

*To all my dental hygienist friends. You make the world's smile  
brighter!*





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## PROLOGUE



**D**orey's short fingernails scraped against the jagged surface of the rock, chalky bits of stone raining down into her eyes and mouth. She coughed and tried to blink away some of the dust. But she didn't dare let go of her skimpy hold on the wall to wipe it away.

The toes of her shoes barely perched on the narrow ledge. Cold air bit into her skin right through her shirt and pants. Is this how it would all end? With her unable to hold onto the wall of the dark cave, her body plummeting to the ravine below?

There didn't seem to be any way out. She'd either fall to her death or stay on the ledge and starve. How had her life come to this?

She glanced up, her heart in her throat. Was he still following her? Would he find her? As if thudding a death knell, her heart rapped against her ribs.

Faint light reflected off the item, which had started the whole nightmare.

The ring.

She wished she'd never seen the stupid thing. That he would have lost it somewhere else.

*I never asked for this.*

Something flew directly over her head. A bat? Dorey jerked and nearly lost her balance. She pressed tight against the wall, the icy temperature seeping into her cheek. Her whole face hurt from the cold—even her teeth ached. Plops of a loud drip from somewhere nearby made her shiver even more, especially without her jacket.

Her jacket.

The one that Harry had so lovingly zipped up for her before he'd brought her here the first time.

Dorey closed her eyes, hot tears burning their way down her frozen cheeks. *Harry. I'm so sorry. All this horror and destruction because of a ring I found.*

Her ring shone bright again, reflecting the ...

Wait ... Light?

Had he found her? Dorey gulped in air so fast she got lightheaded. She closed her eyes and took a slow breath. Please don't let him see me. I won't get out alive. Peeking to the right, her movements slow and measured—one, because she didn't want to give her location away and two, she didn't want to fall—she saw a beam of light coming from the mouth of the cave. A lantern?

It was him. Had to be! Who else would be here this time of night in such awful weather?

Something scratched on the rock a few feet below her. A wider ledge was there, but she couldn't reach it without tumbling down into the dark.

No thanks.

More scratching. An animal? Mountain lion? Bear?

Fresh fear of wild creatures doing her harm got in line behind the terror already racing through her veins.

How would she escape the madman who wanted her dead?



*Eight weeks earlier*

Sometimes it didn't pay to get out of bed. Dorey Cameron should have heeded the warning. Staring down at the woman in the hygiene chair, Dorey tightened her grip on the patient chart. "Excuse me, Mrs. Harkins, but did you just say—"

"You are not touching me. Not even to put that ridiculous paper napkin around my neck."

"I don't understand."

"Young lady, you cannot possibly be qualified to do anything to anyone's teeth."

Unfortunately, not the first time Dorey had been told that. Dr. Connors, the dentist who'd previously run the practice, thought dental hygienists were unnecessary. Since she'd taken the job with Harry, she'd heard from Dr. Connors' former patients that he didn't think hygienists were even qualified to do more than seat the patients.

His interference wreaked havoc with her schedule. More often than not, her patients either didn't show or wouldn't let her near them.

Curmudgeonly old dinosaur.

The fact that Dorey hadn't been able to land a job at any other office was a sign of personal defeat. And she wouldn't even have her present job if Dr. Connors hadn't sold his practice to Harry MacKinley.

At least Harry believed a hygienist was an actual occupation.

Mrs. Harkins had stopped talking. What had she said? Did it matter? It probably wasn't complimentary anyway.

Dorey gripped the patient chart tighter. The thick paper threatened to tear beneath her fingers, but at the moment, she didn't care. "Mrs. Harkins, I assure you I'm quite well trained in—"

The frumpy woman held up her hand, her long fingernails looking like claws with red polish. "Stop. Talking."

Heat traveled up Dorey's face when she sucked in a breath. She blinked, hoping to erase the sight of the woman—lips pulled back in a sneer, looking as if she'd like to bite her.

Mortified, Dorey bit her tongue to keep from shouting out the not so nice words hovering, waiting to pounce. Turning, she stalked from the room. She wanted to run. To flee. Out of the room. The office. Chester, Indiana.

Why couldn't some dentist in a larger city need a dental hygienist? Someone with forward-thinking patients who would be glad to have the services of a hygienist? Who would embrace what she could do for them. How she could help them. Instead, Dorey still resided in her tiny hometown, longing for any escape route she could find. So far, none had materialized.

Face it, you're stuck here. At least for now.

Not for long, if she could help it. When she went home to her apartment every night, she sent her résumé out to a few more dentists. She'd heard back from two with the unfortunate



news that they'd already filled their positions. At least they'd bothered to contact her. The others hadn't even acknowledged her inquiry.

