought it fun to teach her pet foul language. Needless to say, she didn’t share his twisted sense of humor.

She snatched her purse, keys, and an umbrella from the side table and strode out the door.

When her feet hit the two concrete steps leading out to the yard, she realized that she wasn’t wearing shoes. Shaking her head at herself, she unlocked the door and rushed back into the apartment.

“Loser,” Toby screamed.

“I know, I know.” She went on a frantic search for her camel-hued pumps and finally, after a few minutes, found them sitting on top of the closed toilet lid. “What are they doing here?” She put them on and hurried out the door a second time. She’d have to run the three blocks to the MAX station if she wanted to catch the early train.

God, she hated first days.



Even though she had hurried, she still missed the train by about thirty seconds. As she ran up to the North Killingsworth Street station, the light-rail train had just pulled away.

She slumped onto a bench and tried to slow her racing heart. No need to worry. Even though she had to transfer to another line, the next train would still get her to work

on time, especially since the MAX stopped right across the street from Kudos Entertainment.

When she stepped off the train in the Lloyd District, rain began to fall. Thank God she had grabbed an umbrella on her way out; she didn't want to look like a drenched rat on her first day. As she rushed across the brick-paved plaza surrounding the high-rise building, she nearly broke a heel. She slid to a stop in front of the main entrance to close her umbrella and check her appearance in the reflective glass of the building's curving facade.

Still presentable. With a calming breath, she entered the lobby. Her heels clicked a staccato beat on the polished travertine floor but then slowed as she craned her neck and stared in open-mouthed wonder. Although she had seen the lobby when she'd been here during her job interview, it was just as impressive the second time.

Drizzle fell on the high glass roof. Despite Portland's dreary winter weather, the lobby looked as if it were bathed in sunlight. Ferns and potted plants grew in large stone troughs along two sides, and a fountain gurgled in the background. A long, crimson couch flanked one of the white marble walls.

Austen skirted the twelve-foot Christmas tree in the center of the lobby, breathing in the scent of pine. Today was the eighth of December, but for some reason, the tree was still completely bare, no ornaments hanging from its branches. *Strange. Why have a Christmas tree if you don't decorate it?* She shrugged off the distracting thought and stopped in front of the reception desk.

The receptionist looked up from her computer. Her conservative business attire contrasted starkly with a pink streak in her blonde hair.

That was encouraging. At least her new company wasn't as stuffy as the old one.

"Good morning." The receptionist smiled at her. "May I help you?" Her gaze swept across Austen, who barely restrained herself from checking if she had coffee stains on her blouse or wrinkles in her skirt.

"Good morning. I'm Austen Brooks, the new administrative assistant."

"Oh, yes. Mr. Saunders is expecting you."

Austen swallowed. She hadn't met her new boss yet, but she told herself that he couldn't be as bad as the last one.

"Take the elevator all the way up to the fifteenth floor," the receptionist said, gesturing. "It's the corner office to the left."

"Thank you." Austen walked over to the bank of elevators behind the reception desk and pressed the up button.

While she waited for the steel doors to open, steps echoed across the lobby. The reflections of the elevator's steel doors showed two people, a man and a woman, hovering behind her. Austen felt their curious gazes, but she didn't turn around.

The elevator chimed, and its gleaming doors slid open.

Austen stepped in and moved toward the back of the elevator to make room for the two other people.

"Which floor?" the man who'd entered last, dressed in jeans and a button-down, asked and gave her a questioning glance.

"Fifteenth, please."

The man and the elevator's other occupant, a woman in business attire, looked at each other before he pressed the button for the top floor.

“Did they finally hire a new admin for Ms. Saunders?” the woman asked.

Ms. Saunders? Austen had thought she would work for *Mr. Saunders*, the company’s vice president of marketing and customer service. Before her job interview, she had checked out the company’s website, and the organizational chart had indicated that her boss would be Timothy Saunders. Or had she misread, and had it really said *Timothea*? But the receptionist had said *Mr. Saunders* too, hadn’t she?

“I’m an admin,” Austen said, “but—”

“Well, good luck, then,” the woman said. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine. Don’t let the rumors scare you off.”

“Rumors?” That didn’t sound promising. “What rumors?”

The two employees exchanged glances as the elevator propelled them upward.

“Well, they say her last admin committed suicide,” the woman said in a stage whisper. “Just jumped out the window on the fifteenth floor one day.”

“I thought that was her second-to-last secretary?” the man said.

The woman shrugged. “I lost track over the years. Anyway, poor Wendy. I had no idea her depression had gotten so bad.”

The steel doors slid open on the third floor, and the man stepped out. “You’d be depressed too if you had to work for Ms. Saunders,” he muttered just as the doors closed.

The elevator stopped once again on the seventh floor, and the woman got off, sending Austen one last encouraging glance.

Finally, Austen was alone. She stared into her own wide eyes in the mirrored wall.

Great. Apparently, her new boss was Attila the Hun.



When the elevator doors opened on the fifteenth floor, Austen stepped onto plush, gray-blue carpet. The scent of espresso wafted down the corridor. Well, at least they had good coffee. She'd need it if she really had to work for the boss from hell.

She knocked on the first door to the left but didn't hear an answer. Hesitantly, she opened the door and peeked in.

The outer office was empty and the assistant's desk unoccupied. That would probably be her new place of work. She let her gaze wander over oak-paneled walls, burgundy carpet, and a solid wood desk with a large computer screen. A smile formed on her face. The new office was a huge step-up from the tiny cubicle she'd worked in before.

As she stepped into the room, she realized that the door to the inner office was partially open. A male voice came from inside.

Was this her new boss or just someone working for the female version of Attila?

Before she could walk over to peek at the nameplate on the wall, the door opened more fully and a tall man stepped out. If this was indeed her new boss, he was not at all what she'd expected. For one thing, she had thought he would be in his fifties, but this man was only a few years older than she was, maybe in his mid-thirties. In a gray pinstripe suit that matched the color of his eyes and a dark blue tie, he looked as if he'd stepped off the cover of *GQ* magazine. He reached up to push back a strand of wavy,

black hair and gave her a smile that probably made women all over the company swoon.

Austen grinned inwardly. *Good thing I'm immune to male charms.* "Good morning," she said. "I'm Austen Brooks, the new administrative assistant. I'm looking for Mr. Saunders."

His grin broadened. "You found him. Timothy Saunders. Welcome to Kudos Entertainment, Ms. Brooks."