Blowing out a long breath, she trudged into Harry's operatory where he had both hands immersed in a full-mouth extraction on Mr. Pemberley. Classic rock, Harry's favorite, played from the CD player in the corner.

Harry glanced up briefly, his safety glasses having slid halfway down his nose. "That was fast. Ready for me to check your patient already?"

She clasped her hands together in front of her waist, trying to hold back her irritation in front of Harry's patient. Be professional. "I'm afraid not."

"Oh." He blinked twice. "I see."

"Yes." *I'm sure you do.*

After removing his gloved hands from Mr. Pemberley's mouth, he held them out, away from his face. "I'm guessing my patient here is ready for a break, anyway." Harry's raised eyebrows were visible over the top of his safety glasses.

With a vigorous nod, Mr. Pemberley agreed. "Yeth. A break would be nith. Thankth."

"No problem." Harry backed his chair away from the patient while the assistant, Luanne, used the suction and water to clean out Mr. Pemberley's numb mouth. Mr. Pemberley let out a sigh, his hands relaxing from their previous fisted stance.

Standing, Harry removed his gloves and washed his hands at the nearby sink. He stepped closer. "Same as before?" he whispered.

She swallowed hard and glanced toward the floor. "Yep."

"Sorry."

"Not your fault." She held his gaze needing him to know she didn't want sympathy.

With a quick peek at Luanne and a glance back at Dorey, he pointed toward his private office. No use having that

conversation in front of the nosy assistant. Things were bad enough without her telling Mae at the front desk. Then Mae, in turn, would tell the whole world. Gladly.

She stepped in behind him, closed the door, and leaned against it. "Honestly, I'm not sure what else to do."

"Yeah, I know. But don't give up. I need you."

And she needed the job. Badly. Money for rent, groceries, and cat food didn't happily pop up in her bank account. "I won't give up. It's just ..."

He nodded. "That if Dr. Connors hadn't turned the patients into his way of thinking, it wouldn't be so hard for you."

"For you too. I've seen how he comes in and wastes time talking to your patients, so you can't get your work done." She shook her head. "Frustrating."

"Very." Harry crossed his arms over his chest.

Why hadn't she noticed before how broad his shoulders were? He used to take her for piggyback rides when she was little. Sitting on his shoulders now would be way different. Stop it, Dorey. "So, what do we do?"

"We keep trying."

"I'm not sure that's enough." Mirroring his actions, she crossed her arms. She hadn't gone through years of college to be a trained hygienist to have patients tell her she didn't know what she was doing. And there hadn't been any classes concerning nosy retired dentists who couldn't cut the apron strings from their former patients. If Dr. Connors would leave them alone, everything would work out fine.

Harry relaxed his stance and tapped his finger on the top of the desk. He did that a lot when deep in thought. Did it help him solve anything? She didn't have any better ideas. Might have to give it a try.

"I want you to stay, okay? I'm gonna do everything I can to help." He smiled.

Though he'd always been a dork ever since they were kids,

the man did have a nice smile. Lucky thing, since patients tended to shy away from dental professionals with rotted, crooked teeth. Under the circumstances, Harry couldn't afford to lose any more patients.

"Thanks."

He gave a nod. "Ready to dive back into the shark tank?"

Her laugh came out as a snort. "Uh, you're actually not far off there, Doc. From the tiny glimpse I got of Mrs. Harkins' pointy teeth, shark-like is a good description. I had images of her snapping off my fingers when I got too close."

Harry bit his lip and his nostrils flared. "No fair making me laugh right before I have to see her."

"You started it." Dorey poked him in the shoulder.

With a grin, he opened the door. She stayed right behind him as they made their way back to shark lady. It was a throwback to fourth grade when she huddled behind Susie, the biggest girl in class, during their dangerous weekly game of dodge ball. As a kid, Dorey had been so skinny, somebody with a wicked pitch might have snapped her arm right off. Susie, though, was built like a bulldozer. With the personality to match.

Feeling even more like a kid in trouble at school, Dorey slunk off to the side of the room. At least Mrs. Harkins didn't wield a dodge ball.

Dorey hated to bother Harry with this when he was busy with his own patient. But he'd told her to let him know if it happened again. Unfortunately, it was all too often.

He took a seat next to their patient, the wheels of the chair squeaking when he rolled a little bit closer. "Good morning, Mrs. Harkins." His voice sounded pleasant, but Dorey had known him long enough to recognize the irritation buried in his words. The little inflection he'd put on the word good was anything but cheery.

The woman frowned. "Hello."

Did she not like him any better than she did Dorey? Who wouldn't like Harry? He was amazing. Sweet. Funny. Thoughtful. But Dorey was only slightly prejudiced.

"My hygienist tells me you're a little reluctant to let her do your cleaning."

Reluctant? Try venomous.

"I'll tell you what I told her," Mrs. Harkins said, emphasizing every word with a poke in the air by her finger. "I'll not allow just any old person the liberty of touching my mouth." Her lips thrust out in a sour expression.

The old bat. *Trust me, lady. It wouldn't fulfill my every longing to touch your mouth. I ain't asking you for a date.*

Harry leaned forward, his forearms on his knees and clasped his hands together. "Mrs. Harkins, I assure you that Miss Cameron is very well trained and highly qualified to do your cleaning. Actually, she went to the same school I did—"

"That means nothing to me. A crumpled-up cocktail napkin stating she's qualified would mean about as much as that framed diploma over there on the wall." The words flew out like they tasted vile and she longed to fling them from her lips.

Dorey longed to yell, it's a license, not a diploma! But she knew that would mean nothing to the woman.

"I see. Then it seems we have a problem." Harry's left eyebrow rose.

"You bet we do." She leaned forward, peering around Harry so she could glare at Dorey. "There is no way that girl is touching me." A visible shiver rippled across her shoulders.

Did she think Dorey was contagious or something? Would jab her with a spear? Burn her under hot coals?

How dare she? Humiliation and anger warred for dominion over Dorey's thoughts. With her arms crossed, she dug her fingernails into the flesh of her arms. A scream lodged in her throat along with an unvoiced rant about how unfair Mrs.

Harkins acted. But it wouldn't do any good and would only embarrass Harry.

He closed his eyes briefly and let out a long, audible breath. "You've made that quite clear, Mrs. Harkins. Are you sure you won't reconsider?"

"Absolutely not."

"That's a shame. I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this. I'm sorry to say, then, I'll have to ask you to leave."

Uncomfortable silence filled the room. Even the sound of crickets chirping would have been welcome.

Shock rolled across Mrs. Harkins' face. "W-what?" Her mouth hung open unattractively, showing her pointy shark teeth to great advantage.

*I didn't want to clean your ugly old teeth anyway.*

Harry looked the woman square in the eye. "I trust Miss Cameron completely. She's a valued member of my team. I'll not have a patient, any patient, say something negative about her or to her. Do I make myself clear?" He backed the chair away, putting a few feet between them and crossed his arms over his chest. "I believe you know the way out."

Dorey's mouth gaped open. He did not just do that. From his stony expression and rigid stance, no one could have any doubt he was serious. Harry had always been so sweet and funny. Who knew he had a bad boy side?

Snapping her mouth closed, Dorey swallowed, hard. Why would he do that? He'd just lost a patient who'd been with the practice forever.

A deep furrow appeared on Mrs. Harkins' forehead. She stared wide-eyed at Harry. "You ... can't be serious."

"Very serious."

"But what if I have a problem later on ... a toothache?"

"Then we'll be glad to give you a list of competent dentists to call. Mae can assist you with that." Harry cleared his throat. "I

have other patients to see, so ...” Standing, he extended his arm out to the side toward the front of the office. And waited.

The wall clock ticked, the only sound in the room. Each movement of its second hand progressively louder as time stepped forward. Dorey’s heartbeat thrummed in time, somehow choreographed.

What would Mrs. Harkins do? If she apologized, would Harry let her stay? Then Dorey would have to do the cleaning. She would, of course, but boy, would that be uncomfortable.

“I ...” Mrs. Harkins blinked, her false lashes bouncing against a vast amount of dark pink blusher. “Well ...” With a quick shake of her head, as if not believing what had just occurred, Mrs. Harkins grabbed her purse from her lap and stood. She brushed off the front of her blouse as if wanting to rid herself of any remnant of their office. “You can be quite assured that others will hear about this.”

“Good.” Harry nodded. “Tell everybody. That way, it might save me the time of having to dismiss someone else from *my* practice who doesn’t deserve to be treated here.”

“Well!” Mrs. Harkins stomped from the operatory, down the hall, complained loudly at the front desk, and slammed the main office door.

When Harry turned back and made eye contact with Dorey, he gave a little shrug. Didn’t it matter to him that he’d just lost a patient and could lose a lot more when Mrs. Harkins started flapping her lips to everyone?

Rushing over to him, Dorey narrowly missed the footrest of the patient chair as she skirted past it. She grasped his shoulders tightly. “Why did you do that?”

“I had to.” His muscles tensed beneath her fingers.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yeah, I did.”