Phew. So she wouldn't be working for Attila after all. Was the woman the employees on the elevator had talked about related to her new boss? If yes, had they just happened to get jobs at the same company, or was Kudos Entertainment a family-run business? She realized she should have studied the company's website more carefully, but there hadn't been much time to prepare before her job interview and now she didn't want to appear too nosy by asking.

They shook hands.

"Sorry for making you wait. Things are always a little crazy around here right before Christmas." He pointed toward his office, where the phone was ringing off the hook.

So that was why he seemed so happy to see her.

"Why don't we go to my office and talk for a minute?"

Austen nodded and followed him into his office.

A large, L-shaped desk faced away from a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking downtown Portland and Mt. Hood in the distance.

Wow. She couldn't help staring at the panoramic view.

He laughed. "Pretty nice, isn't it? The first week I moved in here, I didn't get any work done because I was staring out the window all the time. Take a seat, please."

Instead of sitting in the padded leather chair behind his desk, which would have given him the upper hand, he directed her to a small, round table.

Austen smiled and decided that she liked her new boss. “So what can I do to help you deal with the pre-Christmas craziness?”

“For today, probably not much. Just settle in, find out where the bathrooms are, and check out the break room. Oh, and go down to the tenth floor to fill out some employee forms before HR has my head.”

“I’ll do that right away.”

Saunders flipped through his daily planner. “There’s a staff meeting at eleven that I’d like you to attend. I’ll introduce you to the rest of the marketing team.”

Austen nodded.

“We also need to set up your e-mail so I can forward you a bunch of stuff that will get you up to speed on our ongoing projects. This week, I’ll be busy putting together my report for the annual shareholders’ meeting in January, so if anyone calls and wants to talk to me, tell them I joined the Foreign Legion.”

Austen laughed. Finally, a boss with a sense of humor.

The phone in the outer office rang.

Austen jumped up, eager to prove herself. “I’ll get it.” She hurried over to her desk and snatched up the phone. “Kudos Entertainment, marketing department. This is Austen Brooks. How may I help you?”

“This is Danielle Saunders, COO.” A contralto voice reverberated through the line. “Is my brother in?”

Austen clutched the phone more tightly. Mr. Saunders’s sister was the company’s chief operating officer? The one

Joe

who made administrative assistants jump to their deaths?
“Uh, I’m sorry, ma’am, he is—”

“Let me guess. He joined the Foreign Legion—again.”

Austen suppressed a chuckle. At least Attila had a sense of humor too. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, once he’s back, tell him to call me.” Danielle Saunders hung up before Austen could answer.

She stared at the phone. Welcome to Kudos Entertainment.

CHAPTER 2

A FEW MINUTES BEFORE ELEVEN, Austen followed her boss to the conference room. Her first day at the new job wasn't even halfway over yet, but her head was already buzzing after sorting through mail all morning. Mr. Saunders hadn't been kidding when he'd said that they were busy right before Christmas.

About fifteen people milled around the conference room, helping themselves to coffee and chocolate cake.

Austen smiled. A team that had chocolate cake couldn't be too bad, could it?

Mr. Saunders clapped his hands to get their attention. "If I could distract you from the cake for a minute... This is Austen Brooks." He earned extra points for getting her name right on the first day. "My new secre—"

"Administrative assistant," the team shouted in unison.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I just wanted to see if you're paying attention."

People started shaking Austen's hand, welcoming her to the team, and introducing themselves. Someone handed her a plate with a piece of cake.

She knew she couldn't possibly remember all those names, but she was already beginning to feel like an accepted member of the team. Maybe first days weren't so bad after all.

Half an hour later, the cake was gone, and they had made it through all of the items on the agenda—except for one.

“As you probably noticed, we’re woefully behind on our Christmas decorations,” Mr. Saunders said. “This year, it’s our turn to decorate the company Christmas tree in the lobby. So, any takers for that assignment?”

The team members on either side of Austen stared down at the crumbs on their plates. Others busied themselves reading the papers in front of them.

Finally, the woman next to Austen looked up. “Finance did such a good job last year. That’ll be hard to beat.”

“Oh, please! We’re marketing specialists. We can out-decorate these number crunchers with one hand tied behind our backs,” Saunders said, earning enthusiastic nods around the table.

Still, no one offered to take on the project.

Saunders looked from one team member to the next. “Come on, people! I know you’re all up to your necks in work, but someone has to do it. Don’t make me pick a volunteer.”

Paper rustled.

“How about you, Sally?”

“Me?” The brunette to Austen’s right looked up from her paperwork with a horrified expression. “Oh, no, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because...because...I’m Jewish.”

The man across from her snorted. “Oh, please. You’re about as Jewish as Genghis Khan. You wouldn’t know a gefilte fish if it bit you in the ass.”

Sally lifted her chin. “Why don’t you do it, Jack?”

“You saw photos of my Christmas tree last year. Do you really want me to be the one who holds up the honor of the marketing department?”

“Come to think of it...no.” Sally giggled. “That Christmas tree looked like it had dying-forest syndrome.”

“That’s pathetic, people,” Mr. Saunders said. “We’re the marketing department. Presenting things and making them look good is our job, right?”

The people around the table nodded.

“Decorating one little Christmas tree can’t be that hard. Who’s gonna do it?” He looked at each of his employees.

Austen hesitated. Because of Toby, she hadn’t had a Christmas tree for the past five or six years. He seemed to think the tree was a giant bird toy and chewed on the ornaments, so after that first year, she had banned all Christmas decorations from her apartment. Now she was totally out of practice. Still, this was her chance to make a good impression on Mr. Saunders and her new colleagues.

Slowly, she lifted her hand. “I could do it.”

All heads turned in her direction.

“Are you sure?” Mr. Saunders asked. “Wouldn’t you rather ease into the new job instead of taking on a project on your first day?”

Austen squared her shoulders. “That’s okay. I’d like to do it.”

Mr. Saunders nodded. “All right. Thank you. How about some support for our new admin?”

“I could help her,” Jack said.

Sally nodded. “Me too. We could discuss strategy over lunch.”

Discuss strategy? Austen stared at her. She’d thought she would just start with the lights, add ornaments, and

finally finish with tinsel. But, apparently, it didn't work that way if you were in marketing and trying to outdo the accounting team.

"All right. Please get on it right away, if possible. An empty Christmas tree is a disgrace for a company that aims to make children happy." Mr. Saunders gathered his stack of papers and got up. At the door, he stopped and looked over his shoulder at Austen. "Welcome to the team again."



This must be workplace heaven. Austen had expected a company cafeteria that served mac and cheese or lukewarm pizza, but instead she'd had her choice of four different mouthwatering dishes.

She finished her last bite of grilled chicken and got started on her cinnamon toffee muffin, which tasted just as spectacular. Clearly, Kudos Entertainment Inc. was on a mission to fatten up its employees. "Is the food always this good?"

Jack nodded while still shoveling down his second helping of curry.

"Working for Kudos is a pretty sweet deal," Sally said. "Unless you work in operations, of course." She and Jack exchanged knowing glances.

Austen swallowed a bite of muffin. "Why? What's wrong with operations?"

Sally looked left and right, then leaned across the table and whispered, "Its boss. Mr. Saunders is a sweetheart—not to mention hot—but his sister..."

"She's hot too," Jack mumbled around a mouthful of curry.

Sally rolled her eyes. “Men. She’s a bitch. She fired her last assistant a few days ago, not caring that it’s the holiday season. Can you believe it?”

Austen could. “My last boss was like that too.”

“Yeah? What happened?” Sally’s eyes gleamed. She leaned even farther across the table.

Shit. Now she’d done it. She hadn’t planned to come out to her new colleagues on the first day, but maybe it was better that way. The new team seemed friendly, and she didn’t want to distance herself from them by hiding in the closet, unable to join in when they talked about their private lives. She took a deep breath. “He was a homophobic chauvinist. He had it in for me ever since I brought my girlfriend to the office Christmas party the year I started working for them.”

“Oh,” Sally said.

Jack glanced up from his curry.

Austen clamped damp fingers around the napkin. Maybe being so open about her sexual orientation had been a bad idea.

“You should bring her to the office Christmas party the Friday after this one,” Sally said.

“Who?”

“Your girlfriend.”

Austen shook her head. “We’re not together anymore.”

Her colleagues didn’t need to know the details. After breaking up with her on Christmas Day three years ago, Brenda had revealed that there was someone else. She was in a long-term partnership and had been long before they’d met. Without knowing it, Austen had been the other woman. She brushed a few muffin crumbs off her blouse, wishing she could get rid of her bitter memories as easily.

“Oh. Sorry.” Sally reached across the table and patted her hand. “But you could still bring a date. Mr. Saunders would be fine with it. His sister is gay too.”

“Attila is gay? Uh, I mean...Ms. Saunders, the COO?”

Sally chuckled. “I see you’ve already heard of her. Yes, she’s gay. Not that anyone has ever seen her with a woman. She’s married to her job.”

Austen shoved back her empty plate. “So, any ideas for our Christmas tree project?”

Jack and Sally shook their heads.

“It has to be something unique,” Sally said. “We can’t let the guys from finance think they’re more creative than us.”

“Maybe we could hang little toys,” Austen said. After all, that would be fitting for a games and toy company.

“That’s what finance did last year,” Sally said.

“Hmm.” Austen searched her memory for more unusual Christmas tree decorations she’d seen in the past. “How about natural ornaments like pinecones, winterberries, and apples?”

“Already been done,” Sally said.

“Gingerbread ornaments that employees baked themselves?”

Sally shook her head. “HR, four years ago.”

“We could do a Christmas tree out of green beer bottles,” Jack said when he finally finished the last bite of his curry.

Austen and Sally just looked at him.

“Okay, okay.” He lifted his hands. “Just a suggestion.”

“How did your old company decorate their tree?” Sally asked.

“We didn’t have one. Instead, we donated the money to an organization that fulfills wishes of children from

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poor families.” That had been one of the few things she liked about her old company. Austen leaned her chin on her hand and rubbed her forehead. *Wishes. Hmm, that could work.* “How about we do something less commercial?”

“What?” they asked in unison.

Austen fished for the notepad in her purse and sketched it out for them.

CHAPTER 3

AT THE KNOCK ON HER office door, Dee looked up from the reports scattered all over her desk. “Yes?” she snarled. God help whoever was interrupting her.

The door opened, and her cheerfully grinning brother appeared in the doorway. “Hey. I hear you called?”

Dee slipped out of her shoes and let them drop to the carpet. “I already took care of it.”

“Took care of what?”

“Oh, nothing. Just had to go knock some heads together down in licensing. We need that licensing deal with Unicorn Pictures to go through before Christmas, or we’ll lose shares in the European market. Is the marketing campaign for that ready?”

Tim nodded. “I’ll send you the details before I leave for the day.”

“Leave?” It was barely five.

“Yeah. Some of us have a life, you know? I don’t want to end up like Dad, not getting to see my kids grow up because I’m always at work.”

Part of Dee admired her brother for going against family tradition and not making work the center of his life, but she didn’t have kids or anyone waiting for her at home, and she didn’t see that changing anytime soon. “Are you finished with your report for the shareholders’ meeting?”

“Almost. There’s still plenty of time.” Tim entered the office and closed the door behind him. He crossed over to her desk and set something down on a stack of spreadsheets.

Frowning, Dee studied the pile of paper snowflakes. She picked one up and looked at it. One side glimmered silver under the fluorescent lights in her office; the other side was made of white paper. “Don’t tell me that’s all your department came up with for the new product launch next week.”

Tim chuckled. “No. It’s not for the product launch. This is part of our Christmas tree decoration. We’re asking our employees to write down their biggest wishes for next year on the paper side of the snowflake and then hang it on the tree. Hand them out to your team.” He threw a pen at her. “And fill one out too.”

Dee scrunched up her face. She didn’t have time for this childish crap. Their CEO was breathing down her neck to hand in her annual report by next Tuesday at the latest. Just because he was their uncle didn’t mean he’d go easy on her—quite the opposite. “Who came up with that bright idea?”

“My new administrative assistant.”

“You’d better keep her on a short leash, or she’ll have us knit socks for the tree next year.”

Tim folded his arms across his chest. “Don’t be an ass. She’s an intelligent, young woman. I’m sure she’ll be an asset to my team.”

“If she’s that good, why didn’t we hire her as my new secretary?”

“It’s called administrative assistant nowadays, Sis.”

They grinned at each other.

“And we didn’t make her your admin, because you said you didn’t want one. Besides, we want to keep her around for longer than...” Tim pretended to leaf through a file, “...three weeks, six weeks, or four days.”

Dee crumpled up one snowflake and threw it at him. “You make it sound like I’m impossible to work for.”

He lifted an eyebrow at her. “If the shoe fits. Your track record with admins isn’t the best.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault. The first one never got any work done. The only thing she did all day was water her plants and paint her nails. And you know what happened with the last one. She shredded my reports, and when I told her to print them out again, she somehow managed to delete my files. Which is why I have no time for this stuff.” She waved at the stack of snowflakes on her desk. “I have to start over with the report.”

“We’ve been discussing this for longer than it would have taken you to scribble down one measly wish. Come on. Get it over with.”