She gritted her teeth and muttered, “Stop arguing with me. I’m having flashbacks to seventh grade.”

“You know that a lot of Dr. Conners’ patients acted as if he created the moon. If I don’t stop this now, it won’t go away. I didn’t take over this practice to have to convince patients my staff is competent. I came here to do my job.”

“You might not have any patients left to see.” She dropped her hands to her sides.

“Then I’ll get new ones.” He didn’t seem particularly concerned. Sure, it was a busy practice. Now. But if people kept leaving, it might not stay that way. Didn’t it bother him that he had bills coming in the door? Student loans to repay? Mortgages on his house and the office?

She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “You didn’t have to do that for me.”

“Yeah, Dorey.” His glance slipped down to her lips, lingered for a few seconds, and then worked its way back up. “I did.” Giving her a pat on her arm, he left her alone in the hygiene room.

She shook her head. Why did Dr. Conners have to cause so much trouble? Working on patients when they didn’t want to be there in the first place seemed hard enough without him meddling. Harry worked so hard. Was such a good dentist. But some of the patients wouldn’t even give him a chance. They were too loyal to Dr. Conners.

With slow movements, in turtle mode, Dorey pulled on gloves and began to clean her room for her next patient, who hopefully wouldn’t spew venom at her and would consent to allow Dorey to do the job she was trained for.

She jerked to a stop, the patient napkin dangling from her fingers like a windsock. Before, when Harry told her he’d had to get rid of Mrs. Harkins for Dorey’s sake, he’d stared at Dorey’s lips. Her lips. What did that mean? She knew what it meant when other guys did it. But Harry? The dorky brother of her sister’s husband? The goofball who always teased her?

She sputtered a laugh. No. Way.

A few hours later, Dorey gratefully closed the door behind her, glad to be home. How come trying to find something to keep her occupied at work was more stressful than working? She glanced down. Weatherby wound around her ankles, meowing pitifully.

“Yeah, I know.” She bent down to pet him. “You’re starved. Haven’t eaten for twenty-seven days. The usual, right?” Actually, he’d been gone three days this time.

Her cat froze and stared up at her. Eerie how he did that. Like he understood her. Even when she used sarcasm.

“Okay, sorry. Come on and let’s get you fed.”

The dark gray cat took off like someone had pinched his long skinny tail and raced to the kitchen. Dorey wasn’t far behind, but Weatherby sat next to his empty dish, scowling.

“I’m right here, dude.” Dorey filled the dish, then sat on the floor. Weatherby crunched the dry food fast and loud, like a starving man gorging on potato chips.

She ruffled the soft fur on his head, but he didn’t look up. “Weatherby, I have a problem. Patients aren’t showing up, and it’s making me crazy. And when they do show, sometimes they won’t let me do my job. What should I do?”

He ignored her, except for a purr. Just kept on chewing, his face buried in the dish up to his whiskers.

Sighing, she crossed her arms over her chest. “It would be nice if you at least pretended to listen, you know. You could—”

The cat jerked his head from the bowl and whipped it toward the doorway.

Dorey frowned. “What?”

His fur bristled and stood on end. With an arched back, he hopped sideways, then took off like a shot toward the front door. Before Dorey could grab him, he’d climbed through the kitty door.

“Wait. What’s wrong?” She ran after him.

When she flung the front door open, the cat stood on the



small front cement slab, back still arched like a buffalo's, tail slashing left to right.

Dorey glanced around but didn't see anybody. The parking lot was empty except for two cars parked at the other end. "Cat, what's gotten into you? Why are you so freaked?" Unlike other cats, Weatherby ran toward possible confrontation, not away.

He gave a long howl, worthy of any self-respecting wolf.

"Stop that. You're scaring me." She knelt and touched his back.

Finally, he quit howling.

Ah ... quiet.

"Dorey." Not a shout, but a whisper, making the hair on her arms stand up like Weatherby's fur.

She gasped. Who said that? No one was around that she could see. It might be one of her neighbors calling through an open window. Did someone need help?

No. As far as she could tell, no one close by was even home. At the very least, she couldn't see anyone hanging out any windows, trying to get her attention.

"Dorey."

She stood up. Who called her name? She looked around again, still not finding the source. Why couldn't she see the person trying to get her attention? Was someone playing a joke? Hiding where she wouldn't notice them?

"This is getting too weird for me, Weatherby."

Rubbing her arms, she went back inside but waited just inside the doorway. After a few more seconds of continued vigilance, her cat joined her.

With the door now securely locked, Dorey tried to relax. There was no one there. Nobody called your name.

But someone had, hadn't they?

*Am I losing it?*