“Jesus, you’re a pain in the ass.”

“Must be genetic, then, because that’s what people around here say about you.”

Sighing, Dee picked up a pen and thought of a wish. Only one thing came to mind. She quickly scribbled it down on the paper side of the snowflake. “There. Now get out of here and let me finish this damn report.”

Tim didn’t move. He narrowed his eyes at her. “You didn’t wish for good fourth-quarter numbers, did you?”

She shrugged. What else was she supposed to wish for?

He picked up her snowflake.

“Hey! Isn’t it supposed to be bad luck to let others read your wish?”

“That’s the point of the snowflakes. We’re putting them up on the tree for everyone to read.” He read what she had written. “I knew it. That’s pathetic. When will you finally realize that there’s more to life than just work, work, work?”

“Since when?” She remembered the many nights he’d been right there with her, burning the midnight oil, both working their way up in their uncle’s company.

“Since I met Janine,” he said, a smile softening his expression.

Before he could go into raptures about the whirlwind romance with his wife of fifteen months, she grabbed another snowflake, wrote “world peace” on it, and shoved it at him. “There. Happy now?”

He read the two words. “No. It has to be a personal wish.”

“Tim...” She rubbed her forehead and took a deep breath. It wasn’t his fault that she had to write that report all over again. “Let’s make a deal. I’ll finish your report for the shareholders’ meeting if you take care of this for me.”

His eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. “Deal.” He pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket, took a new snowflake from her desk, and wrote something on it. “All done. You have to hang it yourself, though.”

She opened her mouth to protest.

“Just take a little detour and place it on the tree the next time you go get yourself more of that black tar you call coffee.” He handed her the snowflake, turned on his heel, and strode out.

The mention of her drug of choice made Dee peek into the large mug on her desk. It was empty and probably had been for hours. She picked it up and headed for the door, leaving the snowflake behind.

A few minutes later, she returned and set the steaming mug on her desk.

The snowflake was still there.

Might as well get it over with. The coffee would still be hot once she returned. She took the snowflake and made her way down the corridor. While the elevator carried her toward the lobby, she read the two words that were written on the paper side in capital letters: NEW GIRLFRIEND.

Dee snorted. *Yeah, right.* She spent all her time at work, so how was she supposed to meet a woman? *Not gonna happen.*

The steel doors slid open, and she stepped into the lobby.

She had to admit that the Christmas tree didn't look half bad. Lights in red and blue, the company colors, had been strung around the tree, which was topped by a large, five-pointed star made of crystal. Dozens of snowflakes glimmered in the branches, and employees were swarming the tree to hang their own snowflakes and read what their colleagues had written.

Don't they have work to do? As she sent them a narrow-eyed glare, they skittered away.

Dee strode toward the tree to get it over with. When she hung her snowflake on one of the upper branches, she realized there were too many lights in this section of the tree. She moved around to get a view from different angles.

Yeah. Definitely too many lights.

That wouldn't do. Clearly, Tim's assistant had no sense of aesthetics. She jerked the first misplaced light from its branch and repositioned it.



Austen grinned when the elevator doors parted and the sparkling snowflakes on the Christmas tree greeted her as she stepped into the lobby. Her first day at the new company was over, and it hadn't been so bad after all. In fact, everything had gone great. Her new boss wasn't an asshole; the team seemed pretty nice, and she'd done a good job with her first assignment—decorating the Christmas tree. What more could you wish for?

Speaking of wishes... She still had no idea what to put on her own snowflake. Maybe a more refined vocabulary for Toby. Or she could read a few of her colleagues' wishes on her way out; that might give her an idea of what to write.

As she made her way across the lobby, another employee stepped up to the tree and hung her snowflake. Instead of then walking away, the woman began to reposition the lights on the upper branches none too gently.

What the...? The woman, clad in a pantsuit that hugged her shapely hips, definitely wasn't part of the marketing department. Austen would have remembered a colleague with such a sexy ass. *So what the hell is she doing rearranging my tree?* She rolled her eyes at herself. *My tree?* Still, she couldn't help feeling a little protective as she watched the stranger manhandle the tree.

The woman pulled another light off a branch, making the tree start to sway and dislodging a few of the snowflakes.

"Careful!" Austen shouted.

Still holding on to the tree, the woman whirled around. The top branches tilted.

Austen surged forward, but it was too late.

As if in slow motion, the star-shaped tree topper tumbled from its perch.

The woman let go of the tree and jumped back, but gravity was faster.

The heavy ornament hit her in the head and then crashed to the floor, where it exploded into fragments.

Crystal shards crunched beneath Austen's feet as she ran over. "Oh my God! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." The woman straightened to her full height, towering over Austen, and glared at her. She ran one hand over her black hair that was pulled back into a neat chignon while clutching her forehead with the other. Blood seeped out from between her fingers. "Shit."

"You're not fine at all." Austen's mother hen instincts took over. She grabbed the woman's elbow. "Come with me."

The woman dug in her heels.

Austen tugged on her arm. "Stop being so stubborn. We need to get the bleeding stopped."

After a short tug-of-war, the woman finally followed her to the lobby bathroom, muttering curses as she went.

Ignoring the colorful language, Austen tugged her over to the sink and pressed a paper towel to the cut on her forehead. "Looks pretty bad."

"Great. What idiot puts a heavy crystal star on a tree without securing it?"

Heat rose up Austen's neck, but she forced herself not to flinch back from the woman's angry glare. "This idiot."

"What? You mean...you are Tim's new admin? The one who's responsible for decorating that damn tree?"

Austen nodded. So word about Mr. Saunders having a new assistant was all over the company already.

"Thanks a lot, then." The woman pointed at her forehead, still glowering.

“I’m sorry you got hurt, but you can’t blame it on me. That star would have never crashed down if you’d just hung your snowflake, like everyone else.”

“I was just rearranging the lights. A blind man could see that they were too close together.”

“The lights were just fine. Everyone said so.” What a control freak. She probably worked in legal or finance.

The woman blinked as if not used to people confronting her.

Blood was still dripping down, and Austen pressed a little harder to get it to stop.

“No, they weren’t. I— ouch.” The woman flinched back. “Careful, Nurse Ratched! There’s a bleeding gash on my forehead, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“I’m trying to get that bleeding stopped, in case *you* hadn’t noticed.” Austen shook her head. “Why is it that you tall, tough-looking types are always so squeamish?”

Smoky gray eyes blinked down at her, then narrowed. “I’m not squeamish!”

“Then hold still. We have to keep pressure on it, or it’ll never stop bleeding.”

Still glaring at her, the woman stopped fidgeting.

They stood like that for several minutes, with the stranger bent a little and Austen pressing the paper towel to the cut, her other hand against the back of the woman’s head to keep her from moving.

The door opened, and Sally walked into the ladies’ room. “Oh, hi, Austen. How was your first day at Kudos?”

When the stranger turned to face her, Sally stumbled to a stop. Her eyes widened as she took in the scene in front of the sink. “Oh.” Without another word, she turned and left.

“Great,” the woman mumbled. “That’s how rumors are started. Now she’ll tell everyone she caught me in the ladies’ room in a romantic clinch with the new girl.”

Austen turned her head and stared at them in the mirror above the sink. With a little imagination, their positions—with her cradling the stranger’s face and the woman bending as if about to kiss her—could indeed be misconstrued as an embrace. And Sally worked in marketing, so she had imagination in spades. *Wonderful*. “So what’s your name?” Austen asked.

The woman hesitated. “Why do you want to know?”

Still keeping pressure on the cut, Austen shrugged. “I’m not into anonymous encounters. I want to know who I’ve been caught feeling up in the ladies’ room.”

A hint of a smile dashed across the woman’s face.

Austen couldn’t help staring. With her high cheekbones and strong jaw, the woman already looked arresting, but when she smiled... *Wow*.

“Dee,” the woman finally said.

Her contralto voice sounded familiar, but Austen was sure that she’d never met her before. She would remember a gorgeous woman like this. “Austen.”

Dee lifted one eyebrow, nearly dislodging the paper towel from her forehead. “Like the city in Texas?”

“Like the famous author. Now hold still.”

“Are you always this bossy?”

Austen laughed. “Only when I’m dealing with people who are too stubborn to know what’s good for them. And why do I get the feeling that the pot is calling the kettle black?”

“Must be your vivid imagination. You’re in marketing after all.”

“Yes, I am. And you?”

Dee shifted her weight, earning her a warning glare from Austen when the paper towel shifted away from the cut again. After several seconds, she said, “Operations.”

“Oh. My condolences. You’re working for Attila, then.”
“Who?”

Austen’s cheeks warmed. She hadn’t meant to use that nickname when talking about one of the company’s executives. “I mean for Ms. Saunders.”

Dee snorted. “Attila. That’s a good one.”

“Is she as bad as they say?”

Another wry smile crossed Dee’s face. “She has her moments.” She studied her forehead in the mirror. “Has it stopped bleeding? As pleasant as this has been, I need to get back to work.”

Slowly, Austen lifted the paper towel, which was soaked with blood by now. *Damn*. The cut didn’t look as if it would stop bleeding anytime soon. “No. Still bleeding. We should get you to the emergency room. I think that cut needs some stitches.”

“I don’t need stitches. It’s probably not as bad as it looks. Head wounds just bleed a lot.”

“I didn’t know Kudos Entertainment had a physician on its payroll, Doctor.”

“We don’t. I’m not a doctor.”

“Then you should leave the diagnosis to someone who is. Come on.”

Dee didn’t move an inch. “I’m fine. I just need to clean up and get back to work.”

“Even Ms. Saunders can’t be so horrible that she’d expect you to return to work with a bleeding head wound. Plus it’s after five anyway.”

Jae

Dee stared at her bloodstained forehead in the mirror for several seconds. Finally, she sighed and nodded. “All right. The emergency room it is. Just what I needed two weeks before Christmas.”

CHAPTER 4

VANESSA, THE RECEPTIONIST, STARED AT them as they left the lobby bathroom.

Dee scowled at her. “Instead of standing around, staring, can you go up and get me my briefcase? My car keys and ID are in there.”

“Oh. Of course.” Vanessa’s heels clacked over the travertine floor as she hurried to the elevator.

It took only a few minutes for her to make it back. She extended her arm as far as it would go to hand over the briefcase, either afraid to get close to Dee or to get blood on her clothes.

Dee rolled her eyes. “Thanks.”

On the way to the car, Austen kept a careful arm wrapped around Dee’s waist.

“You don’t need to do that,” Dee said. “I can walk just fine on my own.” Truth be told, she didn’t mind. Austen was a pain in the ass, but at least she was cute. Her auburn hair feathered around her pretty face in a sassy pixie cut, with the side fringes repeatedly falling in front of her sapphire eyes. *Down, girl.* The last thing she needed was a complaint about sexual harassment in the workplace.

Austen refused to let go. “Humor me, okay? You’ve got your car here, right? I’m afraid I took the MAX this morning.”

“Yeah, it’s over there.” Dee led her across the parking lot, to the spaces reserved for senior executives. Thankfully, Austen was new to the company and had no idea about the parking arrangements.

When Dee came to a stop in front of her car, Austen’s eyes widened. “You drive a BMW? Wow. I work for the wrong department, then. Maybe I should have applied for a position in operations.”

“Nah,” Dee said. “You wouldn’t want to work for Attila, remember?”

“Right.”

After getting the car key out of the briefcase, Dee pointed it at the car, pressed the unlock button, and moved to open the door on the driver’s side.

Austen clutched her arm and hung on. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Uh, driving to the ER before I bleed to death?”

“You’re in no condition to drive. Give me the keys.” Austen held out her hand, palm up.

No one but Dee had ever driven her car, and she intended to keep it that way. She closed her hand more tightly around the key. “I’m fine. Get in.” She pointed across the car to the passenger side.

Austen waved her fingers at her. “Give me the keys. I’ll drive, and you can...continue bleeding. HR would have my head if I let you drive like this.”

Dee had to admit that she did feel a little woozy. Blood was dripping into her eye when she forgot to apply pressure on the wound. If she wanted to get that damn cut taken care of within the next few hours, she had to give in, as uncharacteristic as that was for her. With a huff of frustration, she held out the keys.

Austen snatched them from her grasp before she could change her mind.

Grumbling, Dee walked around to the passenger side and got into the BMW. She didn't like the view from this side of the car.

Austen slid into the driver's seat and started to giggle. "Wow. How tall are you?"

Dee looked over. At the sight of Austen trying to reach the steering wheel, the brake, and the accelerator, she couldn't hold on to her annoyance and cracked a smile. "A lot taller than you, apparently."

Austen slid the seat forward and reached up to adjust the rearview mirror.

Sighing, Dee reconciled herself to the fact that she'd have to readjust everything to her liking later.

"Are you an only child?" Austen asked as she started the car and pulled out of the parking space and onto the street.

"Uh, no. Why?"

"Because it's clear as day that you don't like sharing your toys." Austen smoothed one hand over the leather of the steering wheel.

Dee didn't know what to say to that. She couldn't remember the last time someone had spoken to her so frankly.

Austen smiled. "Keep the pressure on that cut. It still hasn't stopped bleeding."

"Damn. It's a nasty one."

"Could have been worse."

What could be worse than being dragged to the ER when she should have been in her office, working on that report? "Oh, yeah?"

“Yeah.” Austen’s lips curled into a smile that even Dee couldn’t help returning. “That star could have hit me.”

Dee glared. “Shut up and drive.”

“Yes, ma’am.”



Austen steered the sleek BMW into a parking space as close to the emergency entrance as possible and then dashed around the car to help Dee out.

Dee waved her off. “I can walk on my own. It’s not like I’m in labor or had a limb cut off or anything.”

“Christ, are you always this stubborn?”

“Yeah.”

Sighing, Austen stepped back and let her climb out of the car on her own. “All right, then. Let’s get you sewed up.”

“Gee, you make me sound like an old blanket.”

Austen grinned but didn’t answer, her attention already on the ER’s glass doors and the bustling activity behind them. *She’s not going to like this.*

When they stepped closer, the doors slid open, revealing a barely controlled chaos. The waiting room was crowded with patients. A baby cried; a man bellowed, demanding he be given the strongest pain medication they had, and the ER smelled as if at least one patient had a case of acute diarrhea.

Dee froze in the doorway. “No way am I going in there. Let me bleed to death somewhere quieter and less smelly.” She whirled around and then stumbled.

With one big step, Austen was by her side and slung both arms around her, balancing her. “In you go.” She directed Dee to the only free plastic chair along the wall. “Sit down before you fall down.”

“I’m not gonna—” Dee paled and plopped down onto the seat, swaying a little. “Okay, okay, I’m sitting. See?”

“Good girl.” Austen patted her shoulder. “Don’t move an inch, okay? I’ll get you the paperwork to fill out. If you’re not here when I get back, I’ll...I’ll...”

“Yeah?” Dee drawled, smirking. “You’ll do what?”

Now that she was seated and Austen was standing, Dee no longer towered over her, but she was still intimidating. No way could she physically restrain Dee or force her to stay if she didn’t want to. Austen squared her shoulders. Time to pull out her ace. “I’ll let Ms. Saunders know that you didn’t follow company policy.”

“What company policy would that be?”

“The policy to...to...”

“Well?”

That superior smirk on Dee’s face made Austen want to slap her. Her thoughts raced, trying to come up with something to outwit her. “To protect valuable company assets.”

“Valuable company assets?” Dee repeated slowly. “What assets would that be?”

“You, of course. The company can’t afford to have one of its employees out sick with a festering head wound during the holiday season.”

“Did anyone ever tell you that you’re a pain in the ass?”

Austen smiled. “A time or two.”

Dee threw her hands up. “Fine. Go and get me one of those clipboards.”

Austen looked down at her, determined not to let Dee get away with ordering her around. “Go and get me one of those clipboards...what?”

“Huh?”

“You forgot to add the magic word.”

“Abracadabra?”

Austen hid her smile. “Please.”

Dee sighed. “Go and get me one of those clipboards, please. There. Magic word added. Happy now?”

Austen nodded and trotted over to the reception desk.

When Dee had filled in her information, Austen wanted to take the clipboard from her and take it back to the nurses’ station, but Dee wouldn’t let go. “I’m not an invalid, you know?”

“I’m only trying to help.”

“I know, and I appreciate it, but it’s not necessary. I’m perfectly capable of walking this over to the nurses’ station all by myself.”

Austen let go of the clipboard. *Wow*. She was fairly independent herself, but this was taking self-reliance to a whole new level. “Were you always this stubborn, or was it the knock on the head?”

“Why do *I* get the feeling that the pot is calling the kettle black now?” Dee asked, repeating Austen’s words from earlier.

Austen tried to look innocent but knew she was failing miserably. “I have no idea.”

“I’m sure you don’t.” Dee stood and walked over to the nurses’ station, one hand still pressing a paper towel to her forehead.

Rolling her eyes, Austen watched her every step of the way. “Women.”



Two hours later, even Austen was beginning to regret not turning back around.

The crowd in the ER didn't seem to thin out.

Austen leaned against the green-tiled wall, out of the way of the guy pacing back and forth next to them. His shoes squeaked across the linoleum, setting Austen's nerves on edge. To Dee's left, a drunken man wobbled in his seat. To her right, a woman whose ankle had swollen to twice its normal size was flipping through a magazine.

The guy with the squeaky shoes paused for a moment. Just when Austen wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, he started pacing again.

Dee looked up from her position, slouched in her plastic chair. Her gunmetal-gray eyes squinted at him as if she were a sharpshooter taking aim. "Jesus, stop that damn pacing." With a side-glance toward Austen, she added, "Please."

Austen chuckled.

The guy stared at her, then slunk away and resumed his pacing on the other side of the room.

Dee sank back against her chair. "Huh. What do you know? That magic word actually works."

A nurse walked toward them.

Finally. Austen watched her approach.

But at the last moment, the nurse veered a bit to the left and led the woman with the elephant-sized ankle toward one of the curtained cubicles.

Great. Austen dropped onto the now free chair next to Dee.

Dee lifted yet another blood-crusting paper towel from her forehead. "I think it stopped bleeding. That's one way to take care of patients. Just wait until they either die or heal by themselves."

"I'm pretty sure you'll survive. But keep that paper towel pressed to your forehead. We don't want it to start bleeding again." A headache was building behind Austen's eyes. She glanced toward the vending machine. "You want anything? Soda? Coffee?"

"Coffee." A beat. "Please."

Austen smiled. "Who said you can't teach an old dog new tricks?"

"Are you calling me old?"

"Me? No, never. My mother taught me not to talk about a lady's age." Austen studied the planes of Dee's face. Her age was hard to guess, but she seemed to be a few years older than Austen, maybe in her mid-to-late thirties. Crow's feet had started to form around her smoky gray eyes, but otherwise, her skin looked smooth. Austen's fingers itched to touch her and find out if that skin was as soft as it looked. *Are you crazy? She'd slap you from here to Timbuktu!*

"Your mother gave you advice on how to treat women?" Dee's eyebrow inched up her forehead, making her wince.

Had she just outed herself? Austen's cheeks warmed, and she cursed her fair complexion. "Uh, no, not really. So? Coffee?"

"Sure."

"Black?"

Dee nodded. "How did you know?"

"Call it a hunch." Austen got up and went over to the vending machine. When she returned with two plastic cups of coffee, one black, Dee had taken off her suit jacket and was now sitting there in a short-sleeved blouse. *Wow. Nice arms.* Austen forced herself to look away. She handed over one cup and sat. Her arm brushed Dee's, sending little

sparks down her body. *Jesus. What's wrong with you?* Her mouth suddenly dry, she took a big sip of coffee—and promptly burned her tongue. “Ouch.”

“Careful. Remember that company policy about valuable assets? We wouldn’t want you to be out sick with a first-degree burn.”

Not looking at her, Austen blew on her coffee.

Silence descended on them, interrupted only by the squeak of shoes across the room and the snoring of the drunken man next to them.

When the coffee was gone, Austen got up and took a magazine from the rack in the corner, but it was almost a year old already and couldn’t hold her interest. Finally, she put the magazine down and turned toward Dee. “Is it true what people say about Wendy?”

“Wendy? What Wendy?” Dee’s frown moved the skin on her forehead, making her wince again.

“Ms. Saunders’s assistant. Did she really kill herself?”

“Oh, is that what people at the office are saying? Let me guess. Her boss drove her to jump out the window from the fifteenth floor.”

Austen nodded. “Something like that, yes. So? Is it true?”

Dee jerked around and growled. “No!”

“Okay, okay, don’t bite my head off.” Austen lifted both hands. “I didn’t know you felt so protective of your boss.”

“Yeah, well...” Dee rubbed her neck. “I just don’t like gossip. Don’t you people in marketing have something better to do with your time? Like actually getting some work done, for example?”

Now it was Austen’s turn to feel protective. “Don’t make us sound like we’re lazing around in the cafeteria,

gossiping, for eight hours straight. From what I can tell, there are some really hardworking people in marketing.”

“True. Doesn’t stop them from gossiping, though.”

“We have a lot of women,” Austen said with a tiny grin. “They can multitask.”

Dee glared at her, but after a few seconds, she couldn’t hold on to her grumpy mood and returned the grin. “Apparently.”

“So Wendy didn’t jump?”

“No! She moved to Florida with her fiancé.”

Austen couldn’t help wondering. Were any of the other things that people had told her about Attila...about Ms. Saunders outright lies or exaggerations too? Well, she would find out in the near future. The woman was their COO and Mr. Saunders’s sister after all, so she’d probably meet her sooner rather than later.

A woman with a severe rash on her face took a seat across from them.

Austen and Dee exchanged alarmed glances. *Uh-oh. Whatever she has, I hope it’s not contagious.*

“Great,” Dee mumbled. “This keeps getting better and better. And here I thought falling stars were supposed to be good luck.”

Austen laughed. “Not when they hit you on the head.”



Four hours. Dee fixed the clock hanging on the wall with a deathly stare. They’d been waiting for four goddamn hours now, and she was beginning to think the nurses had forgotten about her.

At least Austen was good company. The poor woman still had no idea who she was, though. In the beginning,

Dee had found it amusing, just a little game that made the time go by faster. But the longer she sat next to Austen, talking and drinking that poison the hospital called coffee, the guiltier she started to feel.

There was no easy way out, though. It was too late to come clean and tell her who she was. Truth be told, she was enjoying Austen's company, and that was rare for her. Very rare. Normally, she barely tolerated her colleagues and subordinates. Either they were busy kissing her ass, or they treated her as if she were the devil herself. Austen was different. She was friendly but didn't let her get away with anything. If she found out who Dee really was, that probably wouldn't last, and she would start watching what she said around her.

A nurse stopped in front of them and looked down at Dee's forehead. "Are you Ms. S—?"

Dee shot up. "Yes, that's me," she said before the nurse could give away her last name. She hoped the nurse had been about to say *Saunders*, not the name of some other patient who had to undergo a colonoscopy or another unpleasant procedure.

"Would you follow me, please? We'll get that cut taken care of."

As Dee was led to one of the curtained cubicles, she realized that Austen had gotten up and was following them. She tilted her head and sent her a questioning look.

"In case you need me to hold your hand," Austen said and smiled.

Dee huffed and took a seat on the exam table. "What am I? Five?"

"Oh, she's right, honey." The nurse patted her knee and gave Austen a conspiratorial smile. "It's always the

big, tough ones who start whining the second they see a needle.”

Dee folded her arms across her chest. “Do you hear me whining?”

Austen leaned against the exam table. “She hasn’t brought in the needle yet.”

Admittedly, all that talk of needles didn’t sound like fun.

Dee held still as the nurse took her blood pressure, shone a pen flashlight into her eyes, and then prodded her forehead. Pain flared through her. “Ouch.” She flinched back, barely resisting the urge to slap the nurse’s hands away. “Careful. There’s a bleeding wound up there, you know?”

The nurse and Austen exchanged glances.

“No signs of shock or trauma to her head,” the nurse said, talking to Austen as if Dee weren’t even there. “She’ll be fine, but that cut needs stitches. The doctor will be with you in a minute.”

That minute turned into half an hour. Then forty-five minutes. After an hour, there was still no sign of a doctor.

Dee was ready to just get up and walk out of the ER, but she knew Austen would drag her back.

Austen glanced at her wristwatch. “I’d better call my best friend and ask if she can come over and give Toby his dinner.”

“Toby? You’ve got a kid?” At the thought of Austen with a child and a husband, a wave of surprise, mixed with something that felt strangely like jealousy, washed through Dee. Not that Austen had indicated that she was gay, but somehow, the subtle impression had lingered. Maybe it had been wishful thinking.

Austen laughed. "No."

"Boyfriend?"

"No, Toby is my uncouth cockatoo."

"Uncouth?" Dee found herself grinning. Somehow, Austen's smile and her good mood were contagious, even after being stuck in this hellhole of a hospital for hours.

"Yeah. When I was on a cruise last year, my brother looked after him. When I came back, he was cursing like a sailor."

"Your brother?"

"Toby. My brother taught him some new words, most of them not fit to be repeated in the company of children, priests, and old ladies." Austen held up her cell phone. "I'll be right back." She drew back the curtain and slipped out.

Dee had always thought of herself as one of the most fiercely independent women on earth. When she'd broken her leg skiing a few years ago, she'd somehow managed to get back to the lodge all alone and had driven herself to the nearest ER. But now, as she watched Austen's retreating back, she wished she'd hurry up and come back to keep her company. *Wuss*. She rolled her eyes at herself.

Within minutes, Austen returned and again took a seat on the plastic chair next to the exam table.

The waiting continued.

Finally, Dee had enough. "Can you go and remind your little friend that we're still waiting?" As an afterthought, she added, "Please."

Austen got up. "Sure."

Before she could leave, footsteps sounded and the curtain separating their cubicle from the rest of the ER was pushed aside. Austen's friend, the nurse, entered, followed

by a disheveled doctor. He looked as if he was too young to even be in medical school.

Dee narrowed her eyes at him. “How old—?”

“Sssh.” Austen nudged her none too gently and whispered, “If we have to wait for another doctor, we won’t get out of here before midnight.”

Right. Dee sank back onto the exam table.

Doctor Babyface stepped closer. “Lie down and let me take a look.”

Hesitantly, Dee slid into a lying position and moved her hand with the paper towel away from her forehead.

The doctor hmm’ed—not a sound that Dee liked from a doctor. “What happened?”

“I was hit by a meteorite,” Dee said.

“A meteorite?” The doctor shone a pen flashlight into both of her eyes as if suspecting severe head trauma was causing her confusion.

“Yep.”

Austen rolled her eyes. “She was meddling with my Christmas tree decorations. The tree topper fell and hit her.”

“Ah. Well, we’re going to clean this up and then put in some stitches.”

“Great. Can *we* get started, then?” Dee’s patience was wearing thin. By now, it was almost ten o’clock, and she wanted to get some more work done before the day was over.

The doctor pulled a pair of latex gloves out of a dispenser and put them on. “I’m going to give you a local anesthetic.”

Well, at least he had stopped talking about himself in the plural.

He gave the skin around the cut a quick swab of Betadine and then positioned the tip of the needle on Dee's forehead, where she couldn't see. She hoped Austen was keeping an eye on Doctor Babyface.

"It might sting a bit."

A burning pain flared through her forehead. She ground her teeth and glared at him. "Dammit. That's what you call a little sting?"

He ignored her. "Now we wait for the lidocaine to set in. Be right back," he said and walked out.

Great bedside manner, kid. She hoped he'd be back before the anesthetic wore off. Within minutes, she felt the upper part of her face go numb.

The doctor returned as promised and covered Dee's face with a sterile drape; it had an opening that left only the cut on her forehead free.

Not being able to see a thing made her nervous. She clutched the edges of the exam table with both hands.

"Hmmm," the doctor said from somewhere above her. "I think there's something..." Metal rattled as he took something from a nearby tray and then probed the wound.

Despite not feeling any pain, Dee winced. She wanted to pull off the drape to see what he was doing.

A small hand gently gripped her own, startling her.

"There's a sliver of glass in the wound," Austen whispered next to her. "Probably from your meteorite." Despite her teasing, her voice and the touch of her hand were warm and comforting.

Dee swallowed. Usually, people didn't treat her with such tenderness.

To her surprise, Austen didn't let go of her hand as the doctor started to stitch up the cut over her eyebrow. Dee

tried not to think of the needle moving through her skin and focused on the feeling of Austen's hand in hers. She marveled at the softness of her skin and the strength she could feel in the small hand.

Finally, the doctor removed the sterile drape and taped a gauze pad over the cut. He pulled off his latex gloves with a snap and dumped them in a nearby trash bin. "All done."

Dee sat up and tried to peek at her forehead without any success. She probably looked like Frankenstein's monster now. "How many stitches?"

"Eight. You'll need to have them checked in about five days to see if they're ready to come out. You can make an appointment with your family doctor or come back here."

No, thanks. The family doc it is. She slid off the examination table and tugged on Austen's hand, which still held on to hers. "Let's get out of here."

The doctor blocked her way. "Not so fast. When did you get your last tetanus shot?"

Dee tried to remember. "I think I got one when that arrow pierced my palm."

Austen lifted Dee's hand to her eyes. "An arrow pierced your palm? How did that happen?" She ran her fingers over Dee's hand, looking for a scar.

It had been the other hand, but Dee enjoyed the gentle touch too much to point it out. "Don't ask. Let's just say the head of our safety department got fired over that debacle."

"How long ago was that?" the doctor asked.

"Hmm. Six years. Might be seven."

"If you're not sure, it's better to err on the side of caution," the doctor said. "Nurse Jones will give you a tetanus shot."

Great. Dee sat back down.

"I'll write you a prescription for some painkillers in case you need them." The doctor picked up his prescription pad and scribbled something Dee couldn't read. "Keep the area dry, and take it easy for a few days. If you start feeling dizzy or get a headache, come back to the ER immediately. Do you live with someone who can keep an eye on you tonight?"

"I don't need a babysitter."

"Ms. S—"

"Yeah, fine, okay," Dee said quickly.

He handed over the prescription, shook her hand, and was gone.

Dee watched with growing unease as Nurse Jones inserted a needle into a vile and drew a clear liquid into a syringe. She pointed the needle upward and pushed the plunger until a drop ran down.

Austen let go of Dee's hand as the nurse swiped a cotton ball over her upper arm.

Dee curled her fingers, instantly missing the soothing touch. *Oh, come on.* Since when was she the hand-holding type?

"Don't tense your arm muscles," the nurse said.

"Easy for you to say."

Nurse Jones pushed the needle into Dee's arm and then pulled it back out. "See? That didn't hurt at all."

"Yeah. Not you at least."

Smiling unrepentantly, the nurse covered the needle mark with a Band-Aid.

"Am I done?" Dee eyed her escape route with longing.

"Yes, but give me a second." The nurse stepped around the curtain and returned with a wheelchair.

“Oh, no. No way.” Dee backed away. “There’s nothing wrong with my legs. I walked in here without a problem, so I’ll leave on my own two feet.”

The nurse pushed the wheelchair closer. “It’s hospital policy, ma’am.”

“Then it’s a stupid policy that needs to be changed.”

“Dee.” Austen touched her arm.

Dee pulled away. “No. I’m drawing the line here. I got a couple of stitches; that’s all. It’s not like they had to take a kidney.”

“Can we skip the wheelchair if I promise to keep an eye on her?” Austen asked the nurse, directing her irresistible smile at her. “Please?”

The nurse sighed. “Well, if you slipped out of the cubicle while I was busy disposing of the syringe...” She turned her back and threw the needle and syringe into a hazardous-waste container.

“Come on. Let’s spring you.” Austen took her hand again, and they hurried out of the emergency room.

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ABOUT JAE

Jae grew up amidst the vineyards of southern Germany. She spent her childhood with her nose buried in a book, earning her the nickname *professor*. The writing bug bit her at the age of eleven. For the last eight years, she has been writing mostly in English.

She used to work as a psychologist but gave up her day job in December 2013 to become a full-time writer and a part-time editor. As far as she's concerned, it's the best job in the world.

When she's not writing, she likes to spend her time reading, indulging her ice cream and office supply addictions, and watching way too many crime shows.

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